

What is PE?

Sport, Education and Society

Maura Coulter ^{a*} & Déirdre Ní Chróinín ^b

*^aSt Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Ireland; ^bMary Immaculate College,
University of Limerick, Ireland*

* Corresponding author: Education Department (Physical Education), St Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Ireland
E-mail: maura.coulter@spd.dcu.ie

Abstract

Physical education is a socially constructed activity that forms one component of a wider physical culture that includes sport and health/physical activity (Kirk, 1999, Lake, 2001a: 69, Penney, 1998). The terms sport and physical education are often used interchangeably in school contexts, where sport and health continue to shape what is understood by the term physical education (Capel & Blair, 2007). This study explores discourses shaping pre-service primary teachers' understandings of the nature and purposes of physical education within an Irish context and the relationship between these understandings. A ten minute writing task (Pike, 2006) prompted by the question 'what is physical education?' was completed by a sample of pre-service teachers (n=544, age range 18-46, 8.8% male) from two colleges of education, prior to the physical education component of their teacher education programme. Content analysis involved an initial text frequency search to create categories which were collapsed into three broad areas of students' understandings of physical education – sport, health and physical education. The research design allowed access to pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education. Participants' understandings reflected their own school experiences and were framed within health and sport ideologies of physical education. Although acknowledged as an important part of school life physical education was perceived as a break from academic subjects where the purpose of learning was to learn sports and activities to stay fit and healthy. While the overwhelmingly positive nature of participants' experiences and the changing discourses around competition and team games are encouraging the dominant discourses of physical education continue to reflect the dominant aspects of wider physical culture in Ireland. The capacity of physical education to move beyond reproducing dominant sport and health ideologies provides a significant challenge to teacher education contexts, to challenge dominant discourses and recreate understandings of physical education for future action.

Keywords: Sport, Physical education, Health, Culture, Physical Activity, Initial Teacher Education

Introduction

Physical education is a socially constructed activity which is informed by, and informs wider physical culture. Individual experiences of physical education as well as messages from wider physical culture, shape understandings of the nature and purpose of physical education, where physical education is defined by what is done in its name (Kirk, 2010). This paper examines pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education and the role of wider physical culture in shaping these understandings in an Irish context. It explores the dominant ideologies shaping understandings of the nature and purposes of physical education. In Ireland, teacher education programmes are expected to show evidence of their role in teacher learning and development (The Teaching Council, 2007). The overall study is a longitudinal cohort study examining the potential of the physical education component of a teacher education programme in shifting pre-service teachers' understandings to align with the key messages of their physical education programme and the primary curriculum. The relationship between school, university and wider physical culture discourses are explored. This paper focuses on the understandings of physical education pre-service teachers bring to their teacher education programme and considers the connections between their understandings based on their school experiences and wider physical culture.

Educational justifications of the place of physical education in schools have emphasised its 'unique' contribution to overall development through a focus on the body. Insight into the relationship between pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education and wider physical culture in Ireland can support (re)alignment of their understandings with educational purposes. In the process this may support the (re)creation of physical education and wider physical culture.

Physical Culture

‘Physical culture is a specialised form of discourse concerned with meaning-making centred on bodily practices which constitute sport, physical recreation and exercise’ (Kirk, 1999: 66) where discourse ‘refers to all meaning-making activity, whether this is intentional or unintentional, explicit or implicit, overt or reflexive’ (Kirk, 1999: 66). Engagement in physical culture includes roles that range from participation in sporting and physical activities, coaching and volunteering as well as supporting sporting icons and teams as a fan. Physical education professionals have defined physical education within wider physical culture in relation to school sport, physical activity and lifelong learning (AfPE Scotland, 2010). It is suggested that school physical education is a part of youth physical culture that ‘informs and is informed by physical culture’ (Kirk, 1999: 69). However, it is suggested that in reality school physical education practices have failed to keep pace with changes in wider physical culture leading to a lack of connection between experiences provided to children in school contexts and the types of physical activity opportunities they pursue outside of school (Kirk, 1999).

Physical Culture in Ireland

Sport and physical activity play an important social role in Ireland (Fahey & Delaney, 2005). Irish physical culture is dominated by sport where the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), collectively known as the ‘big three’. Sport has been more recently recognised as an important social capital in Ireland (Fahey & Delaney, 2005). Despite sport forming a core part of Irish culture, there has been an increase in sedentary lifestyles for Irish adults and young people in recent years (Department of

Health and Children, 2005, Morgan *et al.*, 2008, Nic Gabhainn *et al.*, 2007). While this trend is not uniquely Irish (Janssen *et al.*, 2005) it has placed the spotlight on the provision of, and participation in, physical activities opportunities for adults and young people in Ireland.

