

**Title:** The (mis)alignment between young people’s collective physical activity experience and physical education curriculum development in Ireland

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## **Abstract**

Major curriculum changes have recently occurred in Ireland, including redeveloping the primary curriculum and the enactment of the Junior Cycle Framework (DES, 2015). Positive and negative experiences affect the attitudes which contribute to determining the quality of curricular experiences. Therefore, a smooth transition from primary to post-primary should be predicated upon continuity of curricula and of young people's positive learning experiences in physical education. Framed in the work of Fullan (1991) and Dewey (1997), this study aims to understand how young people's experiences of collective physical activity can inform physical education curriculum development and enactment. Focus group interviews were conducted in three primary and three post-primary schools. The young people's experiences reflected the features of meaningful physical education: fun opportunities, preferably outside; to socially interact with friends; provision of activities that are both competitive and non-competitive; activities focused on team sport and alternative forms of movement such as yoga; differentiated activities and teams and choice, beyond choosing between team sports only. We argue that the young person's voice has the potential to inform policy and practice, as well as enforce and advocate for policy and practice that positions young people at the centre of the learning experience.

**Key Words:** physical education; curriculum development; physical activity; sport; student voice, meaningful experiences

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## **Introduction**

The pace and scope of educational change has been somewhat substantial in Ireland (Gleeson, 2010; Walsh, 2016; 2018). From 2014, changes enacted at post-primary level in Ireland include the phased introduction of a new junior cycle (first three years of post-primary schooling typically aged 12-15 years old) framework, phased rollout of a new Leaving Certificate Physical Education curriculum (examination physical education in a high-stakes environment) and the Senior Cycle (non-examinable) physical education syllabus (both involving the final two years of post-primary schooling, typically aged 16 – 18 years old) (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2012; 2015; 2016; 2018). More recently, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated a consultation process for the redevelopment of the Primary Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999).

These curricula developments reflect key changes in education policy and new experiences for young people, necessitating greater curriculum alignment and continuity across all phases in the Irish education system from primary to post-primary school. This major physical education reform across all post-primary schooling years has led to questions of how well prepared physical education teachers are to deal with system-wide change (Author, 2018). The same question could be asked of primary generalist teachers who also teach physical education. Indeed, these questions could be asked of the young people; how prepared are young people to transfer from primary physical education to post-primary (Junior Cycle) physical education in the midst of all this curriculum development and reform? Since Williams and Woodhouse (1996) noted over two decades ago that young people's views were "a neglected dimension of research into [PE] curriculum practice" (p. 212), there has been an increasing interest in young people's own ideas and understandings of the ways they engage with physical activity and physical education (Azzarito, 2013; O'Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010).

With this in mind, the research question of this study was; how can primary and post-primary Irish young people's collective experiences of physical activity inform physical education curriculum development and enactment? Additional to this was to exploration of the notion of curriculum continuity (from primary to post-primary physical education) from the young people's perspective. Initially we present the Irish education context and where primary and post-primary physical education curricula currently reside within that context, then we explore Fullan's work on educational change and Dewey's work on continuity of experience to theoretically position this study in the midst of curriculum change.

### ***Primary Physical Education***

Physical education is a compulsory curriculum subject in Irish primary schools, for children aged four to twelve years old, with a suggested minimum weekly curriculum delivery time of one hour, as recommended by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The primary school curriculum, including physical education, is usually delivered by the generalist classroom teacher. Unlike curricula in some other parts of the world, the primary physical education curriculum in Ireland is positioned within an educational, rather than a sport or health, discourse (Author 2013; Ní Chróinín, 2017). The prioritisation of educational values is also clear in how the Irish primary physical education curriculum explicitly distinguishes between physical education and sport. The term *sport* is defined as 'formalised physical activity involving competition or challenges against oneself, others or the environment, with an emphasis on winning' (Government of Ireland, 1999a: 6). In contrast, *physical education* is outlined as encompassing a more holistic development of the child encouraging 'personal and social development, physical growth, and motor development' (Government of Ireland, 1999a: 6). Recent policy announcements on the purposes of physical education requires that young people's learning experiences become

more contextualised within health and wellbeing, and lifelong learning agendas (McGuinness, 2018).

