

**‘ACTIVITY CHOICE’ AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION  
IN ENGLAND AND WALES**

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## **‘Activity Choice’ and Physical Education in England and Wales**

### **Abstract**

This paper draws on data from a broader study, the central object of which was to explore the place of sport and physical activity in young people’s lives. More particularly, the paper reports the findings of 24 focus groups conducted with 153 15-16-year-olds in north-west England and north-east Wales in order to examine young people’s views towards activity choice in physical education (PE). In this regard, it is suggested that despite their deep-seated preferences for ‘traditional’, games-dominated PE curricula and the constraints imposed upon them from the existence of a National Curriculum for PE and government policy over the past two decades, PE teachers continue to provide young people with a degree of activity choice in the later secondary school years. The 15-16-year-olds in this study considered activity choice to be a very positive feature of their experience of PE at Key Stage 4 and viewed it as a vehicle for greater enjoyment of and engagement with PE. It was also the case that the 15-16-year-olds appeared to attach a great deal of importance to the ways in which the activities provided them with the opportunity to engage in activities within PE that they also do in their leisure-time, and which they are likely to do in the future. At the same time, however, many young people expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as unnecessary and undesirable limitations on the number and range of activities made available to them. Restrictions on choice were particularly felt among girls and those from lower social class backgrounds who were evidently dissatisfied with what they saw as the over-representation of a small number of traditional team sports and activities in PE. It is concluded that if PE teachers and policy-makers want to increase their impact upon young people’s participation in PE

and 'modernize' further the curricula provided for pupils, then they need to appreciate more adequately the significance of the twin processes of democratization and informalization, since both processes help explain young people's growing preference for choice in PE and in other social contexts.

**Key words: activity choice, democratization, informalization, physical education, sport, young people**

## INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on the findings of a broader study examining the place of sport and physical activity in the lives of 15-16-year-olds (Smith, 2006) in order to explore young people's experiences of and views towards 'activity choice' in physical education (PE) in England and Wales. There are several reasons for exploring this particular aspect of PE. First, it has often been presented as an important vehicle for enhancing older-age pupils' engagement with and/or adherence to PE and sport (see, for example, Green, 2003; Scraton, 1992). Second, despite the fact that the constraints of the *National Curriculum for Physical Education* (in existence for almost two decades) might have been expected to reduce PE teachers' scope for including 'activity choice' in the later stages of secondary schooling (where, by convention, it tends to be located), many PE teachers appear to have persisted with the practice of providing pupils with a greater range of sports and physical activities from which to choose in PE at Key Stage 4 (Years 10 to 11) compared to that available during Key Stage 3 (Years 7 to 9) (Bramham 2003; Smith & Parr, 2007). Third, in addressing this largely under-researched dimension of secondary PE, it is hoped that this paper will go some way to addressing Biddle et al.'s (2004, p. 692) concern that more studies of PE 'should take into account both the perceived needs of young people and those expressed by young people themselves' on the grounds that policy and practice are more likely to be effective if they are informed by young people's views.

## **ACTIVITY CHOICE IN SECONDARY SCHOOL PHYSICAL EDUCATION**

The seemingly widespread tendency among PE teachers to incorporate an element of activity choice in the final year of schooling, especially in ‘games’ lessons, appeared to be consigned to history following the introduction of the NCPE in 1992 and the stipulation of particular ‘activity areas’ to be covered at each Key Stage of schooling. It appeared even less likely to remain a feature of PE following the requirement in the revised NCPE of 1995 that the curriculum be more prescriptive than hitherto, with games identified as a core and compulsory feature of PE throughout secondary schooling. Indeed, the expectations of OFSTED that teachers would raise standards of achievement by focusing on a limited number of traditional team games (Green, 2003) appeared to sound the death-knell of activity choice.

