

## **What is PE?**

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## Abstract

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

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Word Count 300

*Keywords:* Sport, Physical education, Health, Culture, Physical activity

## **Introduction**

Physical education is a socially constructed activity which is informed by, and informs wider physical culture. Individual experiences of physical education as well as messages from wider physical culture, shape understandings of the nature and purpose of physical education, where physical education is defined by what is done in its name (Kirk, 2010). This paper examines pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education and the relationship between physical education and wider physical culture in an Irish context. It explores the dominant ideologies shaping understandings of the nature and purposes of physical education. Educational justifications of the place of physical education in school, have emphasised its 'unique' contribution to overall development through a focus on the body. Insight into the relationship between pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education and wider physical culture in Ireland can support (re)alignment of their understandings with educational purposes. In the process this may support the (re)creation of physical education and wider physical culture.

## ***Physical Culture***

'Physical culture is a specialised form of discourse concerned with meaning-making centred on bodily practices which constitute sport, physical recreation and exercise' (Kirk, 1999: 66) where discourse 'refers to all meaning-making activity, whether this is intentional or unintentional, explicit or implicit, overt or reflexive' (Kirk, 1999: 66). Engagement in

physical culture includes roles that range from participation in sporting and physical activities, coaching and volunteering as well as supporting sporting icons and teams as a fan. Physical education professionals have defined physical education within wider physical culture in relation to school sport, physical activity and lifelong learning (AfPE Scotland, 2010). It is suggested that school physical education is a part of youth physical culture that ‘informs and is informed by physical culture’ (Kirk, 1999: 69). However, it is suggested that in reality school physical education practices have failed to keep pace with changes in wider physical culture leading to a lack of connection between experiences provided to children in school contexts and the types of physical activity opportunities they pursue outside of school (Kirk, 1999).

### ***Physical Culture in Ireland***

Sport and physical activity play an important social role in Ireland (Fahey & Delaney, 2005). Irish physical culture is dominated by sport where the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), collectively known as the ‘big three’. The foundation of the GAA points to the sport being a part of what it means to be Irish. Sport is more recently recognised as an important social capital in Ireland (Fahey & Delaney, 2005). Despite sport forming a core part of Irish culture, there has been an increase in sedentary lifestyles for Irish adults and young people in recent years (Department of Health and Children, 2005, Morgan *et al.*, 2007, Nic Gabhainn *et al.*, 2007). While this trend is not uniquely Irish (Janssen *et al.*, 2005) it has placed the spotlight on the provision of, and participation in, physical activities opportunities for adults and young people in Ireland.

Physical culture for young people in Ireland includes three key pillars: extra-curricular sport in schools, sport played outside school contexts, and physical education (Fahey *et al.*, 2005, Woods *et al.*, 2010). Sporting and physical activities play an important role in children's lives in Ireland (Collier *et al.*, 2007b, De Róiste & Dinneen, 2005, Nic Gabhainn *et al.*, 2007, O'Sullivan, 2002). They highlight the complex process of engagement in sport and physical activities by young people and argue that the larger cultural and social context must be taken into account when devising sporting and physical activity opportunities for young people reflecting 'the changing times and unique interests of young people' (Collier *et al.*, 2007). As the 'big three' continue to receive a disproportionately large amount of government funding, the privileged and dominant position of these team games within wider Irish sporting culture continues to be maintained and extended (MacPhail *et al.*, 2008). This dominance influences all aspects of physical culture and impacts significantly on the dominant ideologies and practices of physical education in schools.

### ***Physical Education in Ireland***

In national contexts, it is through policy documents such as school curricula, as well as the practice of physical education that the nature and purposes of physical education are determined. Physical education in Ireland is a subject on the school curriculum in both primary and post-primary schools. The physical education curricula in Ireland are underpinned by the principle of lifelong participation aiming at the primary level to 'provide children with learning opportunities through the medium of movement' (Government of Ireland, 1999b: 8). This is developed at the post primary level by providing opportunities for personal, social and physical development through participation in physical activities (Government of Ireland, 2003). These core aims reflect physical education thinking internationally where the World Summit on Physical Education (2005) called on

