



# Children's experiences of pedagogies that prioritise meaningfulness in primary physical education in Ireland

Déirdre Ní Chróinín, Tim Fletcher, Stephanie Beni, Ciara Griffin & Maura Coulter

**To cite this article:** Déirdre Ní Chróinín, Tim Fletcher, Stephanie Beni, Ciara Griffin & Maura Coulter (2023) Children's experiences of pedagogies that prioritise meaningfulness in primary physical education in Ireland, *Education 3-13*, 51:1, 41-54, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2021.1948584](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1948584)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1948584>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 14 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4312



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Children's experiences of pedagogies that prioritise meaningfulness in primary physical education in Ireland

Déirdre Ní Chróinín <sup>lb</sup><sup>a</sup>, Tim Fletcher <sup>lb</sup><sup>b</sup>, Stephanie Beni<sup>b</sup>, Ciara Griffin<sup>a</sup> and Maura Coulter <sup>lb</sup><sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Arts Education and Physical Education, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland; <sup>b</sup>Department of Kinesiology, Brock University, Saint Catharines, Canada; <sup>c</sup>School of Arts Education and Movement, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

## ABSTRACT

This research explored the experiences of children (age 9–10) when five Irish generalist primary teachers positioned meaningfulness as the priority filter for their pedagogical decision-making in physical education ( $n = 37$ ). Pedagogies that support meaningfulness include those that are democratic and reflective, and give attention to individual experiences. Data sources included non-participant observations ( $n = 10$ ), pupil diary ( $n = 101$ ) and focus groups ( $n = 21$  in five focus groups). Children's experiences were enhanced by shared ownership of the learning focus, collaboration on learning activities and teacher's attention to individual experiences. Results provide direction on a coherent approach to prioritising meaningfulness in primary physical education.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 October 2020  
Accepted 18 June 2021

## KEYWORDS

Meaning; quality; primary school; democratic; reflection; collaboration

## Introduction

Attention to personal meaningfulness has been proposed as a solution to the weak impact of physical education on continued physical activity participation for many (Ennis 2017; Kretchmar 2008). Empirical evidence is lacking, however, about what an intentional focus on meaningfulness might look like and how it might influence children's experiences in physical education. Building on new developments related to pedagogies teachers can use to promote meaningful experiences (Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín 2019; Beni, Ní Chróinín, and Fletcher 2019; Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2021; O'Connor 2019), this research directly attends to children's experiences of physical education when pedagogies of meaningfulness are implemented. In our approach, teachers implemented pedagogies of meaningfulness within a unit of work with close attention to developing a deep understanding of children's perspectives. Elsewhere we have gathered data that represents the teacher's perspective on this approach (Beni, Ní Chróinín, and Fletcher 2021; Vasily et al. 2021) but have lacked children's voices in relation to their experience. As such, data collection in this research focused on capturing individual children's experiences. Empirical evidence of children's experiences provides important direction on refinement of pedagogies of meaningfulness in physical education.

## Literature review

There continues to be wide variability of experience and outcomes for children in physical education settings with concerning gaps revealed between the ideals and realities of children's experiences.

**CONTACT** Déirdre Ní Chróinín  [deirdre.nichroinin@mic.ul.ie](mailto:deirdre.nichroinin@mic.ul.ie)

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

For instance, current forms of school-based physical education are failing to promote children's continued participation in physical activity (Ladwig, Vazou, and Ekkekakis 2018) and many report that physical education lacks in meaningfulness and is irrelevant to their lives (Lodewyk and Pybus 2012). Of particular concern is that for many, *not* having to engage with physical education is their best memory of the subject (Ladwig, Vazou, and Ekkekakis 2018). Such findings raise questions about the value of physical education in promoting physical activity across the lifespan for all children. The quality of physical education experiences matters to children's commitment to stay involved. If the experience is negative, the child may avoid or lose interest in participation (Bergeron et al. 2015; Knight, Harwood, and Gould 2017). Moreover, recent research has shown that the current emphasis on health outcomes in many physical education programmes is misplaced, for many young people, health is not a motivating factor to support physical activity participation (Strömmer et al. 2021). The match between children's personal preferences for participation (Balish et al. 2014; Crane and Temple 2015) and the experiences provided in physical education and physical activity settings is therefore critical to promoting the types of experiences that children will want to pursue across time.

By way of solution, Ennis (2017, 248) suggested that teachers of physical education should assist 'students in their search to find meaningful experiences in which they seek to engage and affiliate with others in an enjoyable physical activity environment'. Attention to meaningfulness places emphasis more on the processes than the products of physical education (Kretchmar 2008) by focusing on the quality of an individual's experience. Meaningfulness is defined as 'the amount of significance something holds for an individual' (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010, 94–95). Identifying an experience as meaningful therefore entails a retrospective value judgment(s) or interpretation of circumstances (Baumeister et al. 2013). Meaningfulness is fundamentally about an individual's interpretation of experience, not the experience itself (Chen 1998). It involves the individual becoming aware and making sense of the experience in relation to past, present, and future experiences through a process of synthesis and reconciliation (Jarvis 1987). Meaningfulness in physical education and related settings for human movement (e.g. sport, physical activity, recreation) involves consideration of the purpose and goals of movement, judgements related to the emotional value of the experience, and a sense of coherence that provides a 'big picture' comprehension and connection between these and other life experiences (Chen 1998). Personal meaning interpretations are constructed in relation to the world, where individuals make connections to 'something that reaches beyond the actual experience, linking it to something else' (Leontiev 2013, 462).

