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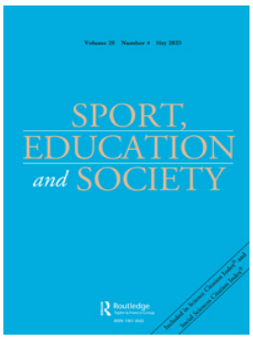

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Learning to play: how working-class 'lads' negotiate PE in a working-class secondary school in England

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which working-class boys negotiated the content and delivery of physical education at a 'typical', white working-class secondary school located in the north of England. The study utilised a quasi-ethnographical case-study design conducted over a non-continuous three-month period involving covert and overt participant observation, guided conversations, and group interviews. A total of 48 key stage 4 (Year 10 and 11) male pupils were selected to take part in eight focus groups following the observation of approximately 340 key stage four (KS4) pupils in PE lessons. The data revealed that the vast majority of these male pupils arrived at the school with a narrow sporting repertoire as result of the upbringings and lifestyles made up of 'traditional' working-class activities such as football and fishing. Their strong predisposition for recreational involvement in these activities impacted directly on what the young males would, and could, do during PE at school and in this way were able to influence (to lesser and greater degrees) the content and delivery of their PE experiences. The findings of the study, therefore, go some way explaining how PE in many working-class secondary schools may come to influence the long standing, class-related adult participation anomalies that continue to exist in the UK.

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Introduction

Recent research suggests that sports participation and levels of physical activity (PA) continue to reflect patterns of social stratification and particularly those based on social class (Sport England, 2022). Despite some claims that the influence of social class on sports participation has been in decline in recent decades (Scheerder, 2005), many other studies continue to find that a gap between social class groups participating in sport still exists (Kahma, 2012; Kraaykamp et al., 2013; Wheeler et al., 2019). Indeed, in some studies over half of upper/middle class adults have been shown to be taking part in sports activity at least once a week (57%), compared to 29% of unskilled workers (García Ferrando & Llopis Goig, 2017).

One of the influences on this participation trend in adults has been attributed to the impact of adolescents from working-class backgrounds generally taking part in a narrower range of sports (Dagkas & Stathi, 2007; Green et al., 2005; Wheeler et al., 2019) and, as a result, develop narrower sporting portfolios or repertoires (Haycock & Smith, 2012) – an issue that has been shown to

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impact significantly on young people's predisposition towards lifelong participation and future exercise habits (Engstrom, 2008).

Much has been written about the ostensible role of PE in increasing the sports participation of under-represented groups and working-class youngsters (Evans & Davies, 2010; Green, 2014) by providing them with the 'dispositional resources that may promote participation in sport and PA both in and out of school' (Evans & Davies, 2010, p.768). Nevertheless, as Evans and Davies (2008, p. 201) observe, in terms of its impact upon working-class youngsters' sporting predispositions and engagement with the subject, 'contemporary PE flatters to deceive'. Indeed, claims are made that PE may not only be unsuccessful in promoting participation for all pupils but may well be perpetuating the existing social differences (Dagkas, 2011). This tends to be explained in terms of the ways in which what is undertaken in the name of education is contoured by contextual constraints such as the type of relationship that many of these pupils 'enjoy' with their teachers (Smith et al., 2009) as well as the ways that working-class youngsters in working-class schools are able to contour what they receive in the name of PE (see, e.g. Green, 2003; Smith et al., 2009) via their active negotiation with PE teachers working in 'tough' schools. That is to say, staff employed in such schools appear more inclined to allow their pupils to 'negotiate' (and in some cases demand) more suitable activities (e.g. football) in PE (see, e.g. Cothran et al., 2009).

One of the main influences on many male pupils' overt willingness to actively influence the structure and delivery of their PE experiences, is the presence of an idealised form of hegemonic masculinity, present in many working-class schools, that exists as a near constant presence and pressure on all boys (Frosh et al., 2002). Indeed, an ability to perform well in PE (especially in traditional working-class sports such as football) not only stands as a site for the construction and display of hegemonic masculinities (Bramham, 2003; Connell, 2008; Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001; Frosh et al., 2002), but can also emerge as a place where these male pupils can 'be' and behave like 'proper' boys via open displays of strength, aggression, heterosexuality, and toughness (Bramham, 2003; Pringle, 2008; Swain, 2000). Behaviours such as these can then subsequently lead to the types and levels of influence, power, and status that enabled them to influence the actions of others (including the PE staff) for their own benefit (Connell, 2008; Swain, 2000). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that studies have found that more prominent members of a male working-class peer group, are likely to openly engage in overtly aggressive, masculine, and disruptive behaviour (Archer et al., 2007; Nolan, 2011) towards their peers and PE staff. in order to gain and maintain influence, authority, and status among their peers (Connell, 2008; Swain, 2000).