### ***Post-primary Physical Education***

Junior cycle (lower-second level) covers the first three years of second level education, typically from the ages of 12 to 15 years. Physical education forms a key part of the area of learning entitled 'wellbeing' and a minimum threshold of time for physical education of 135 hours spread across the three years of junior cycle is stipulated (NCCA, 2017). The intention of junior cycle physical education is to 'foster(s) the balanced and harmonious development and general wellbeing of the child through a diverse range of experiences providing regular, challenging physical activity' (NCCA, 2017a, p. 14). Young people's experiences of school physical education throughout this period of their schooling revolves around four strands; (i) physical activity for health and wellbeing, (ii) games, (iii) individual and team challenges, and (iv) dance and gymnastics.

A central purpose of physical education curricula worldwide is to support children and young people's learning toward a physically active lifestyle (Griggs & Petrie, 2018). Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín (2017) suggest that these positive or 'meaningful' learning experiences are derived from experiences that are satisfying, challenging, social or simply fun, and are likely to lead to individuals committing to a physically active lifestyle (Teixeira et al. 2012). Physical education is therefore meaningful because the person taking part in the experience perceives it to be important to their physical development, their overall life and whether the activities are personally suitable (Chen, 1998). Only if it has relevance to their lives, will a person actively engage in physical education (Kretchmar, 2007). Physical education learning and teaching are activities which cannot be divorced from the broader organisational, societal and cultural contexts in which they occur. Therefore, focusing on

young people's activities, their development of relevant life skills, involving them in programme decisions, and promoting a positive and safe environment, can contribute towards developing meaningful physical education programmes (Gibbons, 2009) and curricula.

### ***Educational change and the need for continuity***

Fullan (1991) discusses that if we are to fully understand educational change “we [need to] come to understand both the small and the big pictures...[and] the ‘what’ of change and the ‘how’ of change” (p.8). While we acknowledge there are many ‘small pictures’ and ‘big pictures’ in the educational change process, with reference to this paper, we conceptualise the ‘small picture’ as the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of change that is occurring in physical education in primary schooling (particularly, sixth class; the last year of primary school) and post-primary schooling (particularly, first year of Junior Cycle; the first year of post-primary school), and the ‘big picture’ as the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of change that occurs between both sets of schooling. These curriculum developments and reforms in Irish schooling reflect key changes in education policy and new experiences for young people (Fullan, 1991), necessitating greater curriculum alignment and continuity across all phases in the Irish education system from primary to post-primary school.

The Junior Cycle Framework comments on supporting continuity and learning, “the changes to learning and assessment envisaged in the new Junior Cycle will support continuity and progression in students’ learning experiences as they move from primary to post-primary school” (NCCA, 2015, p.9). The promotion of curricula continuity between primary and post-primary schooling is to avoid ‘circular curriculum’, i.e., post-primary students repeating content which was covered at primary level (Jones & Jones, 1993). For curricula continuity to occur, it is argued that preparation is vitally important to smoothly progress through this period (and arguably, through curricula) and minimize the likelihood of young people experiencing difficulties (Smith, 2016). With specific reference to physical education

curriculum, preparation can occur by ‘exchanging information’ which can assist in “plan[ning] for continuity and progression in the physical education curriculum” (Capel, Zwozdiak-Myers & Lawrence, 2004, p.283). Informed by Fullan’s work on educational change, and the change process model (Fullan, 2001), we contend that within all this (curriculum) change, there is a need for (curriculum) continuity. We now turn to the work of John Dewey to further understand the role of continuity in educational change.

Dewey (1997) refers to the role of continuity of experience, or what he termed the ‘experiential continuum’ (pg. 33), in determining whether experiences are educative. He asserted that ‘the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after’ (pg. 35). In other words, every experience (either positively or negatively) affects the attitudes which contribute to determining the quality of subsequent experiences. For example, if a child has a positive experience of learning how to kick a football, which increases their desire to learn, this can have a transformative effect in the sense that they are eager to develop further football skills. However, a negative learning experience, such as being unable to complete a skill that everyone else can do, can cause a young person to opt out of the activity and has the potential to limit the capacity for physical growth. Dewey (1997) outlined that the principle of continuity is intertwined with the principle of interaction with the environment, including the teachers’ actions and the learning activities. Therefore, any experience is determined by a combination of subjective attributes of the young person and objective characteristics of the environment. Dewey concluded that the interplay between the principles of continuity and interaction are shaped by the young person’s past experiences impacted by their attitudes, habits and prior knowledge. Therefore, a smooth transition from primary to post-primary should be predicated upon continuity of experience particularly in relation to curricula and pedagogy. It is anticipated, and hoped, that promoting continuity in

young people's learning experiences across the transition will influence and enhance their learning experiences in physical education.