Physical culture for young people in Ireland includes three key pillars: extra-curricular sport in schools, sport played outside school contexts, and physical education (Fahey *et al.*, 2005, Woods *et al.*, 2010). The process of engagement in sport and physical activities by young people is complex and the larger cultural and social context must be taken into account when devising sporting and physical activity opportunities for young people reflecting ‘the changing times and unique interests of young people’ (Collier *et al.*, 2007). As the ‘big three’ continue to receive a disproportionately large amount of government funding, the privileged and dominant position of these team games continues to be maintained and extended (MacPhail *et al.*, 2008). This dominance influences all aspects of physical culture and impacts significantly on the dominant ideologies and practices of physical education in schools.

Physical Education in Ireland

In national contexts, it is through policy documents such as school curricula, as well as the practice of physical education that the nature and purposes of physical education are determined. The physical education curricula in Ireland are underpinned by the principle of lifelong participation aiming at the primary level to ‘provide children with learning opportunities through the medium of movement’ (Government of Ireland, 1999b: 8). This is developed at the post primary level by providing

opportunities for personal, social and physical development through participation in physical activities (Government of Ireland, 2003). These core aims reflect physical education thinking internationally where the World Summit on Physical Education (2005) called on governments to recognise physical education's 'intrinsic value and its distinctive role in physical, personal and social development, and in health promotion' (Maggingen Commitment for Physical Education, 2005: 1). In order to better understand the nature and purpose of physical education and its place within wider physical culture we need to examine the dominant ideologies which shape them.

Dominant Ideologies shaping 'What is PE?'

Sport and health/fitness ideologies have been identified as the most influential discourses in physical education (Green, 1998, Green, 2008, Kirk, 1999, Kretchmar, 2008, Lake, 2001a, Penney, 1998, Penney & Evans, 1999). Garrett & Wrench highlight that the dominance of sport and health ideologies is a direct reflection of wider physical culture:

'the discourses that achieve dominance in physical education do so with support and close alignment to the hegemonic discourses of wider society'
(Garrett & Wrench, 2007: 27).

In addition, since each individual's understanding of physical education is grounded in a range of subjectivities formed through personal experiences of sport, physical activity and physical education (Garrett & Wrench, 2008) these dominant ideologies continue to be reproduced. The following section considers the influential ideologies of sport and health in more detail.

Sport Ideology: The terms sport and physical education are often used interchangeably within school contexts. Green (1998) describes the process whereby sport and team games became ‘the ideological high ground of the subject’ and ‘the epithet of ‘traditional’ PE’ during the second half of the twentieth century. Team games continue to dominate physical education in schools. Green (2008) describes how sport has in many places continues as both the content and justification for physical education in schools (Hardman, 2008b). Caution has been expressed that if this trend towards the sportization of physical education continues there is a danger that the unique identity and individuality of educational purpose for physical education may be affected (Green, 2008, Penney, 1998). Hardman (2007; 2008a) argues that the sport dominated frame of reference for physical education needs to be widened to promote active lifestyles in ways that are meaningful and relevant, and responsive to the needs of young people (Hardman, 2007, Hardman, 2008b).

Health/ Fitness Ideology: Concern with physical education as a vehicle for health promotion has rivalled sport for the ideological high-ground (Green, 2008). This is reflected in policy and curriculum documents, where for example in Australia, physical education is now part of a Key Learning Area entitled Health and Physical Education. While a health driven ideology of physical education has not succeeded in displacing sport as the dominant ideology of the subject area, it has certainly taken a significant portion of the market share from sport. Green (1998) describes how in the second half of the twentieth century physical education emerged as a solution to addressing societal health and fitness concerns with a resultant emphasis on preparation for leisure and promotion of lifelong participation in physical activity as a core purpose of physical education. Health and fitness justifications are often evident

in pupils' understandings on the nature and purpose of physical education (Jones & Cheetham, 2001, Macdonald *et al.*, 2005).

'Lifelong participation' is accepted as a core purpose of physical education (Green, 2004, Kirk, 2005). The contribution of physical education to lifelong physical activity participation (Trudeau & Shephard, 2005) and the capacity of school physical education to prevent or stem the rising tide of obesity (Gard, 2004) have been keenly debated in physical education circles. Physical education has been suggested as one of the solutions to addressing increasing sedentary lifestyles of Irish children and adults (Department of Health and Children, 2005) where lifelong physical activity participation seems to be affected by early learning experiences (Kirk, 2005). Some see this as an opportunity to secure the future of physical education, others see this as a dangerous game by making promises that cannot necessarily be kept (Green, 2008).

While health discourses around the promotion of lifelong physical activity are central to the framing of physical education through school curricula, sport and team games continue to play a central role in the daily practices of physical education. This raises questions around whether sport and health ideologies are the most desirable ideologies of physical education.

Although some concern about the dominance of sport and health ideologies in physical education discourses has been expressed in the literature (Penney, 1998), at both the policy level and in daily practices, sport and health continue to shape understandings of physical education. Smith & Parr (2007) emphasise the importance of engaging with the realities of physical education as experienced by young people as a means to supporting future provision of valuable and

meaningful physical education experiences. Macdonald, Kirk & Braiuka (1999) explored the representation of physical culture in the experiences of future teachers of physical education moving from school physical education to human movement studies at university level. They highlighted gaps in meaning-making between the participants' reality of university level courses and their expectations which were based on their own school experiences. They describe students experiencing 'multiple and potentially contradictory messages during the course of their education in secondary and tertiary institutions' (Macdonald *et al.*, 1999: 47). Their study raises questions about what version of physical education is privileged in school and university settings and what the connections between these sites should be to enhance future delivery of physical education.

