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The challenges of widening ‘legitimate’ understandings of ability within physical education

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This article explores the importance of critical discourse in physical education (PE) that focuses on how understandings of ability are defined, practised, and potentially altered. Research continues to indicate that physical educators continue to draw on narrow notions of ability which are influenced by the presence of a pervasive performative culture. Traditional understandings of ability often fail to reflect the wider aims of PE such as developing young people’s physical literacy. The theoretical concepts of Bourdieu have been used to explain processes that serve to reinforce ‘legitimate’ notions of ability. The significance of the field of PE has been highlighted where habitus and capital inform understandings of ability in PE, and reinforce practices that privilege certain students. The data for this article are based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six PE teachers who were part of a yearlong study on young people’s experiences of ability in secondary PE in England. Within interviews PE teachers defined ability in broad terms and differentiated between the purpose of PE and sport. In practice, teachers placed a distinct emphasis on defining ability in terms which privileged students who either had a reputation for sporting excellence or who demonstrated desired forms of sport-related physical capital in lessons. These discourses and practices were reinforced through individual habitus and through a sense of shared ‘mastery of the common code’ among the teachers. The findings have implications for understanding the tensions within the field of PE that have evolved from previous, and continuing, debates on the distinction between PE and sport and understandings of the purpose of PE. In addition, they highlight the challenges that teachers can experience in aligning their wider views of ability with their ‘legitimate’ ability-based practices and working towards supporting more equitable and inclusive PE experiences.

Keywords: *Ability; Talent; Physical education; Legitimate knowledge; Bourdieu; Performative culture; Equity; Inclusion; Physical literacy; Habitus*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to contribute towards critical discourse and practice within the context of physical education (PE) by exploring how notions of ability are conceptualised and also potentially altered. It aims to contribute towards previous

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related research and the social, political and educational agendas of equity and inclusion. In particular, it intends to emphasise the persistent and constraining influence of prevailing ideologies and political agendas on what constitutes 'official knowledge' and the subsequent impact on understandings of ability within PE. Various authors have explored how notions of ability are socially constructed and understood in PE (Evans, 2004; Hay & Lisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Wright & Burrows, 2006). They have illustrated how the field serves to reproduce narrow 'legitimate' notions of ability that continue to focus on particular forms of physicality that hold value (capital) and consequently privilege certain students over others (Hay & Lisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b). This paper explores teachers' understandings of ability in PE and highlights the challenges that stakeholders face in widening dominant notions of ability, to incorporate ideals such as those associated with physical literacy and a more participatory and inclusive agenda.

Bourdieu's (1990) concepts have been applied as a framework from which to explore how ability is socially constructed and how individuals within PE are defined as 'able' (Evans, 2004; Hay & Lisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Wright & Burrows, 2006). Bourdieu's ideas reinforce that to understand social life we need to understand what historical and 'social conditions made possible the constitution of the system of institutions and agents' (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 820) and overcome dualistic perspectives such as those presented in Cartesian notions of mind and body and a reductionist view of ability. Contextualised historical understanding is therefore crucial in Bourdieu's sociology (1986, 1990). His framework proposes that the field structures the habitus and, as such, habitus is acquired in a social context that has specific historical, political and social agendas (Evans, 2004). Consequently, his framework supports the idea that PE is a socially constructed field that has been influenced by dominant political ideologies and social elements that have been suggested to advantage certain groups (Bailey et al., 2009a; Evans & Penney, 2008) and inform what constitutes 'official' and 'legitimate' knowledge within PE (Kirk, 1988, 1992; Evans & Penney, 2008).