Ultimately, therefore, this paper looks to advance knowledge on the generally under researched topic of PE provision in mainstream working-class schools by focusing on several aspects of the male pupils' daily lives via a range of methods over a prolonged period.

Methods

The study utilised a well-established, quasi-ethnographical, case-study framework common in longer-term qualitative studies in schools (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Parker, 1996) within a 'typical', white, working-class secondary school referred to throughout the paper via the pseudonym Ayrefield Community School (ACS). This included the use of covert and overt participant observations supplemented with guided conversations that then led into focus group interviews with specifically selected groups of males (Yin, 2014).

The design and nature of the entire project received formal approval from both the University Ethics Board as well as the head teacher and chair of governors at ACS.

The aim of the study was to gather and document multiple perspectives from both pupils and PE staff in their 'natural' surroundings in order to gain a more adequate grasp of the ways that the actions and attitudes of male pupils came to impact on the structure and delivery of PE at ACS.

Sixty-five PE lessons were observed over a non-continuous, three-month period, at an average of two full school days per week. Whilst known to the PE staff, the researcher initially adopted the role

of learning support assistant in the department (LSA) and subsequently took on a range of covert roles in lessons – an approach that is common within a case-study design (Yin, 2014, p. 111). An initial familiarisation phase of two weeks was used to become a more accepted member of the PE department with the aim being to 'blend in' to the school environment via the wearing of PE staff kit and lanyard. As part of this covert observation, care was taken to minimise any influence on the actions or interactions of the subjects (Bryman, 2012), while consistent attempts were also made to watch, listen to, and ask questions of the pupils as they followed aspects of their day-to-day activities (Payne & Payne, 2004) in order to provide greater insights into observed behaviours/comments (Yin, 2014). All ethical concerns relating to deception and the specific nature of these observations were addressed and agreed with the University ethics board and school head teacher prior to commencement. In terms of data collection and recording, brief field notes were completed at appropriate times in the day (based on observations and conversations) that were largely influenced by personal interpretations (Laitinen et al., 2014) and written up in greater detail later in the day. As part of this process, a conscious attempt was made to explore links within the emerging data between lessons, pupils, and PE teachers in order to highlight and examine any associations and patterns relating to interactions within and between particular groups (e.g. PE teachers and Y11 male pupils) (Ritchie et al., 2014). As a result of 'pouring through the data' at this stage, the start of a more focused 'analytical path' and inducive approach began to emerge that was based on 'additional relationships' (Yin, 2014, pp. 136–137) and led to the emergence of the two distinct groups of male pupils that we subsequently named the Problematic lads and Participant lads. The term 'lads' was used in order to reflect the way in which teachers consistently referred to all the males at ACS as well as acknowledge the influence of Willis' ethnographical seminal study (1977) with working-class 'lads living in the north of England. The Problematic lads were a much more dominant group of pupils that were generally present in all PE lessons (to greater or lesser degrees). These pupils evidently benefited from a higher level of status and power within their peer group and were subsequently more able and willing to influence the actions of both peers and PE staff which was generally demonstrated through their frequently aggressive behaviour towards classmates in changing rooms and lessons, as well as an apparent inability and/or unwillingness to follow instructions from PE staff in many lessons. In contrast, the Participant lads consistently demonstrated passive and conformist behaviour in their PE lessons, were much more likely to arrive to lessons on time, get changed in to correct kit, and adhere to staff instructions. It was at this stage of the data collection period that the presence of the researcher was made known to the pupils in order to allow for eight group interviews to be conducted with specifically selected pupils from each of the two aforementioned lads' groups in Years 10 and 11 (Problematics: n = 22 across four groups and Participants n = 26 across four groups. Total participants n = 48). The process of thematic analysis was applied to all focus groups transcripts where key themes were distinguished and subsequently extracted from the data using specific labels to comments in order to do so (Bryman, 2012). Due to the fact that initial data analysis had taken place following periods of observation and guided conversations, several exiting labels were utilised (e.g. CG – playing football at the cage after school) with additional codes created and applied that emerged from the focus groups (e.g. PRT – positive relationship with teacher). The specific focus group responses from lads in these two groups data is subsequently utilised in the findings that follow and supplemented with responses from a solitary group interview with the school's male PE staff (n = 4) as a way of attempting to triangulate some of the pupils' responses and researcher's observations.