Physical education can support learners to seek and become aware of the personal meaningfulness of participating physical activity and physical culture, by offering a 'suitable learning context for initiation into a range of worthwhile social and cultural practices' that enrich an individual's lived experience (Thorburn 2018, 26). Meaningful experiences therefore are those that involve democratic transformation and encourage pupils to search for further experiences in physical education and related areas rather than to avoid them (Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2021). This calls to mind Dewey's (1938) classification of experiences as educative, miseducative, and noneducative. According to Dewey (1938), the principle of continuity involves an individual taking account of the interaction of previous experiences, which modifies the quality of future experiences. Meaningful experiences (those that are personally significant) could be interpreted by an individual as positive or negative. Dewey (1938) describes the positive form of meaningful experiences as educative; those that the individual would seek continuity of the experience rather than avoidance. In physical education, pupils have described these experiences as tending to involve an optimal level of challenge, positive social interactions and relationships with peers and teachers, developing competence, and seeing the personal relevance in what they are learning (Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín 2017). Educative experiences that prompt reflection on the nature of the experience and its outcomes tend to produce powerful learning (Rodgers 2002). Meaningful experiences that are negative are described as miseducative, in that they lead an individual to avoid rather than continue an experience. In physical education, these types of experiences might involve harassment, feelings of embarrassment, or

incompetence (Carlson 1995; Ladwig, Vazou, and Ekkekakis 2018). Noneducative experiences are those that lack meaning for individuals, in that they may not care a great deal about the experience in that it provides little value either positively or negatively. Dewey's (1938) theorising about the qualities of experiences provides a useful lens to consider children's experiences of pedagogies that have the potential to facilitate meaningful experiences in physical education.

### **Meaningful physical education**

Jewett, Bain, and Ennis (1995) provide direction on what an approach that prioritises meaningfulness might consist of:

... Personal meaning can be approached either intrinsically or instrumentally, and the sources of meaning in movement varies widely, both within and among individuals. The focus may be upon the feelings of joy, pleasure, and satisfaction inherent in the movement experience itself, or upon the use of movement activities to accomplish some extrinsic goal important to the participant. (52)

The Meaningful Physical Education (Meaningful PE) approach (Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2021) is a pedagogical innovation that prioritises meaningful experiences as an organising concept for decision-making in PE. The Meaningful PE approach gives special attention to the quality of learners' experiences towards meaningfulness and rather than being left to chance, meaningful experiences are positioned as the main filter for a teacher's pedagogical decisions. Jewett, Bain, and Ennis (1995, 52) outline '... the role of the educator is to analyse potential sources of meaning, to provide a wide range of opportunities, and to respond supportively to the individual's search for meaning'. Our understanding of meaningfulness provides important direction on pedagogies of meaningfulness (Fletcher et al. 2021). Reflective pedagogies including goal-setting and review help children to value and appreciate the place of physical activity engagement in their lives through retrospective interpretations of experience. Democratic pedagogies provide a scaffold for children's investment in their participation and empower children to shape and influence their involvement.

The Meaningful PE approach is built on features of participation that children themselves have identified as important to them in their experiences. A systematic review of meaningful experiences in physical education and youth sport (Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín 2017) led to the identification of the following qualitative aspects, or features, of sport and physical education participation that influence meaningfulness:

- (1) Having fun in the moment,
- (2) Experiencing 'just right', optimal challenge,
- (3) Feeling competent to participate,
- (4) Having opportunities for social interaction, with friends, peers and the teacher/coach,
- (5) Seeing the personal relevance of experiences to their lives, both the importance of experiences as well as how it connects to other parts of their lives.

While these features provide a useful guide to teachers who aim to promote meaningful experiences in physical education, they might be thought of as provisional in that they provide a starting point (rather than an end) for discussions about the types of things children have identified as meaningful. It is quite likely that other features exist from person to person, such as self-expression and creativity, and children should be supported to make inductive claims about what made an experience meaningful (Rintala 2009). Moreover, the presence of these features in a child's experience is not a guarantee that they will identify their experiences as personally significant. For instance, Kretchmar (2006, 7) suggests that what matters is 'Who our friends are, what we are good at, where we can go, and what we can do'. This highlights the importance of context, including access to people, financial, material, and organisational resources (such as clubs, equipment, and

facilities). Understanding both why and how individual children ascribe significance to experiences, along with the 'what' is important in helping teachers deliver relevant and meaningful experiences in physical education.

Meaningfulness is ascribed retrospectively rather than 'in the moment' – this can make it challenging for teachers to estimate the effectiveness of the experiences they are creating as evaluation of their personal significance by children is subsequent rather than concurrent to the experience. In understanding why and how children identify an experience as meaningful, several scholars have focused attention on processes or tools to access children's responses. O'Connor (2019) illustrated how use of embodied meaning-making reflection on past physical activity experiences can support children to analyse their participation experiences. Others have provided insight on how teachers can access children's experiences through poems, drawing and journaling to inform their pedagogies (Ní Chróinín, Fletcher, and Griffin 2018; Nilges 2004). Koekoek, Knoppers, and Stegeman (2009) have highlighted the need for research that provides understanding of children's experiences that can inform teachers' pedagogies. In particular, there is a lack of research available that examines the aspects of experiences and connected teacher pedagogies focused on meaningfulness that are valued by children as they participate. This study aims to fill this gap. Also, while acknowledging the personal and idiosyncratic nature of ascribing meaningfulness to experience, there is value in better understanding how children's experiences of these pedagogies of meaningfulness may be similar and different across schools and teachers. The purpose of this research was, therefore, to explore children's experiences of physical education when meaningfulness was prioritised guided by the following research question: What are children's experiences of pedagogies of meaningfulness? Insight on the experiences of individual children and in different school contexts provides important direction on the refinement of common pedagogies of meaningfulness in primary physical education.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants and setting***

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee. Five primary generalist teachers and the 101 children (age 9–10, 53 males, 48 females) in their classes participated and provided informed consent. The five teachers responded to an invitation to participate that was circulated through the Irish Primary Physical Education Association. Their engagement with the national association suggests a particular interest in physical education. Four of the five teachers had a background and experience in sport and/or other forms physical activity as a participant and coach. All were open to innovation in their practice and interested in learning about new pedagogical approaches in physical education.