Bourdieu

Bourdieu presents three fundamental concepts as part of his theory of practice: habitus; field; and capital (Hurtado, 2008; Postone, Lipuma, & Calhoun, 1993). Habitus is described by Bourdieu (1990) as consisting of 'durable, transposable dispositions' (p. 53) which are socially constituted through the conditionings associated with a particular state of existence. Habitus is embodied in individuals while at the same time being a collective property of groups of individuals who have experienced similar socialisation (Bourdieu, 1977; Hurtado, 2008). Habitus is also a concept that facilitates the joining together of structure and action, society and the individual; it is intended to capture the practical mastery that people have of their social situation, while grounding that mastery in a social context (Postone et al., 1993). The concept of habitus can provide a means through which it is possible to theorise and

understand the embodiment of certain aspects of the social context which will predispose individuals such as teachers to act, think and behave in certain ways (Zevenbergen, Edwards, & Skinner, 2002). Teachers' personal biographies and experiences have been shown to shape their understandings of the purpose of PE and their associated practices in schools (Green, 2002; Hay & MacDonald, 2010a). For many teachers, their habitus is formed through their own enjoyment of sport and valuing of skills and knowledge that facilitate success in competitive environments. While individual habitus pre-disposes individuals towards particular attitudes, values and behaviours it is also influenced by differing social contexts and relationships within different social fields.

The concept of field gives habitus a dynamic quality (Reay, 2004). Field has been described as a social system (Zevenbergen et al., 2002), a network of social relations and structured systems of social positions (Bourdieu, 1990). Fields can be occupied by individuals or institutions engaged in the same activity and are structured internally in terms of power relations (Thorpe, 2009). The field is a mediating context wherein external factors are brought to bear upon individual practice and institutions (Jenkins, 2003). Hunter (2004) highlights the importance of the relationships between the concepts of habitus, field, structure and agency. This is particularly useful where the field of PE is described as consisting of a structured system of social relations between all those involved in PE such as, PE curriculum developers, teacher educators, teachers, students, health and sport professionals (Hunter, 2004). Similarly, Green (2002) uses figurational theory to illustrate the process through which social networks, policies, and organisational norms can interact with habitus to shape teaching practices.

Bourdieu (1986) identifies various competencies 'capital' that can be held by social agents that have an exchange value in particular fields; they are economic, cultural, and social capital. In its embodied state, cultural capital can be linked to the body and is also described as physical capital. Bourdieu argued that embodied capital forms an integral aspect of the individual's habitus and cannot be accumulated beyond the capacities of the individual. However, Shilling (1993b) argues that corporeal capital is too important to be seen as merely a subdivision of cultural capital and in support of his assertion the notion of physical capital has been specifically discussed by many in the context of PE (Hay & Ishaq, 2006; Hay & MacDonald, 2010a; Hunter, 2004; Shilling, 1991, 1993a, 2004a, 2004b; Wright & Burrows, 2006). Shilling (1993a) suggests that physical capital encompasses the symbolic value of the body's external appearance, its shape and physique which are external manifestations of the particular 'habitus'. More specifically, Evans (2004) suggests that an individual's habitus can be perceived as abilities defined by the values and attitudes prevalent within a given field. For example, in health-related education the emphasis is placed upon body improvement, which 'may configure ability as a willingness to continually work on and engineer the body ... towards slender ideals' (Evans, 2004, p. 101). Consequently, physical capital can be equated with an indicator of health and work done on the body, leading to developments in strength, fitness or stamina which, can be related to the capacity for the body to perform physical work (Wright & Burrows, 2006); qualities valued in 'legitimate' notions of ability in PE.

Whilst many have utilised Bourdieu's concepts to underpin and explain social life he is not without criticism. For example, Shilling (2004b) suggests that Bourdieu's analysis of social action is hampered by an 'overly reproductionist analysis of human behaviour' (p. 474) whereby Bourdieu is unable to satisfactorily account for individuals who resist the constraints of their background and training, suggesting a lack of acknowledgement of the degree to which people can exercise agency (Shilling, 1993a). However, Reay (2004) suggests that Bourdieu would argue that habitus can potentially generate a wide repertoire of possible actions within a given social field. In addition, Bourdieu (1977) asserts that the habitus can be transformed through engagement in less familiar social fields or elements of a familiar social field resulting in a 'diversified' habitus that in turn impacts future experiences. The possibility for change has been linked to acknowledging individuals' capacity to reflect on the 'rules structuring a field' through consideration of differing possibilities (Shilling, 2004b, p. 478). For example, these 'subversions' may be evidenced in particular contexts in relation to changing and inconsistent attitudes towards gender within PE and sport (Hills, 2006). The concept of habitus has primarily been used to explain and critique the continuity of teaching practices and normative understandings of desirable physical capital within PE in the broader context of Bourdieu's work on reproduction; subsequently, the conceptual and practical considerations involved in changing habitus remain contested (Green, 2002; Hay & MacDonald, 2010a; Wilkinson, Littlefair, & Barlow-Meade, 2013).