The case

The case-study school (known as ACS) was a mixed-sex mainstream secondary school situated in the northern village of Ayrefield and deemed suitably 'deprived' against several measures. ACS was, for example, ranked 1,141 for social deprivation out of a possible 32,482 lower super output areas

(LSOA) areas nationally (ONS, 2014). Nearly a quarter of all residents in Ayrefield had no formal qualifications, and twice the national average of residents were in 'bad' or 'very bad' health. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of all households in the area were defined as deprived in either one or two of the four indicators of deprivation (e.g. one adult unemployed or no inhabitant with a level two qualification) (ONS, 2014). 11.5% of current residents had either never worked or were classed as being long-term unemployed and over twice the national average (NA) of adults were currently claiming key working-age benefits (36% with the NA being 15%) with almost three-times that number on incapacity benefit (20% with the NA 7%). There was a strong prevalence of white people living in Ayrefield with 1,330 of the 1,389 total residents classing themselves as white-British. Of the 965 pupils on roll at ACS in 2013, only 1% of students considered their first language to be other than English: 'most pupils were white British with a distinct lack of pupils from ethnic minorities on roll' (Ofsted, 2014, p. 5). 45% of all pupils in Y11 at ACS were officially defined as being 'disadvantaged', and half (49.4%) of all pupils had been eligible for free school meals in the last six years. In addition, Ofsted (2014, p.7) stated that 'the school had faced challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers' (Ofsted, 2014, p. 7). This appeared indicative of both the reputation of the school and the behaviour and attainment of some pupils.

Ultimately, an attempt was made to ensure that sufficient evidence was presented within the findings below that demonstrates that the researcher 'has spent quality time in the field making penetrating inquiries while there' (Yin, 2014, p. 205). It is to these findings that the paper now turns.

Findings

The aim of this section is to present the main findings and responses from both the lads and the PE staff in order to examine the ways in which the actions and attitudes of these groups as well as how they interact came to influence how PE is structured, delivered and experience at ACS. More specifically, the findings will begin by examining the leisure lifestyles of all lads at ACS before presenting the data linked to the PE experiences of the Problematics and Participants lads groups alongside the views of the PE staff.

The lads' leisure time

An initial examination of the way the lads spent their leisure time was deemed relevant to contextualise their subsequent attitude and approach to school PE. The vast majority of lads from both groups reported 'hanging out' socially with friends as a substantial leisure-time activity (both in terms of time and significance). In response to a question regarding what they generally tended to do when they got home from school, the common response was: '*Gu art wit [go out with] mates*' (Riley: Focus Group: Year 11 Problematics 1). Being out and about with friends often revolved around playing games such as variations on the theme of the childhood game 'hide and seek':

> *Interviewer: What do you get up to after school?*
> *Kieran: Hiddy [hide and seek]*
> …
> *Craig: Oh yeah, we'll play Manhunt*[5] *like. We'll bray 'em up [physically hit them] to get t'word [the word] out of 'em.*
> *Dean: When it's reyt [really] dark nights we play Manhunt.*
> …
> *Jack: Flowerpark. It's just a fence all around it so you just say 'reyt [right] you're not allowed outside of this fence.*
> *Regan: Once we played all [over] Ayrefield.*
> …
> *Regan: [it lasts] ages.*
> (Focus Group: Year 10 Problematics 2)

As well as being an additional, if secondary, leisure-time activity, video-gaming was seen as an extension of socialising with friends:

Ryan: After you've bin art [been out] it's summat [something] because you can still talk to your mates as well.
Oliver: Yeah, go out and play football, come back in and play FIFA (football-based video game).
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 1)

Gaming, with its on-line social interaction, consumed significant periods of their time, particularly in the colder months:

Interviewer: And how much of your time outside of school is spent on Xbox or Playstation?
John: About 50%. And the other 50% is when I'm asleep (laughs). No I'm kidding, about 25% or summat [something] like that.
Interviewer: How many hours a night would you spend on the Xbox?
John: On a school day about two and at the weekend about four.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 2)

and:

Ryan: It's just 'Xbox, we all play on the Xbox'.
Daniel: When it's either snowy or raining.
Oliver: Xbox, breakfast, Xbox, dinner, Xbox, Bed.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 1)

Beyond the two most common leisure activities of just hanging out and video-gaming, the two most widely reported 'sporting' activities were football and fishing. It was noticeable that the youngsters reported a great deal of commonality in their leisure activities, prominent among which were several characteristically working-class sports such as course fishing:

Finley: I like fishing in the summer. I spent most of my holidays there.
…
Ollie: I used to go fishing a lot like in Year 7.
Will: Yeah, I used to go fishing a lot last year.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participant 2)

Playing football with friends and peers, often at one of two of the local outdoor, council-built 'sports cages' in Ayrefield, was an especially popular leisure activity: '*We just go out and have a kick abart [about]*' (Daniel. Focus Group: Year 10 Participant 1).

Ryan: Yeah, especially when it's warm. Go home, get changed, and straight art [out] for a kick abart [about].
…
Anthony: Yeah, it's pretty much every day. We go art [out] and play football.