With this theoretical positioning in mind, this paper addresses the experiences of young people in collective physical activity. These experiences provide us with an analytical framework through which the alignment between the student experience and physical education curriculum development and enactment in Ireland can be examined. This can help inform a progressive curriculum for physical education that provides consistency and relevance for a young person through primary and post-primary education.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted in a qualitative manner utilising focus group interviews (Bryman, 2012). By encouraging young people to share the reality of their collective physical activity experiences, valuable evidence can be garnered from hearing their experiences towards informing curriculum development and enactment. Ethical approval for this study was granted by Research Ethics Committee in [Blinded for Peer review]

### ***Sampling and participants***

The research sample included six schools, comprising of three primary (P) schools (one all-boys, one all-girls and one mixed gender) and three post-primary (PP) schools (one all-boys and two all-girls). This sample was a purposive cohort from a larger quantitative study (for further detail see Author, 2018), which sought to examine participation in collective physical activity among 10-18 year olds in Ireland. The focus groups were conducted with (homogenous) groups of boys (B) and girls (G) who self-identified as either active (A) or inactive (IA) to ensure a balance of experiences. A list of active and inactive young people from each school was provided to the researchers. The young people who self-identified as inactive had failed to meet the National Guidelines on Physical Activity (Department of

Health and Children, Health Service Executive, 2009) which requires young people to be active for at least 60 minutes every day. Therefore, although they took part in physical activities, they did not meet the guidelines. The final sample of young people was chosen in consultation with the principal and/or physical education teacher who identified young people who were present on the day of the interview and available to take part at the time allocated for the interview. It was felt that these 'like' groups might provide a safe environment in which young people might share their experiences. Each of the 12 focus groups (6 active groups and 6 inactive groups) consisted of approximately 5 children (N=64). Primary students were those in 5<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> classes (10 -12 years of age), while post-primary students spanned across grade levels 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> year (12-14 years of age). The focus group interviews were conducted by the first three authors at different school sites. The focus group questions and protocol were adapted from a previous interview schedule (Tannehill, MacPhail, Walsh & Woods, 2015). The aim of the focus group interviews was to explore the young people's experiences of collective physical activity. All interviews lasted between 40-50 minutes, and with written consent of all participants, were digitally recorded for analysis. While interviews were recorded to obtain the detail and nuances of the young people's voices, they were informed that all recordings would remain confidential and pseudonyms used when making reference to specific comments shared by them.

### ***Data analysis***

The first phase of focus group data analysis was initial coding (Charmaz, 2014). Through listening to the recordings, initial codes were recorded in a descriptive manner, adapting to reflect the complexity of the data, and conversations involving multiple voices (Charmaz, 2014). A written summary of the interviews was then produced when clarity of each student's narrative was evident. The second phase of coding (focused coding) involved selecting prominent codes, and by refining such codes in a constant comparative approach (Weed,

2009), categories and sub-categories were constructed. These two phases of coding were conducted by the first two authors and were negotiated (discussed, reshaped and confirmed) at meetings following each phase of coding, for example agreeing nuances in the young people's comments where competition may have had multiple meanings depending on the context. Once the focused coding phase was complete, the research team met to discuss the avenues for the final phase of coding (theoretical coding) based on the constructed focused codes. As the features of meaningful physical education (Beni et al., 2017) arose inductively and aligned with the focused codes they were used as sensitising concepts (Charmaz, 2014) during this final phase of coding.