This paper presents the findings from a study of 15-16 year-olds’ participation in PE and sport with regard to activity choice. In doing so, it is intended that the paper adds to existing knowledge by exploring, in more detail, how young people in their final year of compulsory schooling view this supposedly important aspect of curricular PE.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The data reported here formed part of a broader study, the object of which was to investigate the place of sport and physical activity in the lives of 15-16-year-olds (Year 11 pupils) attending six secondary schools in north-west England and one secondary school in north-east Wales that were purposively selected to represent the various cities,

new towns and rural locations typical of the two regions (Smith, 2006). Based on the key characteristics of the schools included in the study (see Table 1), the participating young people attended schools whose socio-demographic profile could be described as largely lower-working/working-class (Schools A, D and F), as mainly upper-working/lower-middle class (Schools B and E), and as largely middle-/upper-middle class (Schools C and G). As explained in greater detail elsewhere (Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2007), the study involved a survey and 24 focus groups conducted between February and May 2004 with those who completed the *Young People, Sport and Leisure* (YPSAL) questionnaire and it is upon the findings of these that this paper is based. The Head of Year (HoY) 11 at each of the participating schools was asked to identify and select for participation in the focus groups young people who were, in their opinion, a representative cross-section of Year 11 pupils in their school. More specifically, each HoY and, in some cases, form tutors, was asked to construct at least two single-sex groups (one male, one female) of young people who were already a part of the same pre-existing friendship group according to several criteria, including: academic ability; participation in sport and physical activity in PE; and whether they were taking GCSE PE or not.

Between four and eight 15-16-year-olds participated in 24 single-sex focus groups that consisted 'of the kinds of people with whom the participants normally mix' (Payne & Payne, 2004, p.104); that is, their friends and class-mates. Among other things, single-sex focus groups were conducted because pupils were frequently taught in such groups in PE and tended to be members of largely same-sex friendship groups outside of school. In

that sense, the focus groups were conducted with groups of young people together ‘in situations ... quite normal for them’ (Bryman, 2004, p. 358).

The HoY at each of the schools was asked to select the focus group participants for several reasons. First, because those who completed the YPSAL questionnaire were given a guarantee that their responses would be entirely anonymized, it was impossible to select focus group participants on the basis of their individual survey responses. Second, in the light of what was learned from the pilot study, it became clear to the researchers that it was necessary to provide the teachers with a degree of control over the ways in which the participants were selected. Thus, in attempting to minimize the impact that the focus groups would have upon the day-to-day constraints under which teachers and pupils work, and because the success of the study was contingent upon the willingness of the schools to remain involved in the second phase of the research, the HoY was given some leeway in selecting groups. In other words, s/he was asked to select participants as close as possible to criteria established for him by the researchers in the context of what was logistically feasible for them. Third, since the researcher knew very little about the particular biographies of individual young people as well as the friendship groups to which they belonged, the HoY was better placed to select the focus group participants, many of whom they would have known for several years. Whilst not, in methodological terms, ideal, the resultant sample of participants in the focus groups consisted of young people who were, simultaneously, purposively selected and chosen on the basis of convenience for the schools involved in the study.

Conducting focus groups with 15-16 year-olds in pre-existing friendship groups, for example, allows them to ‘relate each other’s comments to actual incidents in their shared daily lives’ (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 105) and to bring to the surface common experiences of sport, physical activity and leisure that might not otherwise be exposed. Focus groups help to ‘show something of the dynamics of social relationships among group members’ (Arksey and Knight 1999, p. 75). In short, participating in focus groups with friends with whom they are already familiar, allows young people to:

recall common experiences, share half-forgotten memories, or challenge each other on contradictions between what they are *professing* to believe in the group and what they might have said or done outside the group (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 191; original emphasis).

A total of 153 15-16-year-olds (85 males; 68 females) participated in the focus groups, 11 (6 males; 5 females) of whom were from School A, 15 (8 males; 7 females) attended School B and 13 were educated at School C (6 males; 7 females). A further 43 attended School D (27 males; 16 females), 19 (11 males; 8 females) were from School E, 14 (7 males; 7 females) youngsters attended School F, and 38 (20 males; 18 females) were from School G. Consequently, slightly more males than females and pupils who attended schools (Schools A, D and F) that were located in largely lower-working/working-class areas were represented in the sample of the focus group participants.

## **Procedure**

Each focus group lasted for between 30 and 45 minutes, took place in a quiet school classroom or office without the presence of a teacher, and were audio tape-recorded with the permission of the headteacher and the participants themselves. The focus groups were conducted by the lead researcher (who acted as the facilitator in each focus group) and a second investigator (who acted as a scribe and who managed the recording of each focus group). All of the young people were given a verbal guarantee of anonymity by the facilitator that neither they nor the school would be identified, and were told that the audio-tape could be stopped at anytime should they request/desire this for any reason. Consequently, in the remaining sections of this paper pseudonyms are used to denote different young people speaking within each of the reported discussions in the focus groups.