Cage football appeared not only popular but a major and regular use of leisure time, among the Problematic lads in particular:

Regan: Me, Dean and Craig go [to] The Cage and play football, like … everyday.
Dean: Every day.
…
Craig: We play five-a-side everyday.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Problematics 2)

and

Oliver: I've been art [out] every day for t'last week me [playing football].
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 1)

Thus, cage football tended to dominate the lads' leisure time (and, once again, that of the Problematic lads in particular):

Regan: Five nights.
Craig: Like, seven nights.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Problematics 2)

Thus, the Cage appeared a very popular venue ('*If you went when it wa' [was] sunny there'd be loads of people darn theyr [down there] … like about … 30.*' Dean. Focus Group: Y10 Problematic 2), whatever the weather: *'We go when it's snowing, Ah mean, we even played int' [in the] snow when it were deep'* (Ollie. Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 2). The key to the popularity of Cage football was its recreational character: '*I play football but not for a team. Just mess abart [about] and put t'nets up.*'

(Regan. Focus Group: Year 11 Participants 2)

Overall, therefore, it was evident that all male pupils at ACS took part in very similar activities outside of school that were made up almost entirely of 'hanging out', video gaming, and class-related 'sporting' activities (mainly football) played recreationally with friends and peers.

The PE teachers were acutely aware that the lads' relatively narrow leisure lives circumscribed their attitudes towards school PE and their strong preference for football above all other activity options:

> *Yes, it's clear from when they arrive what they are interested in and what they get up to outside of school and it runs through the school for the lads. To be honest it was one of the first things that I became aware of once I started working here. I supposed I did know that they [lads at ACS] were likely to prefer football but had never really thought about it properly. There's not much else they seem to do out of school to be honest.*
> (Paul, PE teacher: Guided Conversation).

In this regard, the lads' deeply entrenched leisure habits and predispositions were seen by the PE staff as almost impossible to challenge, let alone change, within PE lessons:

> *This (what they do outside of school) makes it (PE) a bit of a nightmare for us as PE staff. If they've grown up playing football with their mates and knocking about on the street, they are not likely to want to learn how to play hockey or cricket are they?*
> (Paul: Staff Focus Group).

When questioned on their strong preference for recreational football outside of school, it was evident that lads from both groups were happy to acknowledge their subsequent desire to play football in PE. For the Participant group specifically, although they acknowledged a willingness to participate in some other activities in PE, football was their clear preference:

> Alex:*Ar dunt [I don't] mind badminton and basketball, especially in t'winter when its cold*
> *Andy:Yeah it's alreyt [alright], especially if we can just play games in t'lessons*
> *Interviewer: But it if was up to you what you could play this term in PE, what would it be?*
> *Andy: Football*
> *Harry: Yeah, football*
> *Alex: Definitely, football*
> (Focus Group: Year 11 Participants 1)

For the Problematic group, however, the preference for football was much stronger, leading to almost all other activity options being dismissed:

> *Wayne: Ar dunt [I don't] see point in playing owt [anything] else in PE. I'm crap at most things and dun [don't]t really like owt [anything] else … .What's point in mekking [making] us play stuff like tennis and that when we could just play football*
> *Jay: Yeah, everybody 'ere [here] loves football. It's what we do*
> *Lee: Football in PE is mint [good], in't it … dunt [don't] see point doing owt [anything] else*
> (Focus Group: Year 10 Problematics 1*)*

Active responses of problematics to content and delivery of PE lessons

Responses from PE staff suggested that this overwhelming preference for football in PE among the Problematics was not just linked to their narrow leisure profiles, but also strongly influenced by the opportunity that football provided for them to experience some 'success' at school. Something that, in most cases for them, was rare:

I can see why these types of lads want to play football in PE, the Wayne's of this world for example. They don't have much success around school as you can imagine and coming here and playing football gives them the chance to do something that they are good at and they actually enjoy.
(Rich: Guided Conversation)

As an extension to this, PE staff highlighted the Problematic lads' strong reluctance to take part in other activities, and suggested that this was often linked to their valuing of their status around school and the subsequent possibility of 'losing face' if seen to fail in PE:

Paul: You can tell that for this lot, their status around school is really important to them. They know that they have certain reputations around school and around Ayefield in some cases … it influences so much around school and in lessons,
Interviewer: And what impact does this have on PE?
Paul:You've seen it yourself … we give them options in Year 10 and Year 11 football is the only thing that these lads will do.
(Paul: Staff Focus Group)

Indeed, when asked, the Participants spoke of the ways in which the Problematic lads had purposively disrupted KS3 (aged 11-14) PE lessons that did not involve football and that PE staff had often been forced to adapt the content of the PE curriculum to match the apparent 'demands' of the pupils:

Oliver: And then when they [Problemtics] do actually get in to table tennis because they're upset about not doing football, they wouldn't tek [take] it seriously and just mess abart [about] with the table tennis equipment.
…
Daniel: It's like if they cunt [couldn't] have fun or owt [anything] no one could.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 1)