The constructed categories were discussed to clarify, agree and disagree, and come to a consensus. Given that the data reflected features of meaningful physical education, the young people's comments were subsequently interpreted as reflecting meaningful experiences. The trustworthiness of the data analysis was heightened through the face-to-face engagement of the first three authors in analysis of all data which facilitated back-and-forth discussion and supported a rigorous and thorough interrogation of key ideas and messages within the data set

## **Findings and Discussion**

This paper explores how young people's experiences of collective physical activity can inform physical education curriculum development and enactment and the notion of curriculum continuity (from primary to post-primary physical education). As highlighted previously the interplay between the principles of continuity and interaction are shaped by the student's past experiences impacted by their attitudes, habits and prior knowledge (Dewey, 1997). Therefore, a smooth transition from primary to post-primary should be predicated

upon continuity of experience whereby young people's learning experiences across the transition may influence and enhance their learning experiences in physical education. Throughout the results section we utilise two of the reporting styles outlined by Krueger (1998) to share our findings, providing summary description with illustrative quotes and in some instances summary description with illustrative quotes followed by interpretation.

### ***The implicit and explicit experience of fun***

The main reasons cited by the physically active young people for taking part in physical activity and particularly in sport was 'fun' and there was consensus among the physically active boys and girls that they enjoyed physical education class (predominantly due to the class content). The physically inactive boys and girls also alluded to the fact they enjoyed physical education (albeit, with less enthusiasm than the physically active groups) with a greater emphasis on the opportunity to be outside and to be with friends. In all the focus groups 'fun' was an integral part of the young people's experiences in collective physical activity and in many instances was linked to social interaction with one inactive post-primary girl stating that physical education is having 'fun outside with your friends.' The term enjoyment was also used by the young people to express how they experienced 'fun'.

The young people were also willing to provide examples of how more meaningful experiences could be provided in physical education:

Instead of focusing on the competitive side...we could have played more games, like more games with everyone playing in them...a fun game... [P IA G].

Similar to O'Connor's (2019) findings, the young people lacked the rich descriptive language to describe movement experiences and relied on basic words such as fun. This was evident throughout the focus group interviews as the word 'fun' was highlighted in how collective physical activity was experienced. While it may be important to provide 'fun' experiences for

children and young people, Quennerstedt (2013) pointed to the fact that for fun to be considered part of a meaningful experience it should not reflect an unstructured or undisciplined approach. Interestingly, the primary physical education curriculum in Ireland includes fun and enjoyment as a key vehicle to promote lifelong physical activity participation (Government of Ireland 1999a). In seeking pedagogical approaches which explicitly address ‘fun’, the use of game-centered approaches (GCAs) and sport education (SE) instructional models have been found to contribute to young people having fun and finding value in physical education (Fry, Tan, McNeill, & Wright, 2010; Georgakis & Light, 2009; Wallhead & Ntoumanis, 2004). Reviews suggest that experiences which are personally meaningful or simply fun are likely to lead young people to commit to a physically active lifestyle (Teixeira et al., 2012), the aim of both Irish curricula at the centre of this study.

### *Social interaction works in different ways*

Social interaction experiences and the role of all relationships including, but not limited to, friends, peers, teachers, coaches and family in collective physical activity contexts were examined. Social interaction, as described by Light (2010), is identified as contributing to meaningful experiences.

The emphasis on ‘being with friends’ was common to the young people, both boys and girls, with a desire to participate in collective physical activities, ‘it’s better than doing classwork and you get time to spend with your friends’ [PP IA B] and ‘time with your friends not sitting down.’ [PP IA G]. Some young people were critical of how these friendships can demonstrate a negative influence on their participation in physical activity:

Like if I want to go out and I'm sick of being in the house, I feel like people, in particularly our generation are lazy, they are like nah I want to stay inside, I want to go on my phone, I want to go on Fortnite [Xbox game] [PP A G].

Some boys commented how they could spend hours on these devices instead of being physically active, and be easily influenced by their friends to play video games rather than take part in physical activity. Interestingly, positive experiences with social media and in particular Instagram, was identified by the all-girls post-primary group as a form of encouragement to be physically active:

If you follow big football stars like Ronaldo or if you are into Gaelic football and you follow Paul Flynn and all, and you look up to them and you are like. 'I want to be like them; I want to be better than them' [PP A G].