The facilitator began each focus group with a brief, standardized explanation of the nature of the focus group and how it related to the YPSAL questionnaire that they had completed previously. In this regard, the participants were told by the facilitator that the primary aim of the research was to provide them with an opportunity to discuss, in an informal way, their views and experiences of sport and physical activity (including perceptions of activity choice) as well as other aspects of their leisure using their own everyday terms in order to understand the reality of young people's lives from their perspective.

### *Analysis of focus group data*

All of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. This took the form of identifying recurring themes in the data. The main themes of the focus groups and, therefore, of the analysis included young people's perceptions and experiences of activity choice at Key Stages 3 and 4, their preferred styles and tastes of PE and leisure-sport and physical activity, and the gender dimension to activity choice. These categories were amended to incorporate other areas of concern that emerged from the focus groups, such as restrictions on choice, activity choice in relation to self-esteem and the significance of adult-like sporting and leisure lifestyles. In this manner, all of the categories of meaning were subsequently refined and cross-checked to ensure that all of the different kinds of 'units of analysis' (Bryman, 2004, p. 187) were considered as a basis for explaining the data. The core themes evident within the young people's responses are discussed next.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Activity choice in secondary physical education*

Members of all of the focus groups commented upon the benefit, as they saw it, of increased choice of sporting and physical activities in Year 11 (compared to their earlier experiences of PE). The view that increased choice from an increased range of activities tended to lead to greater enjoyment, was illustrated by groups of males at Schools E and C:

Brett: There's a lot more choice now, in Year 11, so you enjoy it more.

Chris: There's a lot of choice and sports to choose from. It's better now.

Dave: There's things like martial arts and stuff that you can do, that's different.

...

Fred: I think we get more choice as we get older because when you're younger they (teachers) tell you what to do and everyone has to do it, but when you get to (Years) 10 and 11 ... you can choose what sports you want to do, what sports you enjoy.  
[School E]

Andy: The choice we get here in PE is good 'cos we get to do loads of different sports in PE, not just the team ones but the individual ones as well, like gym.

Baz: Yeah, it's pretty good now we're in Year 11 – we enjoy it more now 'cos we get the choice of what we're doing, whereas before we had to do what we were told to do.  
[School C]

It was apparent that, as well as being a vehicle for greater enjoyment, choice appeared to be valued by some of the youngsters for its own sake:

Debbie: It makes it more enjoyable then, when you can decide what to do.

Fiona: Because they order you around don't they and they don't give you that much choice in the early years?

Gayle: You want it (PE) so you can be able to enjoy yourself; you want it to be so like *you* have decided. (emphasis in the original)  
[School C]

Some also expressed the view that choice should be viewed as their entitlement or 'right':

Adam: When you get the report (list of activities from which to choose to do in PE) at the end of term there's a long list of activities but we only ever get to do about four of them a year; there's twelve activities on there (the 'report') but we don't get any real choice.

Baz: I think we should be given the option of what we want to do, so if people want to do football then they can go and do that.

Ciaran: [Interrupts] We *should* have a free choice of what to do each lesson (original emphasis).

Danny: Sometimes we get an option, but it's usually just football, basketball or table tennis and sometimes you want to do something different.  
[School A]

Indeed, the young women at School C articulated a view that seemed to be held by many in the focus groups, namely, that choice of activities would be welcomed by pupils much earlier in their secondary school careers:

Chrissy: It would be nice to get a choice in Year 7 like what we do in Year 11.

Debbie: [Interrupts] Like aerobics and gym that we do now.

Emily: Yeah, aerobics; lots of us enjoy that.

[School C]

Notwithstanding, the widespread expressions of satisfaction with activity choice among the 15-16-year-olds, many were keen to point out that the choice they had tended to be restricted to conventional PE activities and team games, in particular, rather than broader sporting diets and even alternative (so-called 'lifestyle') activities:

Elliott: But there is too much football though; you should do other things just as much as well.

Brett: [Interrupts] Like rugby (union).

Chris: We have 16 lessons of football and just four lessons of rugby.