Also:

Ryan: Yeah, they kind of kicked off [misbehaved] [in Year 8] if they didn't get to play football.
Oliver: If they didn't get to play football they weren't happy.
…
Ryan: It were like, you got into t'changing rooms and in year 7,8 and 9 the teachers asked you 'what do you want to do today' and before any of us could really say 'owt [anything] they were in the teachers face [confrontational] saying football and they dint [didn't] want to upset them by saying no so it was just 'right we're playing football' even when some people dint [didn't] really wanna [want to].
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 1)

For the PE staff more specifically, there was also acknowledgment that the Problematic pupils had influenced them in the way that they chose to structure the curriculum and deliver PE lessons during Key Stage 3:

I suppose it is the easy option sometimes, yes. It used to happen a lot more in the old building when we didn't have all these facilities. At certain times and with certain groups, letting them play football in the sports hall was so much easier.
(Paul: Staff focus group)

On reflection, the Participants also stated that they could see why this had been the PE teacher's response to the demands placed on them by the Problematics.

John: I think they [PE teachers] did it because if they said 'no' to them [Problematics] and they start arguing then that wastes our time, so I think the teachers just said 'ok' so that it saved our time.
Finlay: Yeah, they kind of just run along with it so they dint [didn't] have to put up with them which then wastes our time.
Ollie: More attention was shown to people who actually kicked off [caused trouble] than those that actually don't, and just want to do it [PE].
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 2)

As an extension to this, the Participant group were also implicitly sympathetic towards the PE teachers' plight:

Finley: Let's be honest, I think the PE teachers must be scared at times.
Ollie: I think they are.
Finley: It's fear of them kicking off at them [arguing] and they're not being able to control it.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 2)

By KS4 (aged 14-16), it was evident the strong desire of the Problematic lads to play football in their core PE lessons had increased significantly. Similarly, the response of the Problematics to not being offered the option of playing football in PE increased in severity. The Participant lads described the response of many of the Problematics when activity options were offered at the start of each half term in Key Stage 4:

Interviewer: So what did they do when football wasn't an option?
Alex: They (Problematic lads) just didn't turn up.
…
Andy: [They] Just walk round school and not turn up.
Harry: Just go on t'field and 'wag' it [play truant].
(Focus Group: Year 11 Participant 1)

Similarly, a group of Year 10 pupils highlighted a similar response:

Finley: Some lads are like why can't we do football? Reyt up wit' lip [cheeky comments] like we wanna do it.
…
Jacob: They'd (the Problematics) walk off.
Ollie: They'd 'kick off' [cause trouble] basically.
…
Jacob: Yeah, basically if they don't like something or they don't get their own way they just walk off.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 2)

The Problematic youngsters, themselves, confirmed this portrayal of the ways in which they negotiated the content and delivery of PE lessons:

Troy: I'd just sit down on t'floor and not do it [if not doing football].
Dane: I'd probably just sit and watch.
…
Dane: I probably would but probably not take part in it. I'd just sit and watch.
(Focus Group: Year 11 Problematics 1)

The Year 10 Problematic lads suggested that they tended to respond in a similar way:

Wayne: I just jump over t'gate or go through t'metal fence [if they find out they are not doing football].
Kaden: Or go through t'gap [forced hole in the perimeter fence].
(Focus Group: Year 10 Problematics 1)

Finally, this attitude and type of behaviour was also acknowledged by the PE staff: In response to a question enquiring about the content of the upcoming Y11 PE lesson involving the Problematics, PE teacher Rich commented: '*To be honest mate, they'll do whatever they decide they want to do.*'

This issue was further supported by responses to similar questions in the staff focus group:

Rich: Those particular lads (Problematics) … they are the main concern. They are the ones who will literally walk out of the changing room and truant or swear and say I'm not doing it or just sit there (if they can't play football). And removing them is just pointless isn't it because half the time that's what they want you to do. Going back to those Year 10s, we've done football virtually every lesson, all year … it's the only thing they want to do, and they make the decision some of the time as to whether they're going to do the lesson or not.

As Paul indicated in the staff focus group, the stark reality appeared to be that: *There is a group of lads that if football wasn't an option … we wouldn't be able to teach them practical.* As a result of this, one of the 'options' in KS4 PE lessons was consistently outdoor football. This was invariably 'chosen' by the Problematic lads each half term resulting in the vast majority of these pupils playing football in PE for the entirety of the school the year.