Somewhat surprisingly, the young people did not think that there was very much interaction with the teacher during physical education. In only one school, the young people discussed the role of the teacher in relation to collective physical activity and pointed to this experience of social interaction as meaningful. These primary school girls' commented that their teachers encourage them to do physical activity throughout the school day and beyond school and provided examples of the meaningful experiences they had such as 'Park and Stride' and 'active breaks'. What was more concerning, was the lack of teacher interaction, in the young people's discussions about those who encouraged them to be physically active or promoted their engagement with sport and physical activity. Many of the young people could not give examples of how their teachers could motivate them or encourage them in physical education. When asked replied 'don't know' or acknowledged that their peers offered more encouragement, 'others impact on you more than your teacher during class' [PP IA B]. Other responses when asked about how a teacher motivates young people in physical

education lessons seemed to focus on the fact that physical education was compulsory and you were expected to take part, 'it doesn't matter if you are really good at it or really bad at it they make you do it anyway' [PP IA B] or 'he tells us to get on with it' [PP IA G].

Social interaction was a feature central to many of the young people's responses, a finding supported most recently by Røset et al. (2020) and by others in the past (Author, 2011; Author, 2019; Smith & Parr, 2007; Tannehill et al. 2015). However, as Dewey (1997) has outlined one important interaction in the principles of continuity is interaction between the young people and their teacher, teacher actions and the learning activities provided. From the young people's responses, we can see that this interaction is 'missing' from their experiences and may impact on their physical development and their active engagement in collective physical activity.

### ***Challenge***

Engagement in activities that provide appropriate challenge for young people can make for meaningful experiences (Dinsmore and Bailey, 2011). While challenge can be seen as the relative difficulty of a task for young person, competition further extends how young people experience challenge. Young people perceived competition as a barrier to participation, they reported that often there were times of an unbalanced approach to competition, or that competition was not moderated. These perspectives were attributed to less-meaningful experiences for many of them, and in some cases, was the cause of discontinued engagement. The physically active boys' and girls' groups at primary level noted how they participate in a variety of sports (for example, basketball, Gaelic football, Camogie, dancing and running), with the majority being of a competitive, team-based nature. Similarly, in the physically inactive boys' and girls' groups, the majority participated in team games (but these were often uncompetitive in nature), but also in non-team based sports such

as horse-riding and yoga. The primary boys commented how they did not like “little girly games” [P A B], which often referred to games which lacked challenge and therefore provided less meaningful experiences for them.

A similar trend was evident at post-primary level, as the physically active groups participated in competitive activities, such as soccer, athletics, volleyball, handball and basketball. While the physically inactive groups stated that they enjoyed similar activities to the physically active groups, there was a broader range of activities mentioned. One physically inactive post-primary girl was asked why she preferred physical activity over sport: ‘It’s not as competitive as sport, it can be just something that like you would do anyway like walk or cycle’.

At primary level, in the physically active girls’ group, they felt that competition contributed to both positive and negative ways to their meaningful engagement in physical education and sport. Some young people enjoyed competition as it is “fun to win” [P A G] and placed value on winning “you always want to win” [P A G]. These young people seemed to enjoy the challenge that came from competition (Jakobsson, 2014), while other young people argued participation was more important than winning. Unlike the physically active group, the physically inactive group discussed how their friends who focus on winning get frustrated, and sometimes angry at them for not ‘playing to win’. As such, in practice sessions, they are allocated to the weaker teams and this further discourages them from participating.

At post-primary level, when questioned on the importance of winning, one physically active girls’ group agreed that winning was more important than being with your friends or participating with one girl commenting, “You don’t play a sport to just chat with your friends. You’re there because you like the sport, you want to be good at it, you want to go

further in that sport”. The physically active boys’ group argued that winning was the most important aspect of sport, “The point of the game is to win” [PP A B]. The physically inactive boys believed that some players focus too much on winning and subsequently are aggressive to their teammates:

Like let’s just say if they don’t win, they might say something really harsh to the other person and they don’t think how that other person will feel [PP IA B].

Challenge was perceived as competition in collective physical activity, and winning was important to many of the physically ‘active’ children and in some instances, was more important than friendships. Team games were the prevalent curricular strand at both primary and post-primary physical education level, and outside of school also. The role of competition can influence physical activity participation in a positive or negative way (Beni, Fletcher & Ní Chróinín et al, 2019). This finding also shows the inter-relatedness and complexity of young people’s perceptions. Competition can be viewed as meaningful for some, but our evidence shows that it is not the case for all. Likewise, linking with social interaction, this research observed how competition is more meaningful than being with their friends for some, while the opposite is true for others, thus highlighting the subjective nature of meaningful experiences. Competition, possibly due to the prevalence of team games, was inextricably linked to motor competence, with those who felt they lacked motor competence reporting to shy away from participation.