governments to recognise physical education's 'intrinsic value and its distinctive role in physical, personal and social development, and in health promotion' (Magglingen Commitment for Physical Education, 2005: 1). However, in practice the quality and breadth of physical education provision continues to vary greatly in an Irish context (Broderick & Shiel, 2000, Deenihan, 2005, Fahey *et al.*, 2005, Houses of the Oireachtas, 2005, Irish National Teachers Organisation, 2007, MacPhail *et al.*, 2005, MacPhail *et al.*, 2008, Woods *et al.*, 2010). The core areas of both curricula align with common elements of physical education curricula internationally including games, gymnastics, athletics, aquatics, outdoor and adventure activities and dance. Despite Collier and colleague's (2007) call that physical activity opportunities for young people should reflect the changing times, team games continue to dominate physical education provision in Ireland. In order to better understand the nature and purpose of physical education and its place within wider physical culture we need to examine the dominant ideologies which shape them.

### ***Dominant Ideologies shaping 'What is PE?'***

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

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

In addition, since each individual's understanding of physical education is grounded in a range of subjectivities formed through personal experiences of sport, physical activity and physical education (Garrett & Wrench, 2008) these dominant ideologies continue to be

reproduced. The following section considers the influential ideologies of sport and health in more detail.

**Sport Ideology:** The terms sport and physical education are often used interchangeably within school contexts, where sport and health continue to shape what is understood by the term physical education (Capel & Blair, 2007). Jones & Cheetham (2001) also found that pupils perceived physical education as being synonymous with sport and games. Green (1998) describes the process whereby sport and team games became ‘the ideological high ground of the subject’ and ‘the epithet of ‘traditional’ PE’ during the second half of the twentieth century. Team games continue to dominate physical education in schools Green (2008) describes how sport has in many places continues as both the content and justification for physical education in schools (Hardman, 2008b). The dominant position of sport discourses is further reflected in the rise of Sport Education as a curricular model (Kirk, 2004). Caution has been expressed that if this trend towards the sportization of physical education continues there is a danger that the unique identity and individuality of educational purpose for physical education may be affected (Green, 2008, Penney, 1998). Hardman (2007; 2008a) argues that the sport dominated frame of reference for physical education needs to be widened to promote active lifestyles in ways that are meaningful and relevant, and responsive to the needs of young people (Hardman, 2007, Hardman, 2008b).

**Health/ Fitness Ideology:** Concern with physical education as a vehicle for health promotion has rivalled sport for the ideological high-ground (Green, 2008). This is reflected in policy and curriculum documents, where for example in Australia, physical education is now part of a Key Learning Area entitled Health and Physical Education. While a health driven ideology of physical education has not succeeded in displacing sport as the dominant ideology of the

subject area, it has certainly taken a significant portion of the market share from sport. Green (1998) describes how in the second half of the twentieth century physical education emerged as a solution to addressing societal health and fitness concerns with a resultant emphasis on preparation for leisure and promotion of lifelong participation in physical activity as a core purpose of physical education. Health and fitness justifications are often evident in pupil's understandings on the nature and purpose of physical education (Jones & Cheetham, 2001, Macdonald *et al.*, 2005).

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

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



whether it is desirable to have two dominant competing ideologies and whether these ideologies can amount to a justification of the subject on school curricula where education is the intended outcome.

Although some concern about the dominance of sport and health ideologies in physical education discourses has been expressed in the literature (Penney, 1998), at both the policy level and in daily practices, sport and health continue to shape understandings of physical education. Smith & Parr (2007) emphasise the importance of engaging with the realities of physical education as experienced by young people as a means to supporting future provision of valuable and meaningful physical education experiences. This paper examines pre-service primary teachers' understandings of the nature, purposes and content of physical education and explores the relationship between these discourses of physical education and wider physical culture. Macdonald, Kirk & Braiuka (1999) explored the representation of physical culture in the experiences of future teachers of physical education moving from school physical education to human movement studies at university level. They highlighted gaps in meaning-making between the participants' reality of university level courses and their expectations which were based on their own school experiences. They describe students experiencing 'multiple and potentially contradictory messages during the course of their education in secondary and tertiary institutions' (Macdonald *et al.*, 1999: 47). Their study raises questions about what version of physical education is privileged in school and university settings and what the connections between these sites should be to enhance future delivery of physical education.