Further to this, the Problematic lads also largely dictated the structure and delivery of these PE lessons. Not only was it clear that the Problematic lads preferred large-scale, competitive games:

> *Lee: It's (the games of football) competitive.*
> …
> *Kaden: For the people who like football and know how to play it it's reyt [really] competitive.*
> …
> *Zak: Oh Yeah … it's better to win than to lose in't [isn't] it.*
> (Focus Group: Year 10 Problematics 1)

But also, covert and overt lesson observations highlighted the fact that the direct involvement of PE staff was minimal ('*They generally just go down and sort themselves out*' Phil – guided conversation) and the expectations on the lads linked to swearing and kit were especially low. In relation to swearing the teachers commented thus:

> *Phil: Swearing, I think that we let a lot of swearing go. I mean it's the low-level disruption isn't it.*
> …
> *Rich: You hear it, or I hear it (the swearing) when we're out there, particularly football again and I'll speak to lads about it, but I'm also realistic in that when I play football I probably swear.*
> (Staff Focus Group)

With regards to PE kit, the teachers also viewed changing as being largely unrealistic:

> *Rich: It's a difficult one, the kit situation, to be honest. I don't know whether letting them do it in their uniform means that they just stop bringing their kit, but at least they're doing something and they're generally out of trouble. If we stopped them doing it what would they be doing? Probably just causing trouble and disrupting things.*
> (Staff Focus Group)

When asked, this overall outcome was not necessarily something that sat comfortably with the PE staff, but was viewed as an almost inevitable consequence of the situation that they found themselves in:

> *You've seen how they respond when they can't play football. I know it's not ideal but what's the other option? We've got these lads for a 90-minute lesson. We can either try to get them doing some tennis or basketball, or we can let them play football where they'll sort themselves out, all get involved, and generally run up and down for the full lesson. It's just so much easier.*
> (Alex: Guided Conversation)

Ultimately, therefore, the game of football, as well as the manner in which the Problematic lads played it in PE, provided them with an ideal opportunity to experience some 'success' within the school environment in a manner that closely matched what they viewed as being a 'proper' working-class lad. Away from their peers and free from the direct control of the PE staff, these highly physical, aggressive, and competitive games of football provided an ideal platform on which to generate, retain, and maintain their masculinity and status around school.

Participants

Just as consistent as the Problematics' 'choice' of football in KS4 PE lessons, was the Participants' selection of the other activity 'option' available. Invariably, this would be an indoor activity such as table tennis, badminton, or basketball and in most cases it seemed that these pupils largely enjoyed participating in these 'alternative' options. They played amicably within friendship groups, did not cause any behaviour issues prior to, or during lessons, and generally changed in to correct kit in order to participate. All lessons invariably involved the playing of full versions of the games (e.g. badminton tournaments) and could generally be described as having a positive and amicable working atmosphere. However, when questioned during observations, this response from a Year 11 Participant largely typified their seemingly less than positive attitude to such lessons:

Interviewer: Do you like badminton then?
Harry: Not really but at least I'm inside and doin' summat [something] with mi [my] mates.

Indeed, when probed further, it was clear that these pupils had only selected the non-football option in order to be away from the more physical, aggressive, confrontational peers in their lesson, rather than due to a desire and/or ability to participate in the alternative option:

I hate football with that lot. I wunt [wouldn't] have minded a game of football but it's always too rough with them (Problematic lads) and they shout at us all t'time … I've never really played table tennis, but it's inside, I'm with my mates and it's t' last lesson of t' day [last lesson of the day].
(Guided Conversation: Anthony – Year 10 Participants 1)

also:

Anthony: I prefer it like it is nar [now] (PE) because … if someone that you dunt [don't] like goes in the other group you can choose a different one to them.
…
Interviewer: It's interesting, so would it be fair to say … that sometimes you would choose the other sport on offer, just because of the people that are doing football.
Lads: Yeah.
Ryan: Yeah, a lot of people do that. That's why a lot of people do basketball in't it. Because of all the Chav's who play football they dunt [don't] want to, because if they do summat [something] wrong they're like 'you dick' and all stuff like that.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 1)

Ironically, it was evident that the Participants would also have liked to play more football in KS4 PE but were less inclined to force the issue:

Interviewer: So are you suggesting that you'd also like to play football in PE?
John: If we could do it between us yeah, but there not gunna [going to] have two football lessons are the'.
(Focus Group: Year 10 Participants 2)

In relation to this, the PE staff not only acknowledged why the Participants made the choices that they did:

We are aware that most of these lads (Participants) would also probably just like a game of football, but they almost automatically just do what the other option is. It's quite sad really, but some of these lads would get eaten alive playing football out here and I think they know it. (Paul: Guided Conversation)

By extension, therefore, by consistently offering an alternative to outdoor football to all lads at the start of each half term, the PE staff took some solace from the fact that there was, at least on the face of it, a relatively broad boys PE curriculum offered at KS4:

If I'm really honest, these lessons provide a perfect contrast to the football lesson going on outside. I know they are not brilliant (badminton) but if people come up or oftsed came in then it looks much better.
(Rich: Guided Conversation).