Legitimate knowledge and performative cultures in PE

The notion that ability in PE is socially constructed has been presented by various authors (Evans, 2004; Evans & Penney, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Wright & Burrows, 2006). This perspective is in contrast to a reductionist view as it highlights an acknowledgement of the social context of the specific field, with an appreciation of how that field has developed. Debates concerning the purpose and nature of PE in England have been central to its development and internal 'culture' (Kirk, 2010). Early PE was characterised by images of difference where the scope and quality of experience was predominantly determined by children's gender and social background (Hargreaves, 1994; Kirk, 2005). Furthermore, it has been well documented that PE became, and continues to be, dominated by team games (Kirk, 1998) a context that places 'hegemonic masculine schemes of perception at the centre of PE discourse and practice' (Brown, 2005, p. 7). Ideologies related to scientific values and scientific functionalism that focus on the physical and physiological functioning of the body have also been highlighted as dominant influences (Kirk & Tinning, 1990); perspectives that were viewed by physical educators as 'complementary to competitive sport by promoting the idea that sports science can make a significant contribution to improving elite performance' (Kirk, 1992, p. 165).

In addition, the merging of PE and sport policy over the last twenty years, the shift away from educational objectives and a move towards elite development and

competition are key tensions that remain within PE in England and influence how ability is perceived and valued (Croston, 2013; Evans, 2013; Houlihan, 2000; Lee, 2004). The National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) (DES/WO, 1992) is a document that has defined PE and 'legitimate' understandings of ability in England since the 1990s (Evans & Penney, 2008). In their analysis of how 'educability' and 'physical ability' are socially constructed through the practices of PE, Evans and Penney (2008) highlight the impact of the NCPE (DES/WO, 1992) and an earlier document, *Movement and Growing* (HMSO, 1952). In comparing both they emphasise how contemporary education is characterised by a 'heavy concentration on attainment targets, performance indicators, and extrinsic goals' (p. 42) which subsequently influences stakeholders to interpret ability within this framework. Their critique also serves as a reminder of the presence of alternative understandings of ability such as the concept of physical literacy and participatory pedagogies such as Teaching Games for Understanding which appear to have less influence on how ability is understood and practised in school. It was initially purported that the NC would lead to greater equity in the quality of provision by referencing the entitlement of all pupils to a broad and balanced curriculum (Evans, Penney, & Davies, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Penney, 2002). However, there have since been concerns that it served to produce and exacerbate educational and social inequalities rather than raise educational standards (Evans, Penney, & Bryant, 1993; Penney & Evans, 1995). The NCPE (DES/WO, 1992) stipulated six areas of activity where games held the highest status and re-established a 'traditional' and recognisable curriculum (Penney & Evans, 1999). Consequently, the document helped to reinforce a performative culture, one that celebrates competition, comparison and accountability (Evans, Rich, Allwood, & Davies, 2007). Later versions of the NCPE have arguably introduced greater flexibility; however, the aims of the 2014 version (DfE, 2014) support a return to competitive values and the development of physical competence and excellence, values that are inherent in elite sport and related policy (Green, 2004; Houlihan, 2000). Interestingly, the document continues to outline key attainment targets but without the prescribed attainment levels; this potentially facilitates teachers to experiment with alternative and perhaps 'wider' understandings of ability in PE.