### **Where is the education in Physical Education?**

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

A teachers’ understanding and beliefs about teaching physical education are influenced by their prior experiences (Faulkner *et al.*, 2004, Garrett & Wrench, 2007, Matanin & Collier, 2003) and grounded in their practical everyday experiences which provide ‘practical guides to action as well as a justification for those actions’ (Green, 1998). The importance of considering the influence of wider physical culture on beginning teachers’ understandings of physical education was highlighted as socialisation into and via sport impacted in shaping their understandings in addition to their physical education experiences (Placek *et al.*, 1995).

Morgan & Hansen (2008) found teachers’ understanding of physical education as a ‘break’ in their perceptions of physical education which were closely related to health and fitness discourses with little evidence of educational rationales for the subject (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). Pupils perceive physical education as being very different to other subjects

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

This paper examines beginning-teacher's understandings as they cross the divide from being pupil to beginning teacher. The beginning teachers in this study are at the crossroads between being a pupil/ consumer of physical education and drawing on these understandings as a basis for action in their teaching. Pre-service teacher education programmes are embedded with a version of physical education aligned with the core values and principles of the Primary Physical Education Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999a). Further investigation and insight into the place of physical education within wider physical culture may allow programmes to explore the process of meaning-making in physical education and placing them at the centre of beginning teacher's frames of understanding. Insight into the how physical education is framed within wider physical culture may also allow an opportunity for beginning teachers to shape their teacher

education experiences and support a more consistent physical education message between primary, post primary and university settings.

### **Research Design**

A phenomenological approach was utilised in this study as we were interested in how the pre-service teachers made sense of their personal experiences and interpreted these experiences and events to construct their understanding of physical education. Phenomenology has the potential to describe everyday life experiences and these experiences recorded and analyzed can tell a compelling story (Denscombe, 2006). In undertaking the research we were open to the varied understandings that we may have encountered and to the fact that each of these understandings were valid in their own right. This approach also enabled us to go further than just describe the participants' understanding of physical education to trying to focus on how these understandings came about. A qualitative research methodology using a reflective writing task provided access to the participants' understandings. A large-scale single question methodology was chosen as it would provide access to participants' understandings in a way that was feasible within the context of the teacher education program. The method used could be described as a survey, it consisted of one open ended question, however the focus was on words rather than numbers as the unit for analysis, thus pointing to a qualitative study. A feature of this research design compared to other qualitative studies which are often small scale making it difficult to generalize findings, is the large number of sources involved in this study. This allowed patterns to become clear and relationships between ideas to be explored to allow us to argue confidently in relation to shared understandings of participants.

### ***Research context and participants***

In Ireland the primary school teacher is a generalist teacher expected to teach eleven subjects, one of which is physical education. During their three year undergraduate degree these pre-service teachers complete a 36-48 hour course in Primary Physical Education in the first two years. Some continue and take an additional 48 hours as part of a special option in their final year. This study was conducted prior to the students commencing the physical education component of a Bachelor of Education teacher education programme. The participants in this study are pre-service primary teachers (n=544, age range 18-46, 8.8% male) from two colleges of education in Ireland.

### *Data collection and analysis*

The participants were invited to completed a ten-minute spontaneous writing task (Pike, 2006) prompted by the question ‘what is physical education?’ It is important to emphasise no direction was provided and participants were not guided in their answers allowing them to answer the question openly. The answer sheet was blank to allow for responses in any preferred format by the student such as, short prose, bullet points or brain storm style. This methodology was cost and time efficient and an excellent method of gathering the necessary data. Each response was word processed and due to the large amount of data handled using nVivo 8. A coding strategy was designed and adhered to as follows:

**Stage 1** Text search frequency query (Bryman, 2008) was carried out which allowed for the creation of broad categories to capture students’ understandings of physical education (Table 1).

Insert Table 1

Table 1. Sample text frequency search

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

**Stage 3** Further analysis included checking of each category to ensure consistency of coding. The key ideas within these categories were generated into themes constructed through reading and rereading the data using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Groupings were established where codes were matched to themes and the research question (Table 2). Sub themes/categories were established as they arose and any relationships to main themes or other sub-themes were identified and linked.