The aim of this section has been to present the main findings in relation to the data collected and considered with regards to the actions and attitudes of the KS4 male pupils and male PE staff at ACS and how they come to impact on the structure and content of PE at the school. These will now be examined in relation to previous literature.

Discussion

A defining and consistent factor that came to impact on the PE experiences of all the male pupils at ACS was that they participated in a narrow range of sports activities outside of school (Green et al., 2005) made up from the types of activities that have been deemed suitable and appropriate to those lower down the social scale (Dagkas & Stathi, 2007; Engstrom, 2008; Roberts, 2012). More specifically, focus group responses demonstrated that playing in a relaxed and relatively unorganised manner was important to these young, working-class males and much of what they did took place relatively

close to home, in the company of those with similar social backgrounds, and in a predominantly recreational manner (Stuij, 2013). Lads at ACS were not party to the heavy, strategic, and highly structured investment that many middle-class parents have been shown to embark on in order to adequately and effectively 'resource' their children (Evans & Davies, 2010; Wheeler, 2014; Wheeler & Green, 2014). In short, the lads were products of their background when it came to what they did, when, and with whom, outside of school.

Masculinity

It was also evident that an exalted, dominant, and idealised form of hegemonic masculinity existed at ACS that has been shown to be a near constant presence and pressure on all boys (Frosh et al., 2002) – a measure by which the lads at ACS consciously (or even subconsciously) compared themselves (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). As the findings highlight, it was the Problematic lads that were able to consistently demonstrate the type of aggressive, physical and intimidatory characteristics and behaviours linked to this hegemonic masculinity around school and in PE more specifically that are a highly valued and significant feature of working-class communities in the UK. As a result, not only did their 'masculine honour' take precedence over academic ability and achievement, as has been shown to be the case in previous studies (Connell, 2008), but they were also much more able to benefit from greater degrees of influence, power, and status that enabled them to influence the actions of others (including the PE staff) for their own benefit (e.g. demand the playing of football in PE) (Connell, 2008; Swain, 2000).

When linked to PE more specifically, it was football that stood as the key signifier in constructing and reinforcing these hegemonic masculinities due to the fact that 'the game is almost entirely predicated on a level of physicality that 'personifies the acme of masculinity, and communicates ideals of fitness, strength, competition, power, and domination' (Swain, 2000, p. 107). For the Problematic lads in particular, succeeding in the masculine environment of PE, and demonstrating an ability to 'play properly' (Connell, 2008; Frosh et al., 2002) came to define, and even police, what it was to be a 'real male' (Connell, 2000; Lesko, 2000; Swain, 2000). Set against the counter-productive social outcomes of adhering to school rules playing football in PE not only stood as a site for the construction and display of hegemonic masculinities, as has been shown previously (Bramham, 2003; Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001), but a place where these lads could 'be' and behave like 'proper' boys via open displays of strength, aggression, heterosexuality, and toughness (Bramham, 2003; Pringle, 2008; Swain, 2000). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the Problematics were consistently determined to ensure that PE provided them with the opportunity to engage in competitive sport/football by not only refusing to play any sport other than football, but openly engaging in overtly aggressive, masculine, and disruptive behaviour towards their peers and PE staff (Archer et al., 2007; Nolan, 2011) in order to gain and maintain influence, authority, and status among their peers as well as to repress any perceived or actual challenge to their status (Connell, 2008; Swain, 2000).

Impact on peers

In contrast to the outcomes linked to the actions and attitudes of the Problematics in KS4 PE lessons, it was evident that the Participant lads were influenced in a different manner by the social pressures of being a 'real' lad (Connell, 2000). Their responses confirmed the fact that a more significant minority (Problematics) had consistently dominated the masses (Participants) through consistent displays of aggressive behaviours and attitudes in an attempt to reinforce 'already formed gender identities' (Sabo, 1994b, p. 38). In doing so, it was evident that the Problematics had dictated the content and delivery of PE towards 'proper' games of football as part of a conscious attempt to assess whether others were 'up to the job' of being a real boy or not, whilst simultaneously maintaining and reinforcing the social pecking order (Paechter, 2003). In response to this, it was very

much evident that in most cases the Participants were neither able nor willing to compete and/or survive in the public displays of overt physicality and aggression that KS4 football/PE lessons represented. As a result, the Participants either became 'cut off', denigrated, and/or viewed disparagingly by the Problematics as has been consistently shown to be the case for those young males either unable or unwilling to match the strong masculine expectations of the peer group (Hickey, 2008; Hickey & Keddie, 2004; Pringle, 2004, 2005; Skelton, 2001). In short, therefore, the Participants simply chose to remove themselves from the intimidating and unpleasant environment of the KS4 football-based lesson towards the more comfortable, indoor option alongside their like-minded friends and peers, despite it seems, a similar preference for the game of football.