### ***Overview of the intervention***

Teachers received input on implementing the Meaningful PE approach in two ways. First, a series of videos and documents developed by the research team were made available on a password protected website. These introduced some of the main ideas about Meaningful PE and provided teachers with examples of pedagogies and shared the experiences of other teachers in implementing these pedagogies. Second, each teacher was provided with a diary that included an overview of Meaningful PE and suggestions on implementing strategies that could support children experiencing each of the five features (social interaction, challenge, motor competence, fun, personally relevant learning). A general structure for each lesson was also provided. For example, teachers were recommended to share learning intentions with the children and discuss how the features were planned for at the beginning of each lesson. They were also provided with a PE Diary to share with children to document their experiences. Teachers were encouraged to involve children in goal setting and decision-making, facilitate them to make choices and respond to their feedback to

make activities meaningful. Teachers were asked to use observations and regular check-ins during tasks to identify aspects that could be modified or magnified to enhance children's experiences. For example, how a task might be made more fun, challenging, or social. Teachers were also recommended to build 'free' time for children to plan and direct their own activities in every lesson. Sometimes this could be related to the overarching lesson focus (e.g. free time to explore the content with friends or free time to focus on a specific aspect of the unit content previously learned) while at others the choice was left completely open to children. The project team supported teacher's implementation in a variety of ways using an online resource bank and forum, e-mail check-ins, and school visits.

Teachers implemented ideas from the Meaningful PE approach for six to eight PE lessons ( $n = 37$  total). In line with Irish curriculum documents, all teachers identified overall learning objectives for the unit of work related to skill development, tactical and strategic play, and social relationships. Skill development activities focused on learning fundamental motor skills related to games, such as throwing, catching, kicking and striking. Tactical and strategic objectives focused on application of skills in a variety of contexts. Learning objectives related to social skills prioritised relationship building, listening and cooperation with others. Teachers drew on ideas and activities available through a current national physical literacy initiative 'Move Well Move Often' (<https://www.scoilnet.ie/pdst/physlit/>) to plan content activities and implement a range of pedagogies of meaningfulness that suited their learners and context. All teachers' approaches represented the spirit of Meaningful PE, with attention to both democratic and reflective pedagogies. Teachers' experiences have been outlined in detail elsewhere (Beni, Ní Chróinín, and Fletcher 2021); this paper focuses specifically on the children's experiences.

### **Data sources**

A number of qualitative data sources captured children's experiences of pedagogies of meaningfulness in each school including:

- (1) Work samples generated by the children in a weekly diary during PE activities to provide evidence of their experiences. Children completed a diary entry for each lesson – identifying goals at the beginning of the lesson and reflecting on their achievement subsequently. In addition, children were prompted to consider the aspects of the lesson that were meaningful to them using the language of the features.
- (2) Focus groups with children in each school were conducted at the end of the unit of lessons. Children were asked about their participation experiences, the aspects of Meaningful PE they appreciated, and changes they would make. Children were asked to bring their diary to the interview and invited to share a standout example.
- (3) Non-participant observations of each teacher on at least two occasions to provide another perspective on implementation and experiences of Meaningful PE within each local context. The observer recorded details of tasks and activities undertaken, noticed the atmosphere of the lesson by recording what they saw and heard, and captured moments related to children's engagement with each of the five features.

### **Data analysis**

Final data sources for analysis included non-participant observations ( $n = 10$ ), pupil diary ( $n = 122$ ) and focus groups ( $n = 21$  in five focus groups). All data were digitised and transcribed. A thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analysing, interpreting and reporting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Clarke and Braun 2014). TA was selected as a good fit to explore meaningfulness because 'a good TA involves more than simply reporting what is in the data; it

involves telling an interpretative story about the data in relation to a research question' (Clarke and Braun 2014, 6626). One member of the research team (Déirdre) led the thematic analysis following a six-step process (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, all children's data were read and re-read to ensure familiarisation with the data. This was an active process, inserting comments to note potential areas of interest. Data for each school were examined separately and connections were drawn between data from focus groups and diaries. Secondly, the data were reviewed systematically, and initial codes were allocated to summarise the meaning of the data and to note points related to the research question. The coding process was completed separately for each school. Third, codes across schools were reviewed to identify patterns across the data sets from the five schools and to construct provisional representative themes. Fourth, these provisional themes were then reviewed, initially in relation to the children's data, both with their coded data and the full data set, and subsequently through examination of the teacher and observation data. These other data sources provided supplemental evidence that helped to contextualise the story of children's experiences. Fifth, themes were defined and named through interpretation of the key message of each theme. Sixth, and finally, representative quotes from the data were selected and the findings were drafted.

To forefront student perspectives, we decided to prioritise children's data in these representations. Ideas from the observational data of teachers are weaved through the narrative, but no direct quotes from these data are included. Other decisions at this point included the order in which to present the themes and selection of relevant literature to illustrate and support the argument. Trustworthiness was addressed through triangulation of multiple data sources, and member checking of the findings with two other members of the research team who were also familiar with the data set.

## Findings

Attention to meaningfulness influenced the quality of individual children's physical education experiences. Insight on their experiences addresses a gap in our understanding (Kretchmar 2008) by providing important direction on the lesson-to-lesson pedagogies teachers can use to promote educative rather than miseducative experiences that build towards meaningfulness for pupils (Dewey, 1938). Findings are organised and presented within three themes highlighting the importance of: a shared learning focus, a collaborative learning process, and, attention to quality of individual experience. Direct quotes from children illustrate each theme. Quotes are anonymised indicating the school number and data source as focus group (FG) or diary (D).