Evans and Penney's (2008) exploration of how 'knowledge of the body' is produced, transmitted and received in and through educational practices of schools, how they relate to social justice, inequality, cultural reproduction and change exemplifies how legitimate knowledge in PE is reproduced and defined. Furthermore, the influence of the teacher's habitus and their values pertaining to the nature and purpose of PE has been highlighted as influential in relation to understandings of ability (Green, 2002). For example, Hay and Isahunter (2006) reported that a teacher's habitus acted as a powerful selecting mechanism which resulted in differential ability-based expectations of students which led to the misrecognition of 'lower ability' students. In addition, authors have emphasised how 'legitimate' values are reproduced by those who hold the most desirable forms of capital, reinforcing notions of ability and contributing to the maintenance of power by dominant groups (Evans 2004; Evans & Penney 2008; Hay & Macdonald 2010a, 2010b). Students without the

necessary skill or experience may be marginalised, as the recognition and reproduction process tends to rely upon 'what resources a student already possessed rather than what the field and agents operating in it could provide' (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, p. 12). Where a performative culture permeates the field of PE (Evans, 2013) it serves to demarcate 'legitimate' forms of ability-related capital and students who are perceived as possessing such capital are privileged over others (Hay & Iisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b). For example, Hay and Macdonald (2010b) investigated how the discursive conditions in the field of PE contribute to the construction of gendered abilities in two Australian schools. They raise important considerations in attempting to alter 'legitimate' notions of ability and suggest that the practices of PE have been resistant in valuing abilities that lie outside the 'masculinist norm'. This can serve to marginalise girls and boys who are unable to demonstrate the requisite skill.

Alternative discourses

In exploring alternatives to 'legitimate' notions of ability it is important to highlight that defining ability in PE remains problematic as the term can be used differently across various domains and perspectives (Croston, 2013). In the sporting domain, assumptions about ability are closely linked to those of talent (Abbott & Collins, 2002; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). Hay and Macdonald (2010a) highlight that within PE 'ability' can be used to describe the capacity or 'competence' of an individual, whereas another use of the term 'draws upon the notion of talent, beyond the norm' (p. 1). They further emphasise that the meaning of 'ability' depends upon the values of those assessing the abilities of others. The practice of identifying and developing talent gained particular provision through English policy directives intended to support the development of 'high ability' students (Bailey & Morley, 2006); it was referred to as the Gifted and Talented (G&T) programme and was a key aspect of English PE and sport policy between 1999 and 2011 where it was compulsory for schools to identify and support 'talented' students.

The implementation of the G&T programme may have contributed towards a lack of clarity in notions of ability in PE where the terms 'ability' and 'talent' were often used interchangeably (Bailey & Morley, 2006). In addition, the related practices can be argued to have further contributed towards the pervasiveness of 'legitimate' notions of ability in PE where the focus is on physical sports skills and characteristics that are more associated with elite sport; a view considered by many as too narrow (Kirk, 2004; Penney, 2000; Penney & Iisahunter, 2006). Prompted by such concerns and in the context of the G&T programme, Morley and Bailey (2006) developed a specific model to help support a clearer understanding of defining and identifying talent in PE. The model was designed with the intention of differentiating between potential and actual performance, to reflect a multi-dimensional portrayal of abilities, and, to focus on PE rather than domain specific concepts such as sport (Morley & Bailey, 2006). Within their model they proposed that talent identification in PE

(high ability) should not just be concerned with physical abilities but also social, cognitive, creative and personal abilities which should equally be valued and recognised by those teaching PE. Morley and Bailey therefore suggest that ability in PE is best reflected and defined through a multi-dimensional portrayal of abilities rather than 'legitimate' uni-dimensional notions. However despite the introduction of their model, practices within PE in England continue to reflect the dominance of notions of ability that are more associated with a performative culture (Bailey et al., 2009a; Croston, 2013).