As an outcome of this more varied PE 'diet' in KS4, there was scope for the Participants to extend their sporting repertoires, knowledge, and skills as a result of experiencing activities such as badminton, tennis, basketball, softball, and table tennis. However, in reality, the vast majority of Participants were neither able nor willing to actively participate and improve in the alternative PE activities that they 'chose' in KS4 (i.e. basketball, badminton, table tennis) – strongly preferring the sport of football in the majority of cases, in line with that of their Problematic peers. Therefore, in a similar manner to the Problematics, the Participants were strongly influenced by their narrow, class-related sporting repertoires meaning that the playing of the other 'option' in PE was viewed as a means to an end for the majority of Participants who had very little short – or longer-term interest in the activities they took part in during PE.

Impact of problematic lads' actions on PE staff

As a consequence of this often-extreme behaviour on the part of the Problematic lads, the PE staff had adapted aspects of both the KS3 and KS4 PE curriculum and the nature of these lessons. In KS4 especially, as was the case in similar studies, the more challenging Problematic pupils (especially those nearing the end of Y11) were consistently provided with a more relevant 'option' (Bramham, 2003). For those at ACS specifically, this meant a dominance of large-scale, competitive football matches in PE in order to minimise the likelihood of disruption, confrontation, and non-participation (Cothran et al., 2009; Green, 2003). For the majority of Participants in each year group, whilst an alternative activity was consistently offered at the start of each half term, this was largely influenced by a desire for the PE staff to demonstrate some breadth within the curriculum offer and seemingly meet their professional expectations and obligations rather than to reflect a desire to expand the Participants sporting interests/repertoires or respond to the lads' activity preferences. Ultimately, therefore, whilst PE staff were aware of the Participants strong desire to play football, the PE teachers at ACS used their status and power over them to 'actively encourage' the Participants to take part in an alternative activity – an outcome that simply was not possible with the Problematics. This outcome each half term, stood to give their PE curriculum a breadth and depth that simply would not have existed with all lads playing football meaning that the formal expectations of SLT and Ofsted, as well as their own professional expectations were appeased to some degree.

Conclusion

An influential theme running throughout the findings was the narrow, class-related sporting repertoires of pupils arriving at ACS that was made up from several 'suitable' activities and almost completely dominated by on-line video gaming and recreational football. In relation to PE specifically, football was by far the most popular activity. Due to the fact that the game of football was so closely matched to expectations linked to being a 'proper', working-class male and such a socially significant feature of these pupils' lives.

This very strong preference for football often led to low-level disruption in lessons when other activities were delivered in KS3 – an outcome that was largely instigated and perpetuated by the

more dominant and influential minority of Problematic lads in each group. Subsequently, the KS3 curriculum had been dominated by football in the past and lessons in alternative activities had been largely game-based in structure and delivery. As pupils progressed into KS4, the Problematics were increasingly willing and able to directly influence both the content and nature of their PE lessons (football) due to the fact that these pupils in particular saw football as a means of asserting and developing their masculinity and status among the peer group. The PE staff were subsequently constrained towards acquiescing towards the demands imposed on them since such lessons were likely to ensure high levels of engagement and participation whilst minimising disruptive and off-task behaviour – even if rules related to kit and swearing were slightly 'relaxed'. The far less dominant Participants were generally either unable or unwilling to compete for the status that resulted from playing football in this highly competitive and physical manner and so consistently 'selected' the alternative 'option' presented to them in core PE lessons that we largely recreational in nature in order to remain indoors among like-minded friends and peers. This outcome was largely influenced by the fact that these pupils had seemingly been unable to develop sufficient skills and knowledge across the PE lessons lower down school due to the nature of their KS3 PE experiences.

Overall, the content and delivery of PE at this 'typical', white, working-class school did indeed appear to be failing to develop the types of sporting repertoires, skills, knowledge, and interest with their pupils in PE that would have had the potential to address the current and longer-term participation anomalies that existed and continue to exist within this particular social class group. The pupils' leisure lifestyles and the influence of traditional working-class traits and expectations (mainly masculinity) led to a strong favouring of football among almost all pupils. However, it was the actions and attitudes of a small, yet significant dominant group of Problematic lads present in all lessons that strongly influenced both the process and outcomes related to PE at ACS. The content and structure of KS3 PE was severely constrained and although this had little impact on their game-based football lessons in KS4, the rest of the year group were left to engage in a range of alternative activities with no ability and/or intention of participating in these outside of school. PE staff – by their own admission in many cases – acknowledged the short and long-term implications for all pupils as a result of the structure and content of PE at ACS. However, it was evident that the PE staff were operating within very difficult circumstances with pupils whose beliefs, abilities, attitudes and actions proved almost impossible to change.

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