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

Insert Table 2

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

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

Both researchers were involved in the analysis of the data. This included coding individually, whereby both researchers coded the same data to ensure clarity of language, meaning and reliability; coding together and recording memos to establish agreed thoughts, themes and steps in the analysis process; and working together to construct an argument based on key messages within the data that was balanced, robust and made sense (Richards, 2005).

Trustworthiness of the analysis was also addressed using a peer de-briefer who reviewed all materials to address issues of bias in this ‘backyard research’ (Creswell, 2009).

## Findings

Use of a large-scale single question design provided access to participants’ understandings of physical education. Participants believed that participation in physical education was a positive and beneficial experience that supporting learning of a range of physical and social skills (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). Many of the participants used their own experiences to advocate for physical education:

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

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

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

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

Smelly sports bags, laps of freezing cold gym halls, beep tests, circuit training, tennis in the summer, returning roasting hot to classes, attempting badminton while listening to “Snow Patrol”, laughing with

your friends. Trying out random sports to exercise the body and mind, to take the brain off school work and relax. Teamwork.

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

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

They suggested that physical education provides an opportunity for less academic students to succeed. Fun (183 references) was emphasised as an essential element of physical education. For some having fun was an end in itself and physical education was seen as a recreational activity/ catharsis:

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

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

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

However, while their writings (and evidently their previous experiences) included a complex mixture of ideas around the nature and purpose of physical education some discourses emerged consistently across texts. Sport and health were the dominant discourses in participants’ writings and this finding is consistent with physical education discourses internationally (Capel & Blair, 2007, Green, 2008, Macdonald *et al.*, 2005). For these participants sport discourses shape the nature (answering the what? question) of physical



education. Sport discourses were tied to health discourses where they described how physical education provided opportunities to learn about a variety of sports to stay fit and healthy indicating that health discourses shape the purpose (answering the why? question) for physical education for these participants.

*Sport* discourses shaped participants' understandings of the nature of physical education (351 references). They suggested that through physical education it was possible to identify a sport one is good at that could be pursued. The continuing prevalence of team (124 references) games (189 references) within sport discourses suggests that physical education does not seem to offer the broad and balanced experience that is outlined as the basis of lifelong physical activity participation on which much physical education is justified in curricula. In addition, the dominance of team games suggest that physical education has not responded to the diversification of young people's wider physical culture as reflected by what they like to do (Collier *et al.*, 2007). This reflects other contexts such as Australia, where Garrett and Wrench (2007) found that early school based experiences of pre-service teachers were dominated by sport-related discourses. While the majority of participants had a positive experience of games teaching it is worth noting that for this participant the sports-dominated model of physical education was not an enjoyable one:

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

Teaches you how to use sport to unwind, distress.

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

Participants' writings acknowledged the role of physical education in learning skills (153 references) to support participation. However, the opportunity to learn social skills through physical education participation was as important, if not more important for participants. Team games were recognised as a valuable opportunity to learn social skills by providing opportunities to connect with and interact with others through group activities and games. Participants outlined how interaction and co-operation could support learning of people skills and life skills such as leadership, organisation, determination, team spirit and self control. In addition, participants who mentioned competition (20 references) emphasised the importance of 'healthy' competition and not taking competition too seriously.

Most importantly the individual learns that a game is just a game and it is the taking part that counts. This seems to suggest that while team games has remained the dominant activity in physical education, the emphasis within these games has shifted away from performative and competitive discourses (Hardman, 2007, Hardman, 2008a) towards a view of games that emphasises social skills. This seems to have resulted in participants holding a more positive outlook on team games. While it is recognised that the continuing dominance of team sports within sport and physical activity messages in the wider physical culture means that physical education content will inevitably continue to reflect these discourses it is encouraging that the emphasis has shifted away from competitive and performative discourses towards a more educational emphasis.