Claims that are made about the benefits of PE and whether they extend beyond proficiency in physical activities are addressed by Whitehead (2001, 2010) who presents an alternative discourse in the form of physical literacy. Whitehead (2010) states that 'appropriate to each individual's endowment, physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to maintain physical activity throughout the lifecourse' (pp. 11–12). Whitehead (2010) also differentiates physical literacy from elite performance and performative culture where she defines physical literacy as an outcome that is achievable by any individual. Furthermore, her argument supports multi-dimensional notions of ability that are more associated with individual development as opposed to linking ability with 'talent' and elite performance. Physical literacy has also attained some contemporary cultural currency and has been adopted within and beyond education in a number of domains including health and community sport (Giblin, Collins, & Button, 2014). With respect to conceptualising ability, Wright and Burrows (2006) argue that the concept of physical literacy appears to be an acceptable ideal to work towards; although they caution that it fails to acknowledge the social and cultural contexts where movement and learning takes place. Exploring the characteristics of the social field of PE and the interplay between discourses associated with performative sport and physical literacy would further enhance our understanding of how ability is constructed through teacher's experiences and practices (Wright & Burrows, 2006).

The study

The purpose of the study was to explore how PE teachers conceptualised ability in PE. Data were collected as part of a larger study on the construction and experience of ability in PE, in one PE department in a mixed North London secondary comprehensive school (11–18). The larger study took place over the course of one academic year and included six PE teachers and 15 students from a range of perceived ability levels. The teachers' demographic information is presented in [Table 1](#).

Teachers' understandings of ability were explored within the context of 40 PE lesson observations across Key Stages 3 and 4, field notes and informal discussions, 28 individual student interviews, eight student focus groups and six individual PE teacher interviews. The majority of PE lessons were conducted in ability groups and the G&T programme was in operation. The development of a rapport and a level of trust between the researcher and the teachers were considered key in facilitating

Table 1. Teacher demographics

Teacher pseudonym	Teaching experience	Specialist areas	Extra-curricular
Jack Head of PE 28-year-old male	Four years in current school	Football Rugby	Boys' rugby
Alison Ex- head of PE 50-year-old female	32 years teaching, eight years in current school	Hockey Cricket Gymnastics Badminton	Girls' cricket
Kieran PE G&T Coordinator 27-year-old male	Four years in current school	Football Basketball Rugby Badminton	Boys' football Mixed gender Badminton club
Danny NQT 24-year-old male	First year of teaching	Invasion games	Girls' football Boys' cricket Boys' football
Mary Head of girls' PE 28-year-old female	Four years in current school	Netball Trampolining SEN pupils BTEC & GCSE PE	
Hue Non QTS (Australian trained) 26-year-old male	Six months in Australia, four years in current school	Football Physiology	Boys' basketball Boys' football Girls' basketball

in-depth discussions about their practices and understandings of ability. Initially the teachers were made aware that the researcher had extensive experience as a PE teacher, and as such a connection through PE teaching was established. Naturalistic observations of lessons were made with the intention of understanding the context for teachers and to gain insights into ability-based practices. They were also intended to support teacher interviews; for example, they facilitated asking the teachers to reflect on particular practices within the context of specific lessons that contributed towards the identification of 'able' students.

Formal teacher interviews were semi-structured and took place towards the end of the academic year and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. The questions were devised from themes generated through focus groups and interviews with students that were obtained as part of the larger study, lesson observations, informal discussions, and

cognate literature. In order to contextualise the teachers' understandings of ability within the social field it was considered essential to draw upon the student data where emerging themes demonstrated that they had their own understandings of ability; these were useful in informing the exploration of the teachers' definitions of ability. The main areas for the teacher interviews focused on: teachers' background; how PE was structured and worked in the school; processes for identifying talent in PE; their own definitions of talent and ability and their overall view of the purpose of PE. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim and all data were entered into NVivo (©Sage, version 7) which is a software programme that is not intended to supplement the process of learning from data but provides a mechanism to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of such learning (Bazeley, 2007). There are five principal ways in which NVivo supports analysis of qualitative data: Managing the data; managing ideas; querying data; providing graphic models; providing reports from the data (Bazeley, 2007). In this research it was utilised mainly as a tool for managing, coding and interpreting the data.