[School E]

Despite the apparent desire for a broader portfolio of activities from which to choose, the above dialogue hints at the likelihood that freedom to choose would not necessarily result in all youngsters opting for less conventional PE activities. It was apparent that for some males freedom to choose would simply mean freedom to choose more football! In this vein, pupils at School C commented positively about the possibility of choosing team-oriented sports alongside individual activities:

Chris: The thing that lets us down here though is that there is no real rugby going on, a lot of us wouldn't mind doing that.

Dave: We get more freedom to do what we want to do now though instead of the teachers telling us what we've got to do. Now if we want to do football we can do football.

Eddie: And if one week we want to do gym then we can do that instead.  
[School C]

It was also evident from the focus groups that whilst choice was welcomed by the 15-16 year olds they were frustrated when the choice they were offered was restricted. In such cases, choice tended to be restricted in two particular ways. First, the youngsters felt that they were often compelled to choose from a limited range of activities. Second, they felt unable to influence what was made available to them:

Daisy: They don't always listen to you or ask you your opinion ... Say if seven of you wanted to do dance or something ... they wouldn't give you the choice to go and do it, they'll make you go and join in with everyone else. It's not fair sometimes.

Eve: It was like last week, they gave us the choice of basketball and rounders and there was twenty-odd of us that wanted to do dance and they said 'No, sorry'.  
[School G]

In this regard, the youngsters appeared keenly aware that there was little or no room for consultation let alone negotiation regarding the portfolio of activities made available to them:

Al: They (teachers) don't ask us what we want to do. They tell us what we've got to do and we choose one of them.

Ben: You do what you are told to do; most people don't get that much choice of what to do.  
[School F]

### ***Activity choice and the leisure lives of young people***

Many groups suggested that PE per se was simply not as enjoyable as leisure-sport and, if PE were to imitate leisure-sport as they experienced it – with greater choice of activities within PE, from an earlier age in a more recreational format than conventional PE lessons

– it would become a good deal more enjoyable and, as a consequence, more attractive to 15-16-year-olds:

Andy: I enjoy the ones (activities) I do outside of PE *a lot more* (original emphasis).

Brett: [Interrupts] Yeah, I do because that's your choice isn't it? You choose what to do.

Craig: You choose to do it so you know you are going to enjoy it; you don't always get that in games.

Danny: Outside of school you can do whatever you want can't you because it's your choice? It's more of a laugh then. At school there's a range (of activities on offer) but it's limited.

Andy: Whereas in school if you can't do it (an activity) and don't like it you still have to do it anyway.

[School D]

A group of males who attended School B expressed similar positive views on the attractiveness of the greater flexibility and informality that accompanied participation in more 'adult-like' activities. In particular, they suggested that:

Ali: We'd prefer to do things like going to the gym in PE now.

Brett: [Interrupts] Yeah, I'd like to do that.

Charlie: And me! ... or more swimming and running.

Del: [Interrupts] Rather than just basketball that we don't like doing.

Ed: Because you're not going to be doing that when you get older; when you get older you're more likely to be going to the gym aren't you?

[School B]

It was apparent that it was not simply the possibility of choosing from a breadth of activities that appealed to the youngsters in the study. The mode of participation in PE in Year 11 was also important. In short, they wanted to take part in their preferred activities in a manner of their choosing. A group of young women from School C provided a clear indication of the more informal context in which they preferred to participate in sport:

Abi: You're away from the teacher out of school so you can do what you want.

Britney: You can do the sports you want to do and who you want to go with outside (of school).

Chrissie: [Interrupts] And you don't have to worry about the teachers telling you what you can and can't do; it's more relaxed with your friends ... so you don't worry so much.

Debbie: If the teacher's there then sometimes you feel that you've got to do *really* well unless they'll make you do it again ... It's better after school because you go with your friends don't you, and do the things you want, even if you're not dead good at them (original emphasis).

[School C]

### ***Activity choice and girls***

There was evidence to suggest that restrictions in choice and mode of delivery was felt more keenly by girls than boys, both absolutely (in terms of the numbers and kinds of different sports and activities made available to them) and relatively (in relation to the boys in their year):

Amy: They (teachers) don't offer us things that the boys usually do – like football – that some girls are interested in. They just think that all we're into are 'girly' sports and that we want to do the same thing all the time.

Bryony: [Interrupts] That's like rugby as well.

Cheryl: They should do more dancing though, not proper dance, but things like dancing and aerobics to music we like.