### *Shared ownership of the learning focus mattered*

A focus on an educative form of meaningfulness demands a learning collaboration between the teacher and children. The teachers were observed sharing their learning intentions for the lesson and initiating conversations about the learning focus in the classroom before moving to the physical activity space. Based on these learning intentions, the children identified and recognised the purpose(s) of the lessons and recorded personal goals for their learning in a diary, where they subsequently reflected at the end of the lesson. We provide evidence of the value of sharing purpose(s) of learning and time for goal-setting in the following sections.

Teachers sharing their learning intentions helped children to see the purpose of activities. One pupil in a focus group said: 'you got an idea of what we were going to do' (FG2). As a result, children knew what they were learning as well as how, for example: 'Mostly working on our skills, and doing different games to bring the skills together' (FG4). Children appreciated knowing what was happening, which contrasted with their previous experiences, 'It kind of meant more because in normal PE you'd just be passing around a ball and it wouldn't mean much but when you knew what you were

doing and working towards something it meant more' (FG1). This type of experience might be described by Dewey (1938) as noneducative, in that it 'didn't mean much' to this pupil.

The performative aspect of physical skill learning using pedagogies of Meaningful PE provided children with a concrete reference point for their participation that contrasted with their previous experience:

[The] PE we did before was whatever she could think of on that day and then we'd just do that for half an hour. And now we are doing running and catching, and we learn it properly and at the same time we're still playing games. (FG2)

Initial sharing and insight by the teachers on the purpose and direction of children's learning was found to be useful and educative within the lessons:

We knew what we were going to learn before the PE class ... [the teacher] would tell us some brief things, like we would be focusing on tactics or learning to pass backwards ... It's good to know what you're doing because she didn't have to explain it that much, she'd just go into what game we'd have to do. Because we'd know in our heads what tactics we'd be learning so we'd be focusing on it. (FG1)

By teachers sharing their learning intentions, children were also provided with a frame for the continuity of experience in that they could identify future personal goals for their own participation based on their prior knowledge, experience and ambitions. For each lesson, children set and recorded goals for their participation in their diary based on the learning intentions shared by the teachers. Children appreciated the goal-setting process. One pupil commented: 'it was nice to focus in on what you wanted to achieve on that day ... follow through with them' (FG5). As with articulating the purpose(s) of learning intentions, goal-setting gave children a target for their participation and provided a reference point within lessons for children to focus and refocus their efforts: 'you could move towards something, you could have a goal set for yourself. You could have a certain goal if you wanted to get better at passing or catching' (FG1). By providing a learning focus, goals directly influenced what children paid attention to in their participation, for example: 'I thought of my goal because I used to kick with my toe at first and I saw all the boys kicking with the side of their foot and I tried that, and I can kick properly now' (FG1). Goal setting also made a difference to how some children engaged with others, for instance: 'sometimes I would forget it, but other times when I'm with my friends who can't solo, and I'd think what is my goal? And then be like, oh yeah to help a friend' (FG4). These examples illustrate the value of goal-setting in supporting the learning process, to frame a purpose and allow for subsequent reflection on and evaluation of experience (Chen 1998; Dewey, 1938).

Learning intentions were often recapitulated and lessons concluded back in the classroom, where pupils were provided with an opportunity to reflect on the goals they set and evaluate each lesson experience in terms of its educative (or miseducative value). Standal (2015, 110) suggests reflection moves 'the learner from one experience to the next' and helps develop a deeper understanding of the experience. Echoing the literature (Ennis 2017), reflection provided a scaffold for learners to see the personal relevance of their participation in ways that added value to their experiences. Children were comfortable assessing achievement of their goals. Reflection on goal achievement allowed children to evaluate their progress, provided a sense of achievement as well as motivation for future goal setting:

You'd circle if you achieved the goal, or if you were still working on it ... It was easy because you would know if you still need to work on it, because if something wasn't coming out that well you'd know you'd have to practise more and get it right. (FG3)

Reflection from lesson to lesson helped children to track their progress. For example, one student noted she was 'better than I was at the start' (D2). Sharing the purpose(s) of learning intentions by the teacher and providing opportunities for goal-setting and reflection facilitated children to direct their learning. Crucially, children's investment in planning for their learning was



complimented by pedagogies that gave them ownership to shape their participation during the learning process.

### ***Collaboration on learning processes mattered***

Democratic pedagogies that foster inclusivity and provide pupils with opportunities to contribute in authentic ways to individual and collective decision-making can enhance the educative value and meaningfulness of physical education (Enright and O'Sullivan 2010; O'Connor 2019; Walseth, Engebretsen, and Elvebakk 2018). Teachers provided opportunities for children to influence the quality of their own participation in ways that treated children's perspectives as legitimate and worthy of notice. Letting children shape their experiences by adjusting challenge levels, who they played with, as well as the content of games and 'free time' activities mattered greatly to the children who thrived on increased opportunities and autonomy to make choices about their experiences, and to contribute to their participation (Harvey et al. 2018).

First, teachers involved the children in making decisions in relatively simple ways; for example, how they engaged with the content of the activity (e.g. a particular skill or task to focus on) or whom they played with (Koekoek and Knoppers 2015). The freedom to make modifications or more radical changes to tasks helped align learning goals with tasks. For example, one pupil explained how peers in their class would modify tasks: 'after a while they got used to knowing their goal and doing it, but if they found it too hard or easy we'd make a rule to make it different' (FG1). Flexibility to modify tasks also helped to match individual preferences with elements of the specific task or broader activity (e.g. the game or sport). This pupil explained how modifying a task could have influences on the educative or miseducative value of engaging with the task: 'they mightn't like it because they weren't good at a specific thing but by changing the rule it could make it more fun for them' (FG1).