Narratives are a medium in which individuals convey their own sense of past experiences to another and, as such, a careful analysis of the topic, content, style and context should, in principle, provide researchers access to the teller's understandings and meanings (Cortazzi, 2001). While relevant themes emerged through coding, there was an attempt to contextualise these through a holistic understanding of individual narratives supplemented with additional informal discussions and observations recorded in field notes throughout the year.

Exploring teachers' ability-based understandings and practices

Teachers' understandings of ability and how they are embedded in their ability-based practices is a key focus of the discussion. The concept of talent plays a key role in the study due to the presence of the G&T programme and, while ability is conceptualised more broadly than talent there is substantial overlap in the narrative in how the two terms are used.

At times 'talent' and 'ability' were used interchangeably however 'talent' typically was used to refer to the qualities of students who were the 'most able'.

Teachers' understandings of ability

The PE teachers broadly agreed on their understanding of what constituted an able pupil within the context of PE. This was despite variations in their backgrounds and training (Table 1). Their definitions included the possession of all round physical skills related to performance as well as knowledge, confidence, analytical and tactical skills.

Someone that's like an all-rounder and is able not just to perform well but also like explain what he's doing, answer questions ... have the ability and the confidence to help others. (Danny)

Someone whose skill level is quite high in a range of sports, who has good knowledge of tactics in a range of sports so you know your striking and fielding, your invasion games and all that sort of stuff, netball, someone who is able to pick out either tactics or skills and how they can improve. (Hue)

In addition, all of the PE teachers made a clear distinction between being able in PE and sport.

... physical education now is not just the ability to play something, it's ability to observe, analyse, offer feedback for improvement, it's knowledge of health and fitness, diet ... being talented at sport ... put a girl in at centre and she can dominate a game but she might not know the first thing about health and fitness and how the body works. (Jack)

I think in sport implies a lot more competitiveness ... I feel PE is about involvement, enjoyment and trying to work on improving their physical abilities but not as competitive. (Hue)

Jack acknowledged a difference between PE and sport emphasising the importance of an able pupil in PE being required to meet the NC levels. He also showed that he was in agreement with the other PE teachers who defined ability in PE in relation to possessing a range of both physical and non-physical skills still related to performance as well as an understanding of the different disciplines that comprise PE curricula such as health, nutrition and physiology. Collectively, teachers defined ability in PE broadly, incorporating both physical and cognitive abilities. These findings are in contrast to previous reports where teachers have been found to focus exclusively on physical abilities (Bailey, Morley, & Dismore, 2009b; Croston, 2013) and are an indication that inconsistencies remain in working towards a clear definition of ability in PE. Hue's differentiation between the competitive values associated with sport and the need for enjoyment and involvement in the context of PE provides a potential link to values associated with physical literacy and highlights the presence of differing discourses within the social field. Although there has arguable been a move away from educational objectives towards a focus on elite sport development (Houlihan, 2000; Lee, 2004); the teachers' responses indicate their awareness of potential alternative discourses.

Teachers' ability-based practices: indicators and habitus

When considering students who might be talented or exceptionally able, the teachers acknowledged that physical prowess was the key indicator they used.

I—Is it mostly based on physical attributes or do you think it's based on other qualities?

I think at the moment I mainly look for physical qualities. (Danny)

I think physical attributes mainly. (Mary)

This finding corresponds to previous research regarding the centrality of physical definitions of ability in PE (Bailey et al., 2009b; Croston, 2013) and suggests that the teachers' practice of identifying talent differed from their broader understanding of ability in PE as holistic and also differentiated from sport.

Teachers highlighted three key indicators that they used to identify talent in PE, including: assessment via the NC level descriptors; representation in extra-curricular or external sports; their own interpretations of talent. All of the teachers discussed how they utilised policy in the form of the NC level descriptors to help them identify talent and compare pupils' ability levels.