Where is the education in Physical Education?

Hardman (2007) suggests that physical education has become an 'umbrella term' for a range of practices. Debate around the content of the subject area and justifications for the subject on school curricula has focused on the nature and purposes of physical education (Green, 1998, Green, 2008, Kirk, 2010, Reid, 1996) and are grounded in the policy and practice of physical education. Physical education is recognised as a socially constructed concept: 'there is no timeless essence to PE in the sense of something immutable and relatively timeless that the subject is and must always be if it is to count as PE' (Green, 2008: 21). Understandings of physical education are related to the historical, social and cultural context in which physical education takes place and 'understandings' include consideration of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Capel & Katene, 2000, Shulman, 1986, Shulman, 1987, Siedentop, 2002, Tinning, 2002) as well as beliefs (Tsangaridou, 2006a, Tsangaridou, 2006b).

In Ireland, an ideology of physical education grounded in its educational value is evident within primary physical education; ‘physical education provides children with learning opportunities through the medium of movement and contributes to their overall development by helping them to lead full, active and healthy lives’ (Government of Ireland, 1999a:2). This reflects a view of physical education that moves beyond an instrumental justification to one where physical activity is recognised as a valuable human practice (Green, 1998). Physical education ‘is distinguished from other curricular areas by its primary focus on the body and on physical experience and is an integral part of the educational process, without which the education of the child is incomplete’ (Government of Ireland, 1999a:2). The core areas of the Irish curriculum align with common elements of physical education curricula internationally including games, gymnastics, athletics, aquatics, dance and outdoor and adventure activities.

Pre-service teacher education programmes are aligned with the core values and principles of the Primary Physical Education Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999a). Through an integrated approach including modelling, participation in practical experiences, peer teaching, discussion and group based learning, beginning teachers are enabled to teach physical education. Reflection on school contexts following school placements provide opportunities to further develop and challenge the contradictions of physical education ideologies within school culture and the role of physical education within wider physical culture in an Irish context.

A teacher’s understanding and beliefs about teaching physical education are influenced by their prior experiences (Faulkner *et al.*, 2004, Garrett & Wrench, 2007, Matanin & Collier, 2003) and grounded in their practical everyday

experiences which provide ‘practical guides to action as well as a justification for those actions’ (Green, 1998). The importance of considering the influence of wider physical culture on beginning teachers’ understandings of physical education was highlighted as socialisation into and via sport impacted in shaping their understandings in addition to their physical education experiences (Placek *et al.*, 1995).

Morgan & Hansen (2008) found teachers’ understanding of physical education as a ‘break’ in their perceptions of physical education which were closely related to health and fitness discourses with little evidence of educational rationales for the subject. Around the world (Dyson, 2006, Jones & Cheetham, 2001, Lake, 2001b, Macdonald *et al.*, 2005, O’Sullivan, 2002, Smith & Parr, 2007) participation in physical education is perceived by pupils as a break from the rest of school life, an opportunity for non-serious, non-academic socialising that is about fun and enjoyment. In their study Smith & Parr (2007) found that ‘pupils held an amalgam of socially constructed views on the nature and purposes of PE that centred, for the most part, upon the supposedly non-educational purposes of PE’ (Smith & Parr, 2007: 54). These discourses are also evident in the discourses of primary school children in Ireland (O’Sullivan, 2002). The primary school curriculum in Ireland includes fun and enjoyment as a key vehicle to promote lifelong physical activity participation (Government of Ireland, 1999b). Physical education teachers also think that fun should be the medium of learning in physical education (O’Reilly *et al.*, 2001). However, it seems that pupils equate this with physical education being non-serious and non-educational.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the dominance of sport and health discourses in school physical education. This study provides new insight as it examines beginning-teachers' understandings as they cross the divide from pupil to beginning teacher. The beginning teachers in this study are at the crossroads between being a pupil/ consumer of physical education and drawing on these understandings as a basis for action in their teaching. Further investigation and insight into the place of physical education within wider physical culture may allow programmes to explore the process of meaning-making in physical education and place them at the centre of beginning teachers' frames of understanding. Insight into how physical education is framed within wider physical culture may also allow an opportunity for beginning teachers to shape their teacher education experiences and support a more consistent physical education message between primary, post primary and university settings. The methodological approach in this paper asks a large sample of participants to answer a single question. The effectiveness of this method of data collection to access pre-service teachers' understandings and to provide insight on the relationship between these understandings and wider physical culture. The primary research focus for this paper was 'Can we access pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education as they begin their programmes using this methodology, and what insight can we gain from this access?'