Second, some children were empowered to use a voting system to modify group activities. Too often, children turn off from participation because they find that their experiences do not match their preferences or have potentially harmful effects (Dewey, 1938; Ryan and Deci 2017). Understanding and involving children in identifying what is meaningful to them can help counteract their disengagement (Kipp 2017). In one focus group, the following three children explained how this worked for them:

- E: Before every PE class she said what we were doing, like: 'we'll do this game for 15 minutes', and stuff like that, and if one of us didn't really like the game we'd have a vote if we would you like to do this game or that game?
- G: And if a few people didn't want to do it she would let them do whatever they wanted.
- A: They'd do another game that still involved the same skills, but still not be left out. (FG1)

Such negotiations between children and with the teacher facilitated compromise in making and enacting individual and collective decisions (Light and Harvey 2017) in ways that accommodated individual preferences.

Third, children appreciated being allowed to make decisions and choices about their own participation (Mandigo et al. 2008) in ways that made learning more personally relevant. Of their previous experience, one pupil stated:

- ... all the people who loved it said 'let's do this' and the minority didn't want to, and they were left out. As someone who doesn't play football I was grateful to [teacher] because now everyone gets a say, and before you didn't. (FG4)

Children were supported to negotiate and use voting to reach agreement. Having a say in participation mattered 'because you're not being told what to do, maybe not everybody would like that game and they wouldn't get involved as much' (FG4).

Fourth, children were facilitated to have some form of 'free time' to direct their own activities. Free time activities are associated with helping children figure out the personal relevance of activities

as well as to scaffold children's learning about how to organise and implement activities learned in PE outside of PE time in their homes and communities. For example: 'at the end of every session she would give us five minutes to get into our table groups and make a game' (FG2) based on the fundamental movement they were focused on. The children loved the opportunity to control the content of activities and make up their own games. In the following quote the child alludes to both the educative and miseducative potential of their experiences based on reconciling previous experiences with their current experiences of the Meaningful PE approach:

A lot of the time with school work we're pushed to do something that we don't want to do, and we all have different hobbies, and if we're pushed to do something we don't want to do we won't want to do it. So, if we can make up a game with the skill we're learning we can have fun with it instead of just being like: 'this is so boring, I hate it'. (FG4)

Increased responsibility for and control over their participation mattered greatly to the children. Children were undaunted by this new empowerment and embraced these opportunities to input on both the 'what' and 'how' of their participation. Children shared feedback with their teacher about the aspects of their participation that were important and those they would like changed. Understanding that the teacher cared about and paid attention to the quality of their experiences established this collaborative learning atmosphere.

### ***Attention to the quality of individual experience mattered***

Attention to meaningfulness in physical education requires that teachers attend to the subjective and personal experiences of children in responsive and supportive ways (Kretchmar 2000). Children's writing illustrated that the features of fun, social interaction, motor learning, and challenge were important to them. For example, some pupils said they valued participating with peers: 'being with others because I learned from someone else from watching them' (A, M, D) and 'we joked and laughed and learned from our partners' (D2).

On a lesson-to-lesson basis, children provided feedback on aspects of their experiences that could be improved, ranging from the pitch size to rule modifications, to activities they would like to practice more, to the desire for longer lessons. Children's writing provided opportunities for them to explain and demonstrate that they knew how to make their participation experiences better. Writing in their diary after each lesson allowed them to share these ideas and for their teacher to respond. Often, their writing referred to both miseducative and educative moments. Some suggested how to change the game 'because nobody understood it' (D3), or to 'put in more running because you were in a queue a lot to hit the ball' (D5). Others declared they would change nothing beyond wanting to play for longer, 'we wanted to do it' (D5), and 'I would change nothing, it was fun' (D2). Encouragingly and in common with findings elsewhere (Koekoek, Knoppers, and Stegeman 2009) children's responses echoed the language of meaningfulness promoted by the teachers, suggesting that teachers were influential in shaping children's articulation of their learning experiences.

Attention to meaningfulness lends itself to differentiated pedagogies because of the emphasis on how individuals construct their experience (Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2021). Teachers implementing approaches that were considerate of the impact on individual interpretations. As a result, children described their experiences as more inclusive than previously. Attention to individual experience involved placing greater importance on positive social interaction and cooperation, and minimising intense forms of interpersonal competition (Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín 2017).

In most of the classes, children described to varying extents a distinct gap between the children with more experience and/or skill in an activity and those with less. This divide played out in decisions related to who children picked on their team, whom they passed to, whom they did not pass to, and ultimately how individual children felt about themselves and their participation experiences. With attention towards meaningfulness, the teachers adopted a variety of inclusive

approaches that emphasised children's responsibility to each other to interrupt this dynamic in their particular context. For example, one pupil said:

If someone wasn't getting the ball enough they might say that, so then the challenge would be: 'everyone has to get the ball before you score' and then everyone would think that's a good idea ... sometimes people would skip people, and they would get angry, but we'd settle it after a while ... By other people saying: 'you should pass it to them' and then everyone would get more of the ball. (FG1)

Children also provided feedback on aspects of participation that could be adjusted to better suit them. For example, one pupil explained: 'I would change the teams cos some were unfair' (D1). Despite teachers' best intentions, at times, some children's needs were not met: 'nobody passed it to me at all, nothing was meaningful for me personally' (D4). These types of experiences might be meaningful in a miseducative way. It should be noted that many of the strategy's teachers were observed enacting align with good practice recommendations; what was different here is that their decisions were made with a focus on the quality of individual experience. We believe this resulted in a more coherent use of appropriate teaching strategies where the process and outcome of providing an educative type of meaningful experience was the main objective.