We definitely use the National Curriculum levels as a guide, and obviously they're based on you know the skills that the kids can do, the knowledge that they have. (Hue)

Someone who would possibly excel beyond their peers ... certainly achieving at least a level 5 in the National Curriculum. (Jack)

The teachers' use of official guidelines may support levels of consistency in defining talent and assessing ability in PE and is in contrast to Bailey et al. (2009b) who reported only minimal use of NC levels as a talent indicator. Furthermore, comparing pupils against one another and identifying individuals as above the level of their peers was an important variable for the teachers in assessing ability. These forms of assessment are part of the performative culture of schools which moves away from the self-referenced versions of success in Whitehead's conceptualisation of physical literacy.

In addition, four of the six teachers in this study felt that one indicator of talent could be recognised success in sport outside of school.

When we did our football trials in year 7 I had them all write down their names and previous clubs played for and things like that and as soon as I saw there was a boy who played for Charlton I assumed that he was going to be strong. (Danny)
People who play for outside teams, school teams, clubs, you know they're ... we know they are capable. (Kieran)

Within the context of the study, the teachers' practices highlight how physical capital was a key indicator of ability where it was associated with prowess in either the range of activities within the PE curriculum or in a particular recognised sport. Furthermore, the use of success in competitive sport as an indicator of talent reinforces the association between PE and performative sport. It also represents criteria for success that is unavailable to most students in PE.

While teachers used the National Curriculum guidelines and knowledge of external sporting achievements as external reference points for defining ability, their primary framework was their own implicit perception of ability. The teachers agreed that they mostly relied on their own experience, knowledge and understanding of what talent is to assess students.

I suppose what I have is sort of like a knowledge and an understanding of where students should be at ... I haven't looked at the department policy (laughs) for so long I can't remember what the gifted and talented one is. (Alison)

I think personally I find it quite easy to kind of spot a talented kid in PE, I think if you have experience yourself of playing at a high level or watching at a high level, or being involved in coaching at a high level, you know what the standards are. (Kieran)

I—Do you use any guidelines at all to help you ID talent in PE?

No just personal experience. (Hue)

The tendency for teachers to privilege personal experience in their assessment of students has also been found by Hay and Macdonald (2010a) and arguably represents a consonance between individual habitus and the practices and discourses within the social field. According to Bourdieu, 'the homogeneity of habitus is what ... causes practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 80). Teachers' confidence in their judgements of students' embodied capital are reinforced through the shared understandings of ability that permeate the social field of PE within and beyond the school.

Talent was also defined as a 'natural skill' or embodied potential that could be identified by teachers.

I've picked up a lot of great cross country runners that's just basically looking at their body type ... It's like when a class walks into a gym for the first time you can tell ... you know that they're going to be your gymnasts within that group just from their stance and poise. (Alison)

You can see the kids that have that natural skill, that flair, that technique for a certain sport. (Kieran)

I think a lot of kids, once they've got ability they'll always have it, you're kind of born with ability. (Jack)

In practice, teachers stated that this evidence of skill was central to evaluating talent and grouping students by ability.

If I was setting them ... I wouldn't look at the tactical side of it as much as the skills side because I think the tactics are easier to teach than the skills. (Hue)

Within this context talent is perceived as a recognisable 'natural skill'. The association of physical capital with 'natural' abilities consolidates the privileging of particular forms of embodiment while, simultaneously, delegitimising others. The teachers were highly confident in their ability to identify talented and 'potentially' talented individuals and there was a level of trust and acceptance between them which was reflected in their more informal processes.

I think word of mouth amongst us is probably the greatest thing we use ... what happens a lot is at the end of a lesson we'll all come back to the changing rooms and another member of staff will quite often come up to me and say 'get him to rugby training he's a good little player' ... there's been quite a lot of kids identified through that ... It's quite informal ... you know if they've got potential or if they're talented. (Jack)