Research Design

A phenomenological approach was utilised in this study as we were interested in how the pre-service teachers made sense of their personal experiences and interpreted these experiences and events to construct their understanding of

physical education. Phenomenology has the potential to describe everyday life experiences and these experiences recorded and analyzed can tell a compelling story (Denscombe, 2006). In undertaking the research we were open to the varied understandings that we may have encountered and to the fact that each of these understandings were valid in their own right. This approach also enabled us to go further than just describe the participants' understanding of physical education to trying to focus on how these understandings came about. A qualitative research methodology using a reflective writing task provided access to the participants' understandings. Use of a large-scale single question design offered the possibility of a feasible, replicable tool to allow physical education teacher educators access to pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education easily and efficiently prior to undertaking their physical education programme. The importance of asking the 'right' question aligned with the focus of the research is emphasized. The limitations of a short piece of writing, within a limited timeframe, were recognized where development of ideas was not possible. A feature of this research design compared to other qualitative studies which are often small scale making it difficult to generalize findings, is the large number of sources involved in this study. This allowed patterns to become clear and relationships between ideas to be explored to allow us to argue confidently in relation to shared understandings of participants.

Research context and participants

In Ireland the primary school teacher is a generalist teacher expected to teach eleven subjects, one of which is physical education. During their three year undergraduate degree these pre-service teachers complete a 36-48 hour course in Primary Physical

Education in the first two years. Some continue and take an additional 48 hours as part of a special option in their final year. This study was conducted prior to the students commencing the physical education component of a Bachelor of Education teacher education programme. The participants in this study are pre-service primary teachers (n=544, age range 18-46, 8.8% male) from two colleges of education in Ireland.

Data collection and analysis

The participants were invited to complete a ten-minute spontaneous writing task (Pike, 2006) prompted by the question ‘what is physical education?’ It is important to emphasise no direction was provided and participants were not guided in their answers allowing them to answer the question openly. This methodology was cost and time efficient and an excellent method of gathering the necessary data. The data was handled using nVivo 8 and coding strategy was designed and adhered to as follows:

Stage 1 Text search frequency query (Bryman, 2008) was carried out which allowed for the creation of broad categories to capture students’ understandings of physical education (Table 1). Where numerical data appear in this study, they refer to the number of occasions the term appeared in the writings and not the number of participants who used the term, for example for ‘*fitness*’ there were 257 references, in 239 participants’ writings.

Insert Table 1

Table 1. Sample text frequency search

Stage 2 Categories were defined to ensure there was no overlap. Data were then coded to these categories. For example words such as fit, healthy and obesity were coded to health.

Stage 3 Further analysis included checking of each category to ensure consistency of coding. The key ideas within these categories were generated into themes constructed through reading and rereading the data using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants' understandings of physical education reflected consideration of their own lived experiences as well as their perspectives on the potential of physical education based on their experiences of wider physical culture. Both levels of engagement were given equal consideration within the coding process where all data was carefully considered to capture the complexity and subtleties of participants' meaning making and codes were then matched to themes and the research question (Table 2). Sub themes/categories were established as they arose and any relationships to main themes or other sub-themes were identified and linked.

Stage 4 When the data had been coded and assigned categories, it was re-read and decided whether there were other places to code it. The content was then selected and coded at a new or existing category. Discriminate cases, such as negatively framed writings, those that did not include health/ sport discourses, were examined to challenge assumptions within the argument being constructed (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Insert Table 2

Table 2. Example of coding categories and themes and their relationships.

Stage 5 Proposition statements related to each of the themes were generated. The proposition statements/constructed theory were tested against the data. This ensured that all coding and findings were reliable and robust.

Both researchers were involved in the analysis of the data. This included coding individually, whereby both researchers coded the same data to ensure clarity of language, meaning and reliability; coding together and recording memos to establish agreed thoughts, themes and steps in the analysis process; and working together to construct an argument based on key messages within the data that was balanced, robust and made sense (Richards, 2005). Trustworthiness of the analysis was also addressed using a peer de-briefer who reviewed all materials to address issues of bias in this ‘backyard research’ (Creswell, 2009).

Findings

Participants believed that participation in physical education was a positive and beneficial experience that supporting learning of a range of physical and social skills (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). Many of the participants used their own experiences to advocate for physical education:

‘P.E. is physical exercise where students get to exercise and have fun at the same time. In my primary school P.E. was the highlight of the week. We got to play loads of cool games and I would definitely consider it the best fun ever. In my opinion most kids really enjoy P.E. and I would love to see P.E. becoming a daily class. I think this subject is very important and vital in this day and I would love to see the amount of classes increase.’

Some participants approached the task of answering the question ‘what is PE?’ in a logical manner:

The words “physical education” is made up of two words, “physical” and “education”.

“Education” means teaching and learning, developing and broadening ones knowledge and by the end one is generally more aware. “Physical” refers to the body and actually doing something. Physical education hence means learning about developing your body, quite often done through sports. Although “physical” generally excludes emotional and physiological, the development of one body, fitness and understanding this often leads to healthy and strong developed mind too.