Competition was another divisive issue in some of the schools. Similar to Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín (2019), teachers made efforts to deemphasise competition in a variety of ways, including the use of spirit points, emphasising team membership qualities and focusing more on cooperative and skill-based activities. For example, in one school, the teacher promoted a more cooperative and inclusive atmosphere, which the children noticed:

Everyone got involved in it ... because before people would be left out in a game and now everyone is included ... when we were picking teams no one was left last; it was just one, two, one, two, so the teams were even the whole time. And no one was left out, because no one likes to be the last one picked. (FG5)

The children also understood that competition was not a top priority: 'we didn't care about the scores or who won, we didn't even say who won ... Otherwise people would start showing off about it' (FG3). Lessening the importance of winning and losing made a difference to children who perceived themselves as less skilled. The following quote illustrates how an emphasis on competition in previous versions of physical education might be described as miseducative, while the current version is heading toward an educative experience:

Before I felt really undermined by people who knew what they were doing, and I didn't feel like I could say: 'lads, can you help me?' And I felt embarrassed because I didn't know what to do, but now because we were all learning something new, we were equal and all at the same stage. It's helped me be more confident in football, and have more fun ... That was all down to my friends telling me good job, or hard luck, I'll help you fix it. (FG4)

In one school, the class included one group who played Gaelic football outside school, and another group that did not. The teacher chose to emphasise skill performance in ways that neutralised this difference. The children noticed and appreciated their teacher's approach and the quality of experience that resulted, particularly when compared with their former experiences.

All the people who played football and are experienced wouldn't all be on the one team, so it would all be fair. But before we started doing this, the people who didn't play football were always the last picked and it was mean. I think now because everyone is having fun and being involved, it's fairer. And I think for people who don't play Gaelic football it was a lot better. (FG4)

Children who were more experienced and competitive also welcomed de-emphasis on competition and greater emphasis on other aspects of participation. For example, the following pupil explained:

A lot has changed since we started this. For example, if those who were less experienced were on the team of people who did play before they'd say 'aww, we have a crap team', and it would offend them ... I learned to be more positive, because before I was like 'oh my god, can you not just pass the ball?' I feel like I got to practice to be a better captain, and helped show my friends to solo, and just help them out ... To get good at partnering with other people, because before I just wanted the glory. And now I know to be a better team mate and to pass to other people. (FG4)

Taken together, we might interpret the sharing of learning intentions combined with setting individual and collective goals framed participation in ways that interrupted former elite and performative narratives. These data also illustrate that thoughtful and proportionate approaches to competition can provide motivation and context (Aggerholm, Standal, and Hordvik 2018). Collectively, teachers' pedagogies showed attention to the quality of individual's experiences in ways that children noticed, valued and identified as making a positive difference to them.

## Discussion

Children's accounts indicate that their teachers were able to facilitate the types of experiences that aligned with their personal preferences for participation (Balish et al. 2014; Crane and Temple 2015). At the outset of this research we positioned meaningfulness as involving consideration of the purpose and goals of movement, judgements related to the emotional value of the experience, and a sense of coherence – a 'big picture' comprehension and connection between these and other life experiences (Chen 1998). Children who participated in this research found educative value in opportunities to interrogate and negotiate the purpose and goals of their movement and in making judgements about its value (Dewey, 1938). To a lesser extent, given the brevity of the unit, children made connections beyond these experiences. But were these children's experiences meaningful?

The children consistently identified their experiences as meaningful relative to previous experiences. Thorpe (2002) highlights the importance of short-term events 'satisfying' the child given the relative simplicity of their judgements – we are confident that Meaningful PE as a heuristic of meaningfulness met this requirement. The findings provide encouraging evidence that the pedagogies of meaningfulness implemented – democratic and reflective pedagogies – were fit for purpose. We anticipate that more time to engage in and reflect on activities more deeply (Kretchmar 2006) and engaging in diary writing across a longer period may address any novelty effect and yield more nuanced results. With Dewey's (1938) theorising about the continuity of experiences in mind, we suggest that meaningfulness is a longitudinal project that plays out across time, as experiences and units integrate and build upon others and physical activity experiences grow. In addition, given our aspirations for meaningfulness in physical education to influence children's daily lives, we suggest that in future research children need to be provided with extensive opportunities to explore a range of sources of meaningfulness (Jewett, Bain, and Ennis 1995) in depth as part of the goal-setting process. It is possible that some of the children involved will look back at this brief 8-week experience as personally significant in ways that influence their future physically active selves in an educative way; equally, others may identify both miseducative and noneducative experiences (Dewey, 1938). Tracking children's experiences across a longer period of time will help to make this determination. What *is* important is that these data provide indicators of how children experience features of participation, such as social interaction, fun and motor competence within physical education lessons that are facilitated by democratic and reflective pedagogies. This understanding of how to shape educative experiences that facilitate individual preferences provides direction on a version of physical education with a greater likelihood of influencing children's physical activity engagement in personally significant ways (Ennis 2017).

Our findings provide a different insight related to children's experiences to others who have examined this area. For example, O'Connor (2019) and Nilges (2004) focused specifically on embodied aspects of children's experiences. By casting a wide net on children's experiences, we attempted to capture their overall experiences, allowing for a more holistic picture of their experiences to emerge. This new insight on children's perspectives addresses a gap in the literature (Kretchmar 2008) by providing direction on the implementation of pedagogies of meaningfulness. Children within each class identified similar aspects of their teacher's approaches that made a difference to their experiences. These findings illustrate that different perspectives within a single group can, to varying degrees, be accommodated simultaneously and in complimentary ways. While

acknowledging the undoubted challenge of accommodating individual preferences and abilities (Koekoek, Knoppers, and Stegeman 2009), we suggest that attention to individual meaningfulness guided by social constructivist approaches provides direction on how to work towards individualisation of experience in ways that are both manageable and possible. Identification of common pedagogies that impacted individual experience in educative ways within one context is particularly useful given the collective nature of physical education experiences. Further, the enhancement of the quality of children's physical education experiences implemented by five different teachers suggests that the pedagogies of meaningfulness included within the Meaningful PE framework is robust and flexible enough to allow for interpretation by individual teachers that still facilitates similar outcomes for the children involved.