This tacit knowledge is illustrative of Bourdieu's 'feel for the game' evidencing teachers' confidence in their 'mastery of the common code' of PE which underpinned and reinforced particular understandings of embodiment and was supported through their shared pedagogical practice and discourse (Bourdieu, 1977). Teachers perceived that they shared an understanding of an 'undefinable' yet recognisable form of embodied sporting talent which is arguably a form of imagined, idealised physical capital that held currency within this school. This agreed understanding of talent could be argued to represent a shared habitus that emerged from teachers' individual sporting biographies and training which was reconfirmed within the practices of the

school. This process reflects Bourdieu and Passeron's concept of social reproduction which occurs through the 'dissemination and conservation of a particular form of knowledge' which is reinforced in schools 'by sorting students on their possession of the "right" knowledge' (De Carvalho, 2000, p. 94), in this case through the capacity to display desired forms of physicality. So, while alternative discourses exist, the continued understanding of embodied sporting prowess continues to dominate the PE landscape. Teachers 'know' which students embody recognisable sporting abilities. Alternative discourses are part of the social field, but they continue to make little overall impact on the day to day knowledge and practices within PE.

Conclusion

This research illustrates how teachers' ability-based practices were interlinked with traditional performative cultures associated with sporting success, despite their articulation of more holistic definitions of ability and their differentiation of PE and sport. Teachers in this school perceived that they had a shared, implicit understanding of ability that was primarily informed by their experience. Within this school teachers placed a distinct emphasis on defining ability in terms of physicality reifying common-sense notions of 'legitimate bodies' which privileged students who either had a reputation for sporting excellence or who demonstrated desired forms of sport-related physical capital in lessons. Arguably, teacher's individual sporting and pedagogical habitus was recognised and reinforced within the school through their collective agreement of desirable forms of embodied capital. Bourdieu's concepts of 'feel for the game' and 'mastery of the common code' effectively illustrate the comfort and confidence teachers felt in their ability to understand ability and identify those bodies most suited to sporting endeavours.

Kirk (1992) has argued that 'legitimate knowledge' is not fixed, but is instead constantly in process, shaped by social, political and cultural, as well as educational forces; 'legitimate knowledge' is also not politically nor culturally neutral, but on the contrary 'embodies and communicates the interests and values of those parties who have a major hand in constructing the school curriculum, a process which unjustly disadvantages some categories of pupils in relation to others' (Kirk, 1992, p. 2). Working within this context means that PE teachers' actions are rarely accidental; they have an origin, a history and are almost always inevitably constrained by prevailing political ideologies (Evans & Penney, 2008). It is within this culture that teachers' notions of ability are configured and reconfigured, where the emphasis is typically on 'performance', where the social and cultural context gives ability its meaning. Consequently, the context and the wider field of PE play a significant role in informing and reinforcing understandings of ability and constrain teachers from challenging and altering their own as well as others' understandings of what constitutes ability in PE. Attempting to disrupt conceptualisations of PE that are rooted in individuals' habitus and reinforced through shared, commonsense understandings of 'legitimate notions' of ability therefore remains a difficult task for stakeholders.

The findings also highlight the complexities and tensions that can exist between one school and the wider field of PE (Penney, 2013). These tensions contribute towards inconsistencies in working towards clarity and consistency in defining ability in PE and also to discourse that has evolved from previous, and continuing, debates on whether the field should distinguish between PE and sport. Consequently, it can be argued that questions about appropriate indicators of talent and ability in PE seem to centre persistently on debates about whether and how to distinguish between PE and sport and the balance between physical and social, cognitive, creative and personal elements (Croston, 2013; Kirk & Gorley 2000; Morley & Bailey, 2006; Murdoch 1990). More specifically, the findings of this study help to explain the difference between raising awareness and changing practices in the social field of PE. While teachers differentiated between sport and PE, their understandings of embodied capital and subsequent practices reflected their individual habitus and were reinforced by the sense of shared knowledge that was experienced by the teachers. Current understandings of ability in PE remain an issue as they serve to marginalise and exclude many students (Penney, 2013) who are unable or unwilling to display desired forms of embodiment. These understandings of ability are also intertwined with other forms of identity such as gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality. We argue that efforts to create more equitable and inclusive PE experiences will require a capacity to disrupt, diversify, and subvert taken for granted discourses of performative sports culture in order to embed more holistic discourses and practices such as those associated with physical literacy into the social field of PE.

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