Most of the participants’ writings reflected multidimensional understandings where physical education involved a wide range of activities that served a number of purposes:

Smelly sports bags, laps of freezing cold gym halls, beep tests, circuit training, tennis in the summer, returning roasting hot to classes, attempting badminton while listening to “Snow Patrol”, laughing with your friends. Trying out random sports to exercise the body and mind, to take the brain off school work and relax. Teamwork.

Participants recognised physical education as a school subject (96 references) that was unique with an emphasis on active participation. Participants also viewed physical education as an important part of school life that provides a break/ outlet/ rest/ getaway from other subjects, essentially that physical education is non-academic (141 references). The participants distinguished physical education from other subjects which involved books, studying, monotony, strict learning, reading, writing and hard work:

It is an important aspect of school as it keeps the students well rounded and balanced. As the saying goes “all work and no play makes jack/jill a dull boy/girl!” It is a release for some people from their studies and breaks up the amount of time spent in the book

Fun (183 references) was emphasised as an essential element of physical education. For some having fun was an end in itself and physical education was seen as a recreational activity/ catharsis:

in primary school its just lobbing beanbags about the place and making sure they get fresh air

Other participants suggested that while it was important to have fun, physical education did involve purposeful teaching (165 references) and learning (210 references). One participant hinted at the wider potential of learning through physical education:

Lessons learned through physical education, e.g. rock climbing, may just save your life some day.

However, while their writings (and evidently their previous experiences) included a complex mixture of ideas around the nature and purpose of physical education some discourses emerged consistently across texts. Sport and health were the dominant discourses in participants' writings and this finding is consistent with physical education discourses internationally (Capel & Blair, 2007, Green, 2008, Macdonald *et al.*, 2005). For these participants sport discourses shape the nature (answering the '*what*' question) of physical education. Sport discourses were tied to health discourses where they described how physical education provided opportunities to learn about a variety of sports to stay fit and healthy indicating that health discourses shape the purpose (answering the '*why*' question) for physical education for these participants. Ideas within the sport and health ideologies within participants' meaning making reveal nuances and subtleties of understanding that highlight the importance of considering the details of these discourses and their relationship to wider physical culture.

Sport discourses shaped participants' understandings of the nature of physical education (351 references). They suggested that through physical education it was possible to identify a sport that could be pursued outside of school. The continuing prevalence of team (124 references) games (189 references) within sport discourses suggests that physical education does not seem to offer the broad and balanced

experience that is outlined as the basis of lifelong physical activity participation.. In addition, the dominance of team games suggest that physical education has not responded to the diversification of young people's wider physical culture as reflected by what they like to do (Collier *et al.*, 2007). This reflects other contexts such as Australia, where Garrett and Wrench (2007) found that early school based experiences of pre-service teachers were dominated by sport-related discourses. While the majority of participants had a positive experience of games teaching it is worth noting that for this participant the sports-dominated model of physical education was not an enjoyable one:

Degrading, demeaning. Usually repetitive, one sport played for the majority of the year. Fun for those that enjoy and participate in sport outside of school/college but not always for others. Can be a good way to socialise etc but some people may feel too embarrassed to participate if they are not athletic.

While only three participants alluded to negative experiences of physical education these experiences highlight the importance of recognising each individual perspective in physical education. They challenge the individualization of physical education practices in ways that promote lifelong physical activity participation for those who do not enjoy team games.

Participants' writings acknowledged the role of physical education in learning skills (153 references) to support participation. However, the opportunity to learn social skills (85 references) through physical education participation was as important, if not more important for participants. Team games were recognised as a valuable opportunity to learn social skills such as leadership, organisation, determination, team spirit and self control by providing opportunities to connect and interact with others through group activities and games. In addition, participants who mentioned

competition (20 references) emphasised the importance of 'healthy' competition and not taking competition too seriously.

Most importantly the individual learns that a game is just a game and it is the taking part that counts.

This seems to suggest that while team games has remained the dominant activity in physical education the emphasis within these games has shifted away from performative and competitive discourses (Hardman, 2007, 2008a) towards a view of games that emphasises social skills. While it is recognised that the continuing dominance of team sports within sport and physical activity messages in the wider physical culture means that physical education content will inevitably continue to reflect these discourses, it is encouraging that the emphasis has shifted away from competitive and performative discourses towards a more educational emphasis.

Health discourses of physical education were evident in participants' writings where participants framed physical education as an opportunity to exercise (384 references), be active (365 references) and be fit (257 references) and healthy (316 references). Participants suggested that physical education can promote a healthy body, a healthy mind and a healthy balanced lifestyle by providing a fun opportunity to exercise, participate in, and learn about a range of physical activities. For these participants physical education is where you can learn how to get fit and the importance of staying fit. They suggest that the learning of physical skills such as co-ordination and balance, running, jumping and throwing can also support a physically active lifestyle. The importance of participation in physical education and being fit was framed within health (316 references) and obesity discourses (28 references) and reflects participants' understandings of the purposes of physical education in other contexts (Jones & Cheetham, 2001, Macdonald *et al.*, 2005). Although many participants

considered the value of school physical education in addressing issues around obesity one participant was a little more cynical in their response:

Physical education is a school course required by law so the government can be seen to be doing something to battle the plight of childhood obesity.