Koekoek, Knoppers, and Stegeman (2009) illustrate the challenges of accessing children's authentic perspectives. The children's diary was the means by which teachers accessed children's voices. The use of a diary was methodologically appropriate given the important role of reflection in ascribing meaningfulness to experiences (O'Connor 2019). In their diaries, children tended to write relatively short phrases in their responses, the fragmented nature of which limited our interpretation of diary entries. The merits of accessing children's perceptions within activity experiences in 'real time' (Koekoek, Knoppers, and Stegeman 2009) warrants further exploration in the context of meaningfulness. For example, Ní Chróinín, Coulter, and Parker (2019) illustrated how photos can help children interpret and communicate their learning experiences. It is possible that using video or still images within reflective process can enrich children's representations of their experiences.

Children's experiences provide the following direction to teachers aiming to promote meaningfulness in physical education. First, articulation of purpose by teachers through sharing of learning intentions and personal goals provides a learning frame for participation and a platform upon which those purposes, intentions, and goals can be negotiated. Insight on the purpose, along with crafting of personal goals for participation (Chen 1998) is an important starting point of a lesson-to-lesson pedagogical approach focused on meaningfulness. Second, involving children in decisions about the 'what' and 'how' of their participation can also help to facilitate negotiation around individual preferences in inclusive ways. In particular, children appreciated opportunities to direct their own tasks and make up their own games. Allowing children unstructured play opportunities supported them in seeing the personal relevance of activities and making connections beyond physical education, influencing both the value they place on the activity (Chen 1998) as well as their future participation (Ennis 2017). Third, emphasis on inclusive and cooperative values created a supportive space for all to participate and find value in their participation (Crane and Temple 2015). In this research, both children who identified as more or less experienced and skilled thrived within the physical education experience provided. Accommodation of individual preferences for participation may be key to ensuring continued participation (Lodewyk and Pybus 2012). Fourth, children identified issues related to their participation, such as not enjoying overly competitive situations and feeling excluded by elite approaches to performance that are echoed across the physical education literature. It is encouraging that for these children, the pedagogies of meaningfulness counteracted these negative or miseducative experiences (Kipp 2017; Ryan and Deci 2017).

## Conclusion

Taken together, these findings indicate that pedagogies of meaningfulness require attention to both reduction and elimination of miseducative or noneducative aspects that detract from participation, as well as augmentation and emphasis of educative qualities that enhance children's experiences (Dewey, 1938). The underlying message from these findings is that involving children in directing and shaping their learning experiences from start to finish is important to the quality of physical education experiences. Such involvement through pedagogies of meaningfulness can accommodate individual preferences, perspectives and competencies in inclusive ways that echo features children

identify as significant to the quality of their experiences. These findings, therefore, provide important direction on pedagogies teachers can use to promote experiences that build towards meaningfulness, and promote physical education experiences that children may identify as meaningful to their physical activity lives inside and outside of school.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Teaching Council of Ireland Research Support Framework (now called the John Coolahan Research Support Framework) grant number 1001555. This work was also supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [grant number IDG430-2018-00188].

## ORCID

Déirdre Ní Chróinín  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0920-980X>

Tim Fletcher  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7352-4775>

Maura Coulter  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9406-2349>

## References

- Aggerholm, K., ØF Standal, and M. M. Hordvik. 2018. "Competition in Physical Education: Avoid, Ask, Adapt or Accept?" *Quest (Grand Rapids, Mich)* 70 (3): 385–400.
- Balish, S. M., C. McLaren, D. Rainham, and C. Blanchard. 2014. "Correlates of Youth Sport Attrition: A Review and Future Directions." *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 15 (4): 429–439.
- Baumeister, R. F., K. D. Vohs, J. L. Aaker, and E. N. Garbinsky. 2013. "Some key Differences Between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 8 (6): 505–516.
- Beni, S., T. Fletcher, and D. Ní Chróinín. 2017. "Meaningful Experiences in Physical Education and Youth Sport: A Review of the Literature." *Quest (Grand Rapids, Mich)* 69 (3): 291–312.
- Beni, S., T. Fletcher, and D. Ní Chróinín. 2019. "Using Features of Meaningful Experiences to Guide Primary Physical Education Practice." *European Physical Education Review* 25 (3): 599–615.
- Beni, S., D. Ní Chróinín, and T. Fletcher. 2019. "A Focus on the how of Meaningful Physical Education in Primary Schools." *Sport, Education and Society* 24 (6): 624–637.
- Beni, S., D. Ní Chróinín, and T. Fletcher. 2021. "It's How PE Should Be!: Classroom Teachers' Experiences of Implementing Meaningful Physical Education." *European Physical Education Review*. doi:10.1177/1356336X20984188.
- Bergeron, M. F., M. Mountjoy, N. Armstrong, M. Chia, J. Côté, C. A. Emery, and R. M. Malina. 2015. "International Olympic Committee Consensus Statement on Youth Athletic Development." *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 49 (13): 843–851.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101.
- Carlson, T. B. 1995. "We Hate Gym: Student Alienation from Physical Education." *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* 14 (4): 467–477.
- Chen, A. 1998. "Meaningfulness in Physical Education: A Description of High School Students' Conceptions." *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* 17: 285–306.
- Clarke, V., and V. Braun. 2014. "Thematic Analysis." In *Encyclopaedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, edited by A. C. Michalos, 6626–6628. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Crane, J., and V. Temple. 2015. "A Systematic Review of Dropout from Organized Sport Among Children and Youth." *European Physical Education Review* 21 (1): 114–131.
- Dewey, J. 1938. *Experience and Education*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Ennis, C. D. 2017. "Educating Students for a Lifetime of Physical Activity: Enhancing Mindfulness, Motivation, and Meaning." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 88 (3): 241–250.
- Enright, E., and M. O'Sullivan. 2010. "Can I do It in My Pyjamas? Negotiating a Physical Education Curriculum with Teenage Girls." *European Physical Education Review* 16 (3): 203–222.
- Fletcher, T., and D. Ní Chróinín. 2021. "Pedagogical Principles That Support the Prioritisation of Meaningful Experiences in Physical Education: Conceptual and Practical Considerations." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/17408989.2021.1884672.