### ***Motor Competence - experiences and participation***

Motor competence refers to the physical goal-orientated skills necessary to engage meaningfully in physical activities. This section examines how the young people perceived their competence at such skills, and whether they strive to become competent participants. A lack of motor competence became apparent throughout the conversations with the physically

inactive young people. At primary level, the physically inactive girls discussed how they do not like physical education class when the activities are deemed to be “too hard”. The inter-relationship between perceived motor competence and challenge is evident. One physically inactive boy alluded to self-confidence and perceived motor ability: “Some people like...I can’t think of the word but you lose your confidence. Some people can say ‘You aren’t good so just stop doing it’...” [P IA B]. The physically inactive boys, while enjoying taking part in collective physical activity reported that their skill level was not as high as the physically active young people’s and the games they played were not modified to suit their skill level. They also reported that they felt under pressure from others who had better motor competence, ‘if you’re not great at handball and you want to play the easy version and people come into your court and refuse to leave until they get their game’ [PP IA B]. When probed further, it became evident that non-participation revolved around a perceived lack of ability. The physically inactive young people discussed how they do not have the confidence or skills to participate in sport:

I quit because everyone else had joined from such a young age and then you’d only join...and it’s a lot harder because they’re so used to it...so I just found it too hard [PP IA B].

The young people’s experiences of physical education are very similar and when asked what physical education was commented that ‘PE and sport is mainly the same thing’ and ‘PE is football and Gaelic and chasing’ [P A Bs] or ‘I think they are all the same ... like they’re all sport’ and ‘laps to warm-up and then a game of football’ [P IA Bs]. However, the young people had solutions for how they could be catered for in physical education lessons, ‘play with people who have the same capabilities as you if you want do... don’t have someone who’s not good against someone who’s really good’ [PP IA B]. Researchers have argued that performances in typically masculine sports and games have traditionally been accorded high

value (McCuaig & Tinning, 2010) and have tended to constitute ability in physical education (Annerstedt, 2008; Evans, 2004). Author (2010) found that ‘lack of competence’ was the most common cited reason for non-participation in sport and physical activity by young people. According to Gray et al. (2008) when young people’s perceptions of their own motor competence was high, it made for meaningful experiences, however, low perceived motor competence was related to an inability to participate satisfactorily and a lack of enjoyment (Erhorn, 2014).

### ***Personally Relevant Learning***

Central to personally relevant learning is student choice. By offering choice and/or the opportunity to input into the design of a physical activity, this can help increase the personal relevance of the activities. In examining barriers to collective physical activity participation Author et al (2014) identified barriers as perceived lack of choice in physical education class. When asked what could improve physical education class, all primary school groups focused on the principle of choice, i.e., a broader curriculum in which they have the opportunity to choose activities and not repeat the same activities (usually game-based) throughout the year. Some young people did not like the fact that they were not given choice: “[the teacher could make it more exciting by] taking suggestions from us like doing things that we actually want to do instead of boring things that we don’t want to do” [P IA G]. A worrying trend existed at post-primary level. The post-primary boys suggested that there was no alternative choice for them if they did not want to participate in the provided activities, usually competitive, team based games: “[I dislike physical education] when there is not much variety. It is the same sports all year” [PP IA B] and ‘[we’ve] no choice you have to do it – although there are options they are the same two options all year [PP IA B]. In contrast, young people report liking physical education when the curriculum has variety and choice (Dinsmore & Bailey, 2010; Smith & Parr, 2007). When prompted to identify alternative activities or how these

might be arranged the young people, both primary and post-primary, had no previous meaningful experiences to draw from and many responded 'don't know'. Although both curricula currently suggest a wide variety of activities, team games dominate, with 93% young people offered games in Irish physical education classes (Author, 2018). None of the young people interviewed had experienced outdoor and adventure activities and only one primary girls' school reported undertaking gymnastics and dance. One physical active primary school boy even asked 'what is athletics?' Young people's requests for meaningful experiences in a wide range of sports highlights the importance of ensuring young people can find one to which they are attracted, in which they can remain involved, and that caters for their individual abilities and interests (Author, 2011). Worryingly, only two young people spoke of learning in physical education, 'PE and sport you are learning something from the teacher or coach' [P A G] and 'physical education is when you learn about sport and things you would do physically' [PP IA B], when asked to describe physical education.