[School G]

The 15-16 year old young women in the focus groups expressed the view that, compared with their male counterparts, they were provided with a narrower, stereotypical, range of activities (that tended to be offered repetitively throughout the school year) than they wanted:

Angela: You do a lot of netball and you do a lot of hockey but you do hardly anything else. We don't get as much choice in PE at Year 11 as the boys though.

Bernadette: Yeah, we get a bit of choice. We do things like netball, hockey, rounders and a little bit of tennis and badminton.

Charlotte: [Interrupts] And we have done a bit of gym and swimming this year but they've stopped doing that now haven't they?

Debra: Yeah, I enjoyed that and I wished we could do gymnastics as well 'cos I'd like to do that as well.

Emma: I'd do aerobics as well if we could; a lot of the girls would like to do aerobics because we did it once for one week and a lot of them did it and enjoyed it.

Charlotte: The problem in PE is that sometimes we repeat exactly the same things each week. I mean basketball is the only other thing that we have done differently this term. We should do other things as well.

[School E]

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there was no evidence to suggest that boys felt the same way about the activities that girls were allowed to do that they were not!

Many girls appeared to take the view that more girls would take part in and enjoy PE if the curriculum was broadened to include, among other things, sports that are stereotypically associated with males:

Anne: We don't get much of a choice at Year 11, so all that we tend to do is things like badminton and aerobics.

Billie: We should get more choice; more activities to choose from.

Carrie: We never get to do basketball or netball any more do we?

Danielle: [Interrupts] No, we get two choices every term but it's always out of the same thing: aerobics, badminton or dance.

Elle: More girls would be doing PE and sport if they had the choice.

[School F]

Some of the girls expressed the view that being offered mixed-sex provision (in the form of football with the boys) was neither fair nor the best way to extend their opportunities:

Carrie: We have done football a couple of times but most of the time it's with the lads and the thing is when you go with the lads, they just keep the ball to themselves.

[School F]

A particularly interesting feature of the focus groups was the view expressed by several young women that increasing activity choice had the potential to impact positively upon self-esteem and confidence, especially among girls. A group of 15-16-year-olds at School C juxtaposed the lack of choice they experienced in PE in the early secondary school years with, not only the greater degree of choice of activities they were experiencing in Year 11, but also with the enjoyment they were now deriving from PE. They highlighted the manner in which choice might enable them, as young women, to avoid the kinds of activities that might undermine their self-confidence, sensitive as they were to the views of other people, and to choose activities that might help enhance their self-perceptions:

Amy: I remember when we used to do cross-country or the bleep-test in Year 7 ... if everyone knew that they were going to have to do that a lot of people would find ways of not doing it ... because they were worried about what people would think if you came last – as if you were being lazy – and the criticism you could get for it.

Belinda: With things like tennis and badminton, that we do now, people aren't as bothered but when it comes down to personal fitness – like in cross-country – a lot of people are worried about what people think of them.

[School C]

Ella: I think that when you get to our Year (11) you start getting more conscious about what you look like and instead of doing sports you want to go to the gym in PE more than things like hockey and netball. In the gym you know what muscles you're working and you can see what calories you've worked off; that way you know how well you've done.

[School D]

### ***Activity choice and social class***

Although the young people in this study strongly supported the provision of a greater choice of activities as part of curricular PE during the later secondary school years, in practice the opportunity for choice appeared to vary considerably, not only between

males and females but between schools in different regions. More specifically, it appeared that those schools located in largely lower-working/working-class neighbourhoods offered less choice of activities for their 15- and 16-year-olds. That activity choice was context-dependent in this way was brought out in a focus group conducted at School F in which one group of males expressed their dissatisfaction with the rather limited degree of activity choice available to them thus:

Carl: We mainly do footy don't we?

Dean: [Interrupts] It's usually five-a-side.

Eddie: [Interrupts] We should do fitness courses like they do in the army.

Frank: Yeah, gym and stuff like that.

Graeme: I'd make a wider range of stuff available for us to do.

Carl: Like paintballing.

Ben: [Interrupts] They're always sticking to the *same* things, basketball and badminton, things like that (original emphasis).

Al: Yeah, we only get a few choices of sports when we're here and it's annoying. You want to do other things too, not just footy.