- Fletcher, T., D. Ní Chróinín, D. Gleddie, and S. Beni. 2021. "The Why, What, and How of Meaningful Physical Education." In *Meaningful Physical Education*, edited by T. Fletcher, D. N. Chróinín, D. Gleddie, and S. Beni, 3–19. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, J., E. S. Pearson, P. Sanzo, and A. E. Lennon. 2018. "Exploring the Perspectives of 10-, 11-, and 12-Year-old Primary School Students on Physical Activity Engagement – "Cause you Can't Just be Sitting at a Desk all the Time!." *Child: Care, Health and Development* 44 (3): 433–442.
- Jarvis, P. 1987. "Meaningful and Meaningless Experience: Towards an Analysis of Learning from Life." *Adult Education Quarterly* 37 (3): 164–172.
- Jewett, A. E., L. L. Bain, and C. D. Ennis. 1995. *The Curriculum Process in Physical Education*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.
- Kipp, L. E. 2017. "Developmental Considerations for Working with Young Athletes." In *Sport Psychology for Young Athletes*, edited by C. J. Knight, C. G. Harwood, and D. Gould, 32–42. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.
- Knight, C. J., C. Harwood, and D. Gould, eds. 2017. *Sport Psychology for Young Athletes*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Koekoek, J., and A. Knoppers. 2015. "The Role of Perceptions of Friendships and Peers in Learning Skills in Physical Education." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 20 (3): 231–249.
- Koekoek, J., A. Knoppers, and H. Stegeman. 2009. "How Do Children Think They Learn Skills in Physical Education?" *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* 28 (3): 310–332.
- Kretchmar, R. S. 2000. "Movement Subcultures: Sites for Meaning." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 71 (5): 19–25.
- Kretchmar, R. S. 2006. "Ten More Reasons for Quality Physical Education." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 77 (9): 6–9.
- Kretchmar, R. S. 2008. "The Increasing Utility of Elementary School Physical Education: A Mixed Blessing and Unique Challenge." *The Elementary School Journal* 108 (3): 161–170.
- Ladwig, M. A., S. Vazou, and P. Ekkekakis. 2018. "My Best Memory Is When I Was Done with It': PE Memories Are Associated with Adult Sedentary Behavior." *Translational Journal of the American College of Sports Medicine* 3 (16): 119–129.
- Leontiev, D. A. 2013. "Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning: An Introduction." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 8 (6): 457–458.
- Light, R. L., and S. Harvey. 2017. "Positive Pedagogy for Sport Coaching." *Sport, Education and Society* 22 (3): 271–287.
- Lodewyk, K. R., and C. M. Pybus. 2012. "Investigating Factors in the Retention of Students in High School Physical Education." *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* 32 (1): 61–77.
- Mandigo, J., N. Holt, A. Anderson, and J. Sheppard. 2008. "Children's Motivational Experiences Following Autonomy-Supportive Games Lessons." *European Physical Education Review* 14 (3): 407–425.
- Ní Chróinín, D., M. Coulter, and M. Parker. 2019. "'We Took Pictures': Children's Meaning-Making in Physical Education." *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* 39 (2): 216–226.
- Ní Chróinín, D., T. Fletcher, and C. A. Griffin. 2018. "Exploring Pedagogies That Promote Meaningful Participation in Primary Physical Education." *Physical Education Matters* 13 (2): 70–73.
- Nilges, L. M. 2004. "Ice Can Look Like Glass: A Phenomenological Investigation of Movement Meaning in one Fifth-Grade Class During a Creative Dance Unit." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 75 (3): 298–314.
- O'Connor, J. 2019. "Exploring a Pedagogy for Meaning-Making in Physical Education." *European Physical Education Review* 25 (4): 1093–1109.
- Rintala, J. 2009. "It's all about the-ing." *Quest* 61 (3): 278–288.
- Rodgers, C. R. 2002. "Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking." *Teachers College Record* 104 (4): 842–866.
- Rosso, B. D., K. H. Dekas, and A. Wrzesniewski. 2010. "On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 30: 91–127.
- Ryan, R. M., and E. L. Deci. 2017. *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*. New York: Guilford.
- Standal, O. F. 2015. *Phenomenology and Pedagogy in Physical Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Strømmer, S., S. Shaw, S. Jenner, C. Vogel, W. Lawrence, K. Woods-Townsend, D. Farrell, et al. 2021. "How Do We Harness Adolescent Values in Designing Health Behaviour Change Interventions? A Qualitative Study." *British Journal of Health Psychology*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1111/bjhp.12526.
- Thorburn, M. 2018. "John Dewey, Subject Purposes and Schools of Tomorrow: A Centennial Reappraisal of the Educational Contribution of Physical Education." *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 19: 22–28.
- Thorpe, R. 2002. "Selecting the Right Targets." In *Coaching Children in Sport: Principles and Practice*, edited by M. Lee, 145–160, Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.
- Vasily, A., T. Fletcher, D. Gleddie, and D. Ní Chróinín. 2021. "An Actor-Oriented Perspective on Implementing a Pedagogical Innovation in a Cycling Unit." *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1123/jtpe.2020-0186.
- Walseth, K., B. Engebretsen, and L. Elvebakk. 2018. "Meaningful Experiences in PE for all Students: An Activist Research Approach." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 23 (3): 235–249.