The young people in this study were positively disposed to wellbeing and health discourse. At primary level, the boys stated they liked physical education, believing it improves their physical health. The girls group also alluded to health and wellbeing as a reason for participation in physical education: "It clears your mind" [P A G] and referring to yoga: "I get very anxious and it calms me down" [P IA G]. On the other hand, the responses from the boys' groups, particularly the physically active group, implied they appreciated the fitness and health benefits of being involved in physical activity.

At post-primary, the health and wellbeing discourse prevailed as the physically active girls group related the benefits of physical activity to mental health and de-stressing from school pressures:

Yeah it's de-stressing, it's nice to clear your mind and all for exams and all because they are so stressful but you can just go out for a walk and all and then that calms you down...

[Another PP A G] it is like a form of meditation that you don't know...It's helpful for anxiety... so walking or walking my dog can help.

We can see from the responses that the children and young people were able to find aspects of their engagement or lack of engagement in collective physical activity personally relevant. Collective physical activity is more meaningful when young people are able to recognize the importance of what they were learning, and can make explicit connections between their current collective physical activity experiences, and future aspects of daily living outside of the school or community setting (Azzarito & Ennis, 2003; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010; Erhorn, 2014).

## **Considerations**

This paper set out to explore young people's experience of collective physical activity, with the intention of informing physical education curriculum development and enactment. The current data set does not provide enough detail to be definitive in claiming that these young people's experiences will inform curriculum design and enactment partly because this study was undertaken with a small cohort and they also would have benefitted from more time to engage in discussion and reflect on their experiences more deeply. However, the voices of young people must be sought if we wish to hear what types of activities they find meaningful, who influences their choice to participate and how they can be supported on their physical activity journey. Without this collective voice curriculum

developers and teachers will not be in a position to facilitate and promote young people's physical activity habits (Author, 2011).

What is important is that these data provide indicators of how young people experience collective physical activity and that features such as social interaction, fun and enjoyment, motor competence and personally relevant learning including choice are prominent. The young people in this study are requesting (1) fun opportunities, preferably outside, to socially interact with friends, (2) activities that are both competitive and non-competitive, focused on team sport and other forms of movement such as yoga, (3) differentiated activities and teams and (4) choice, beyond choosing between team sports only. It appears overall that these young people have a positive attitude towards collective physical activity which does not seem to diminish as they progressed into post-primary school nor due to their self-reporting as inactive. Dudley et al. (2015) states that one of the primary reasons young people participate in collective physical activity is for the sheer enjoyment they experience while and interacting with their peers. This along with the findings of this study suggests, that it is important to emphasise the social aspect specifically by focusing on doing physical activities and skills with friends and promoting the message to encourage each other to participate in these activities (Voorhees et al., 2005).

This understanding of what experiences facilitate individual preferences provides direction on a version of physical education with a greater likelihood of influencing young people's collective physical activity engagement in personally significant ways (Ennis, 2017). How the experiences of the young people are reported here should not be viewed as separate entities but as experiences or meaningful features which operate together, overlap and, in some cases, contradict each other, in an interdependent complex relationship between each feature and each young person. Teachers must be attentive to the subjectivity of young people in physical education. In a time where there are calls to address these issues in physical

education curricula, many researchers (Beni et al., 2017; Ennis, 2017; Kretchmar, 2000; O Connor, 2019; Thorburn, 2018) believe that the personalisation of collective physical activity through the promotion of ‘democratic, autonomous, and supported physical education experiences for children, which can be transferred to their lives outside of school’ (Ennis, 2017, p. 115) are required. It also raises a number of considerations in exploring these experiences and offers potential for informing developmental curricula considering meaningful transitions from primary to post-primary. Understanding the nuances of young people’s experiences and what influenced their enjoyment can help develop curricula utilising learning environments that reflect enjoyment. Kretchmar (2000, p. 19) observed that few teachers are skilled at enabling children to find meaning in physical education, ‘and almost nobody in professional preparation programs is being trained to do it well’. In our view a key part of the teacher’s role is to improve the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed that will allow young people to access different movement experiences supported by the reason they may want to engage in these experiences. The main way that is achieved is through the curriculum.