Health discourses of physical education were evident in participants' writings where participants framed physical education as an opportunity to exercise (384 references), be active (365 references) and be fit (257 references) and healthy (316 references). Participants suggested that physical education can promote a healthy body, a healthy mind and a healthy balanced lifestyle by providing a fun opportunity to exercise, participate in, and learn about a

range of physical activities. For these participants physical education is where you can learn how to stay fit, learn the importance of staying fit, get fit and stay fit. They suggest that the learning of physical skills such as co-ordination and balance, running jumping and throwing can also support a physically active lifestyle. The importance of participation in physical education and being fit was framed within health (316 references) and obesity discourses (28 references) and reflects participants' understandings of the purposes of physical education in other contexts (Jones & Cheetham, 2001, Macdonald *et al.*, 2005). Although many participants considered the value of school physical education in addressing issues around obesity one participant was a little more cynical in their response:

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

Emphasis on fitness and health seemed to acknowledge the increase in sedentary lifestyles and increasing obesity levels of young people. This highlights the notion of physical education 'being drawn into the obesity vortex' (Gard, 2004) within wider physical culture. It is also worth noting the emphasis on physical education as a 'stress-free' zone (30 references), a form of catharsis for relieving stress and escaping the stress of the rest of school life. This seems to reflect the participants own experiences of physical education and raises concerns about the impact of other aspects of school life on their mental health.

### ***The relationship between physical education discourses and wider physical culture***

It is encouraging that participants' writings about physical education were for the most part positive and advocated for the importance of physical education on the school curriculum.

Participants recognised that there were connections between learning in physical education and lifelong physical activity participation. These connections were grounded in an understanding intertwined with sport and health discourses for most participants. However, for most participants their advocacy for lifelong participation in physical activity was

instrumental and grounded in health discourses rather than a broader understanding of a balanced lifestyle with physical education viewed as a valued human practice (Green, 1998).

It is worth noting the narrow range of activities and ideas considered within the scope of physical education and its lack of connection to wider physical culture and wider culture in general as a feature of participants' writings. Physical culture in Ireland is dominated by team games where sport and physical activity are viewed as a positive aspect of wider Irish cultural life. It is evident that these participants' physical education experiences were also dominated by team games and that their understandings of physical education are dominated by sport and health discourses of physical education. In the case of physical education there seems to be alignment between wider physical culture and school practices. In this case, the alignment suggests that wider physical culture continues to shape physical education practices in schools, as one student wrote, '[physical education] promotes teamwork in team sports and therefore a sense of community, unity and belonging.' This raises questions around how school physical education can move outside the influence of the dominant aspects of wider physical culture to recreate itself in a way that embraces all aspects of wider physical culture. Kretchmar (2008) suggests that 'the challenge is to find ways to prioritize a life-enhancing brand of physical education over its utilitarian counterpart' (p. 169). This conundrum in which physical education finds itself raises particular difficulties for teacher education programmes. Teacher education programmes are challenged to deliver a consistent physical education message based on a broad and balanced curriculum that encourages beginning teachers to implement practices that often contradict pre-service teachers own experiences in schools and their school-based experiences during their teacher education programme. This study highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of pre-service teachers' understandings of physical education and the role of each individual's meaning-making as a

basis for their future actions as teachers. The complex interplay between their own physical education experiences and the dominant messages of wider physical culture serve to complicate and confuse answers to the question of the nature and purpose of physical education. This *mélange* of mixed messages and contradictory practices provides a challenging context for teacher education programmes to ensure that future teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and resilience to deliver physical education aligned with the ideals of the curriculum. How can university level courses serve to reconcile the version of physical education beginning teachers bring with them from schools with the version presented by their teacher education programme? Furthermore, how can this new version be reconciled with dominant physical culture in Ireland? If the practices of school physical education are to be the benchmark in relation to the nature and purpose of the subject in schools then the interplay between dominant ideologies of physical education and wider school culture must be carefully considered. Insight into the phenomenon which is participants' understanding of physical education based on their experiences provides a starting point for this process.

## **Conclusion**

The dominant discourses of physical education reflect the dominant aspects of wider physical culture in Ireland. In this context it seems inevitable that physical education will continue to serve as an umbrella term (Green, 2008) to meet whatever purposes society demands of it at a given time. This suggests that the capacity of physical education to move beyond reproducing dominant sport and health ideologies to recreate itself, and ultimately to recreate physical culture must be questioned. This study has also shown that a large-scale single question designed survey, offers a tool to allow physical education teacher educators access to pre-

service teachers' understandings easily and efficiently. However, if physical education in Ireland continues to reflect the 'gap' between promise and provision (Green, 2008) the answer to the question 'What is PE?' will continue to reflect dominant physical culture and be problematic for those with an educational purpose.

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