Emphasis on fitness and health seemed to acknowledge the increase in sedentary lifestyles and increasing obesity levels of young people.

This highlights the notion of physical education ‘being drawn into the obesity vortex’ (Gard, 2004) within wider physical culture. It is also worth noting the emphasis on physical education as a ‘stress-free’ zone (30 references), a form of catharsis for relieving stress and escaping the stress of the rest of school life. Participants recognised that there were connections between learning in physical education and lifelong physical activity participation. These connections were grounded in an understanding intertwined with sport and health discourses for most participants. However, for most participants their advocacy for lifelong participation in physical activity was instrumental and grounded in health discourses rather than a broader understanding of a balanced lifestyle with physical education viewed as a valued human practice (Green, 1998).

We advocate for an approach based on an ideology where physical education is viewed as valued educational practice. It seems, in this context, more important to consider the reality of the interplay between the sport and health ideologies shaping physical education and wider physical culture rather than arguing for the superiority of one ideology from a theoretical perspective. The overall finding of this study suggesting that sport discourses shape the ‘*what*’ and health discourses dominate the ‘*why*’ of physical education have been found elsewhere. However, the subtleties

within participants' understandings of the nature and purposes of team games and the emphasis on physical education as a cathartic 'stress relief' activity highlight the importance of considering understandings of physical education within the contextual frame of wider physical culture.

The relationship between physical education discourses and wider physical culture

Within an Irish context there seems to be alignment between wider physical culture and school physical education practices. It is evident that the 'what' of these participants' physical education experiences was narrow and dominated team games. In addition, the emphasis by participants on the social nature of team games directly reflects the central position of sporting organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) as an important social hub within communities in Ireland (Fahey & Delaney, 2005). The participants' understandings that health and fitness shape the purposes of physical education also seems to be strongly connected to messages within wider physical culture that link physical activity and health in an instrumental way. This suggests that wider physical culture continues to shape physical education practices in schools, and raises questions around how school physical education can move outside the influence of the dominant aspects of wider physical culture to recreate itself in a way that embraces all aspects of wider physical culture and reposition itself as a valued educational practice. Kretchmar (2008) suggests that 'the challenge is to find ways to prioritize a life-enhancing brand of physical education over its utilitarian counterpart' (p. 169). This conundrum in which physical education finds itself raises particular difficulties for teacher education programmes. It is important that teacher education programmes convey a message consistent with the curriculum based on a broad and balanced curriculum and support beginning teachers

to deliver physical education within an educational ideology of physical education. It is challenging for beginning teachers to implement practices that often contradict their own school experiences and the wider physical culture of schools in which their placements during their initial teacher education programme are situated. This *mélange* of mixed messages and contradictory practices provides a challenging context for teacher education programmes to ensure that future teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and resilience to deliver physical education aligned with the ideals of the curriculum. Consideration of the interplay between wider physical culture and the educational purposes of physical education may provide a framework to support beginning teachers to deliver physical education. As these pre-service teachers construct their understandings of physical education during their undergraduate course, a starting point is to acknowledge, address and where necessary, challenge current attitudes and beliefs to ensure that the key messages of their teacher education programmes translate into teacher practices. (Rovegno, 2003; Tsangaridou, 2006a, 2006b). This may begin to support re-creation of physical education aligned with educational aspirations and support a more consistent physical education message between school and university settings.

Conclusion

The single question methodology used in this study provided a feasible and efficient method of accessing and analysing a large cohort of students' understandings of physical education. The advantage of this methodology is that a large amount of data can be collected and analysed efficiently and cost effectively. This methodology can be applied to explore many facets of pre-service teachers' experiences in a feasible way with the caveat that the correct question must be asked. Moreover, caution must

be applied to the findings of a single question methodology. Responses may be narrow, framed by the focus of a single question. However, it is encouraging that participants' understandings of physical education based on their experiences were for the most part positive. The dominant discourses of physical education - sport and health - reflect the dominant aspects of wider physical culture in Ireland. In this context it seems inevitable that physical education will continue to serve as an umbrella term (Green, 2008) to meet whatever purposes society demands of it. This suggests that the capacity of physical education to move beyond reproducing dominant sport and health ideologies to recreate itself, and ultimately to recreate physical culture must be questioned. With evidence of participants' understandings of physical education we acknowledged students starting points on the programme and began to provide opportunities throughout the programme to challenge all discourses, while ensuring a strong educational discourse was maintained. Further opportunities to support the recreation of students understandings need to be investigated to ensure students have a strong and consistent education ideology, but with resilience to school sport ideologies. However, if physical education in Ireland continues to reflect the 'gap' between promise and provision (Green, 2008) the answer to the question 'What is PE?' will continue to reflect dominant physical culture and be problematic for those with an educational purpose.