The active young people’s collective physical activity experiences indicated a strong match between their personal participation preferences (Balish et al., 2014; Crane & Temple, 2015) and the experiences provided. However, for the inactive young people there was a mismatch between their physical activity preferences and physical education practices. Activities which were personally relevant to the physically active young people focused on competitive team games with the physically inactive young people reporting participation in games but also alternative activities, such as horse riding and yoga for example. From the findings we can see that young people are experiencing continuity of similar experiences, which according to Dewey (1997) affects the attitudes which contribute to determining the quality of subsequent experiences. Those who have experienced a smooth transition from

primary to post-primary physical education are those who are games proficient, have motor competence in games skills and find competition meaningful. These active young people engage in the games-rich physical education programmes on offer as they have personal relevance for them. However, for many young people, in this study, the continuity and interaction is shaped by their past experiences where the games-rich programme provided a negative experience. Experiences were being perpetuated through a 'circular curriculum' (Jones & Jones, 1993). According to Dewey (1997), the interaction between the teacher and the learning activities is intertwined with the principle of continuity. Therefore, in promoting continuity, teachers need to ensure that meaningful positive experiences are provided at primary school and enhanced at post-primary level.

The young people appeared positively disposed to discussing their collective physical activity experiences and to discussing how best to maintain or encourage an interest in physical education, for themselves and their peers, even though they were unable to provide explicit examples. There was a sense that lessons offered lacked choice and variety in physical education at both primary and post-primary reflected in a games-heavy physical education curriculum and the prevalence of mixed ability 'all-in' games (Author, 2010; 2018; Author, 2020 in review).

Finally, this study highlights the need for a developmental curriculum transitioning from primary to post-primary. A greater understanding is required of what both the primary teachers and post-primary physical education teachers recognise as realistic for children and young people to achieve, in addition to a common understanding of what is required to promote continuity and progression across the physical education curriculum (Rainer & Cropley, 2015). A discussion around perceived motor competence outweighing actual motor competence for lifelong and sustainable physical activity experiences could be a very important point for the development of the primary and enactment of the post primary

physical education curricula. We encourage further exploration, understanding and awareness of the complexity of their interrelationships across young people's movement experiences. We extend this consideration to curriculum developers, teachers and teacher educators in ensuring that all stakeholders are educated to understand and appreciate these complexities to ensure meaningful learning experiences for their young people. In this way, the enactment of curricula becomes a process of careful negotiation between people and their context (Hitchings & Latham, 2017; O'Connor & Alfrey, 2015; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The young people from primary schools in this study were positively predisposed to wellbeing and health discourses. At primary level, the physical education curriculum may be reconfigured in a wellbeing sphere in the future. It is interesting to note the positive disposition of these post-primary young people towards wellbeing and health discourse, and to consider its alignment or support of the curriculum development currently taking place.

### **Concluding remarks**

Bridges can be built through curriculum development, transition units, curriculum mapping and a common language at all schooling levels. In all, regardless of school level, this study argues that experiences meaningful to young people in collective physical activity must be considered in physical education curriculum development, if it is to have impact. Young people need to be continually consulted whereby a more accurate picture of what we as educators and policy makers can do beyond the delivery of content, with a view to educating young people to be more proactive in articulating what their needs are. Acknowledging that young people's experiences and voice has pedagogical relevance and implications for primary generalist and post primary physical education teachers we highlight four essential features of curriculum development but more importantly enactment. While these may not be the radical changes that physical education requires, informed by the research in this study they are realistic and implementable. These are: (1) acknowledging subjectivity and

providing meaningful experiences, (2) focusing on variety of content (3) ensuring that the young person has agency in the design of their physical education programme and (4) for the teacher to be supported to enact these features. To be effective, all those tasked with providing meaningful experiences for young people to become physically educated, so they have the knowledge and confidence to make personal choices on their lifestyle and have a clear understanding of outcomes of those choices, need to recognise, diagnose and react to individual learners' diverse needs and interests.

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