References

- AfPE Scotland (2010) Physical Education in Scotland in the 21st Century. *Physical Education Matters*, 5(1), 11-14.
- Bryman, A. (2008) *Social Research Methods*, (3rd edn) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Capel, S. & Blair, R. (2007) Making physical education relevant: increasing the impact of initial teacher training. *London Review of Education*, 5(1), 15-34.
- Capel, S. & Katene, W. (2000) Secondary PGCE PE students' perceptions of their subject knowledge. *European Physical Education Review*, 6(1), 46-70.
- Collier, C., MacPhail, A. & O' Sullivan, M. (2007) Student discourse on physical activity and sport among Irish young people. *Irish Educational Studies*, 26(2), 195-210.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009) *Research Design, Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, New York: Sage.
- Denscombe, M. (2006) *The Good Research Guide for Small-scale Social Research Projects*, Open University Press
- Department of Health and Children (2005) *Obesity: The Policy Challenges. The Report of the National Taskforce on Obesity* Dublin: Ireland.
- Dyson, B. (2006) Students' perspectives of physical education, in: D. Kirk, D. Macdonald & M. O'Sullivan (Eds) *The Handbook of Physical Education*. London: Sage, 326-346.

- Fahey, T. & Delaney, L. (2005) *Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland*, Dublin: University College Dublin
- Faulkner, G., Reeves, C. & Chedzoy, S. (2004) Nonspecialist, preservice primary-school teachers: Predicting intentions to teach physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 23(3), 200-215.
- Gard, M. (2004) An elephant in the room and a bridge too far, or physical education and the "obesity epidemic", in: J. Evans, B. Davies & L. Burrows (Eds) *Body Knowledge and Control: Studies in the Sociology of Physical Education and Health*. London: Routledge, 68-82.
- Garrett, R. & Wrench, A. (2007) Physical experiences: primary student teachers' conceptions of sport and physical education *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 12(1), 23-42.
- Garrett, R. & Wrench, A. (2008) Connections, pedagogy and alternative possibilities in primary physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 13(1), 39-60.
- Government of Ireland (1999a) *The Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Government of Ireland (1999b) *Primary School Curriculum, Physical Education*, Dublin: Government Publications.
- Government of Ireland. (2003) *Junior Cycle Physical Education Syllabus*
Available online at: <http://www.jcpe.ie/>.
- Green, K. (1998) Philosophies, ideologies and the practice of physical education. *Sport, Education & Society*, 3(2), 125-143.

- Green, K. (2004) Physical education, lifelong participation and the couch potato society. *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 9(1), 0-86.
- Green, K. (2008) *Understanding Physical Education*, London: Sage.
- Hardman, K. (2007) Current situation and prospects for physical education in the European Union. *Directorate General Internal Policies of the Union, Policy Department Structural and Cohesion Policies, Culture and Education. P/B/CULT/IC/2006/10*.
- Hardman, K. (2008a) The Situation of Physical Education in Schools: A European Perspective *Journal Human Movement*, 9(1), 5-18.
- Hardman, K. (2008b) The Situation of Physical Education in Schools: A European Perspective *Journal Human Movement* 9(1), 5-18.
- Janssen, I., Katzmarzyk, P. T., Boyce, W. F., Vereecken, C., Mulvihill, C., Roberts, C., Currie, C. & Pickett, W. (2005) Comparison of overweight and obesity prevalence in school-aged youth from 34 countries and their relationships with physical activity and dietary patterns. *Obesity Reviews*, 6(2), 123-132.
- Jones, R. & Cheetham, R. (2001) Physical education in the National Curriculum: its purpose and meaning for final year secondary school students. *European Journal of Physical Education*, 6(81-100).
- Kirk, D. (1999) Physical culture, physical education and relational analysis. *Sport, Education & Society*, 4(1), 63-73.
- Kirk, D. (2004). Framing quality physical education: the elite sport model or Sport Education? *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 9(2), 185-195.

- Kirk, D. (2005) Physical education, youth sport and lifelong participation: the importance of early learning experiences. *European physical education review*, 11(3), 239-255.
- Kirk, D. (2010) Defining physical education: Nature, purposes and future/s. *Physical Education Matters*, 5(3), 30-31.
- Kretchmar, S. (2008) The increasing utility of elementary school physical education: A mixed blessing and unique challenge. *The Elementary School Journal*, 108(3), 161-170.
- Lake, J. (2001a) Young people's conceptions of sport, physical education and exercise: Implications for physical education and the promotion of health-related exercise. *European Physical Education Review*, 7(1), 80-91.
- Lake, J. (2001b) Young People's Conceptions of Sport, Physical Education and Exercise: Implications for Physical Education and the Promotion of Health-Related Exercise. *European physical education review*, 7(1), 80.
- Lincoln, Y. & Guba E. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*, New York: Sage.
- Macdonald, D., Kirk, D. & Braiuka, S. (1999) The social construction of the physical activity field at the school/university interface. *European physical education review*, 5(1), 31.
- Macdonald, D., Rodger, S. R. Abbott, Ziviani, J. & Jones, J. (2005) 'I could do with a pair of wings': perspectives on physical activity, bodies and health from young Australian children. *Sport, Education & Society*, 10(2), 195-209.

- MacPhail, A., O' Sullivan, M. & Halbert, J. (2008) Physical education and education through sport in Ireland, in: G. Klein & K. Hardman (Eds) *Physical education and Sport Education in the European Union. (vol. 2)*. Paris: Editions Revue E.P.S.
- Maggingen Commitment for Physical Education (2005) *2nd World Summit on Physical Education* Maggingen, 2-3 December.
- Matanin, M. & Collier, C. (2003) Longitudinal analysis of preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 22(2), 153-68.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, (2nd edn) Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Morgan, K., McGee, H., Watson, D., Perry, I., Barry, M., Shelley, E., Harrington, J., Molcho, M., Layte, R., Tully, N., van Lente, E., Ward, M., Lutomski, J., Conroy, R. & Brugha R. (2008) SLÁN 2007: Survey of Lifestyle, Attitudes & Nutrition in Ireland. Main Report Dublin: Department of Health and Children.
- Morgan, P. J. & Hansen, V. (2008) Physical education in primary schools: Classroom teachers' perceptions of benefits and outcomes. *Health Education Journal*, 67(3), 196- 207.
- Nic Gabhainn, S., Kelly, C., & Molcho, M. (2007) HBSC Ireland 2006: National Report of the 2006 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children in Ireland Dublin: Department of Health and Children.

- O'Reilly, E., Tompkins, J., & Gallant, M., (2001) 'They ought to enjoy physical activity, you know?': Struggling with fun in physical education. *Sport, Education & Society*, 6(2), 211-221.
- O'Sullivan, S. (2002) The physical activity of children: a study of 1602 Irish schoolchildren aged 11-12 years. *Irish Medical Journal*, 95(3), 78-81.
- Penney, D. (1998) Positioning and defining physical education, sport and health in the curriculum. *European Physical Education Review*, 4(2), 117-126.
- Penney, D. & Evans, J. (1999) *Politics, Policy and Practice in Physical Education*, London: E&FN Spon, Routledge.
- Pike, S. (2006) Irish primary school children's definitions of 'geography'. *Irish Educational Studies*, 25(1), 75-91.
- Placek, J. H., Dodds, P., Doolittle, S. A., Portman, P. A., Ratliffe T. A. & Pinkham K. M. (1995) Teaching recruits' physical education backgrounds and beliefs about purposes for their subject matter. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 14(3), 246-261.
- Reid, A. (1996) The concept of physical education in current curriculum and assessment policy in Scotland. *European Physical Education Review*, 2(7), 7-18.
- Richards, L. (2005) *Handling Qualitative Data*, London: Sage.
- Rovegno, I. (2003) Teachers' Knowledge Construction. In S.J. Silverman & C.D. Ennis (Eds) *Student Learning in Physical Education* Champaign: Il: Human Kinetics, 295-310

- Shulman, L. S. (1986) Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4-14.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987) Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1-22.
- Siedentop, D. (2002) Content knowledge for physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 21(4), 368-377.
- Smith, A. & Parr, M. (2007) Young people's views on the nature and purposes of physical education: a sociological analysis. *Sport, Education & Society*, 12(1), 37-58.
- The Teaching Council, (2007) *Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers*, The Teaching Council, Ireland.
- Tinning, R. (2002) Engaging Siedentopian perspectives on content knowledge for physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 21(4), 378-391.
- Trudeau, F. & Shephard, R. J. (2005) Contribution of school programmes to physical activity levels and attitudes in children and adults. *Sports Medicine*, 35(2), 89-105.
- Tsangaridou, N. (2006a) Teachers' beliefs, in: D. Kirk, D. Macdonald & M. O' Sullivan (Eds) *The Handbook of Physical Education*. London: Sage, 486-501.
- Tsangaridou, N. (2006b) Teachers' knowledge, in: D. Kirk, D. Macdonald & M. O' Sullivan (Eds) *The Handbook of Physical Education*. London: Sage, 502-515.
- Woods, C. B., Tannehill, D., Quinlan, A., Moyna, N. & Walsh, J. (2010) *The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study*

(CSPPA). Research Report No 1. Dublin: School of Health and Human Performance Dublin City University and The Irish Sports Council.

Table 1. Sample text frequency search

Text	Frequency
Physical	453
Exercise	380
Children	316
Education	291
Healthy	261
Sports	255

Table 2. Example of coding categories and themes and their relationships.

Participant response	Coding categories ¹	Coding theme ²
<p>Teaching students about how their bodies work and move, learning through movement and developing skills. Teaching students about fitness and exercise. Learning through playing games, participation and team sports.</p>	<p>move movement developing skills teach fitness exercise learning playing games participation team sports</p>	<p>Education Health Sport</p>

¹ This list is not exhaustive

² This list is not exhaustive