[School F]

The lack of activity choice available to females compared to males was also characteristic of schools located in more deprived areas:

Amy: Although we can do some sports that we like, we should have even more of a *choice* of what we want to do (original emphasis).

Billie: Yeah, it can be dead boring just doing dance, trampolining and badminton.

Coleen: [Interrupts] We should do fitness and gym, stuff like that, as well.

Donna: And swimming and football.

Billie: We've done fitness sometimes but not all the time.

Esme: It's mainly the boys isn't it who get to do it? Only a few of the girls get to do it.

Amy: [Interrupts] The lads get to do loads of *different* kinds of things (original emphasis) don't they?

Billie: Yeah, they do tennis and things like that don't they? We don't get as much to do.

Coleen: Yeah, but we've done dance; that was good.

Donna: Lots of us enjoy dance don't we?

Esme: We dance to music that we like, pop music and stuff like that what is out now. We do get to choose that.  
[School A]

Similar views were also expressed by a group of young women who attended another school (School D) located in a lower-/working-class area:

Andrea: The lads do stuff the girls don't. We don't get as much choice in PE.

Billy: We do a lot of netball and hockey but not much else.

Caz: We don't get that much choice in Year 11 do we?

Delia: We do netball, hockey, rounders and a little bit of tennis and badminton. It never really changes that much from Year 7.

Caz: We have done gym and swimming as well, stuff like that, but not that much in Year 10 and 11.

[School D]

## **DISCUSSION**

The 15-16-year-olds in this study considered activity choice to be a very positive feature of Year 11 PE and viewed it as a vehicle for greater enjoyment of as well as engagement with PE. At the same time, however, many expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as unnecessary and undesirable limitations on the number and, more particularly, the kinds and the range of activities made available to them as well as the method of delivery. In the words of the famous sociological dictum, they saw themselves as being free to choose but not in conditions of their own choosing. Activity choice was, in other words, tantamount to 'Hobson's choice' inasmuch as it tended to involve choice from a range of conventional PE activities (and especially games) with little or no room for consultation or negotiation.

The 15-16 year olds evidently wanted choice from many different activities. However, they did not appear preoccupied with their 'right to choose' per se, as important as that was to them. They simply appeared keen to be able to do the sports and activities they wanted. This would not, of itself, necessitate activity choice. It could, after all, be resolved by the provision in Year 11 PE of activities more in keeping with young people's preferences. Nevertheless, there are grounds for thinking that even if the PE curriculum as they experience it were to be more in keeping with their sporting tastes and preferences, they would still want the right to choose, not least because choosing is an expression of their increasing individualization and has other potential benefits, such as maintaining friendship groups (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Roberts, 1996a; Smith, 2006).

Restrictions on choice appeared to be felt more keenly among the girls in the study. The comments from many of the female 15-16-year-olds chimed with the findings from other studies in which young women were evidently dissatisfied with what they saw as the over-representation of a small number of traditional team sports and activities in PE (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001; MacPhail et al., 2003). As far as the young women were concerned, where it involved a relatively wide range of sports and physical activities – and allowed those that wished to, to choose non-competitive, individualized activities – increased activity choice was perceived as impacting positively upon their self-esteem and confidence. The fact that some girls highlighted the manner in which choice might enable them to avoid the kinds of activities that might undermine their self-confidence, points up the potential for PE to serve as a positive reinforcer of personal development. It

may be the case that where schools fail to offer young women a broader range of activities than the conventional PE diet, they are missing an opportunity not only to increase participation rates among young women but also to enhance their self-esteem.

Friendship is particularly important to girls and is equally likely to facilitate or hamper their engagement with PE (Hills, 2007; Smith, 2006). In Hills's (2007, p. 350-51) recent study, 'the chance to participate in activities with friends ... provided a source of enjoyment for many girls as well as protection against the emotional costs of physical education'. In this regard, activity choice enables girls to keep their individual and group friendships intact and this, alone, may have a substantial impact upon participation in PE.

Restrictions on activity choice appeared a particular feature of schools in working-class neighbourhoods where one might have expected PE departments to have increased the range of activities on offer in order to appeal to older and potentially more reluctant pupils; those at School E, for example, talked of 'loads of choice' while those at School A claimed that they 'don't get any real choice'. In this regard, the gendered experiences which young people reported when describing the degree of activity choice available to them in PE was also heavily interdependent with, and constrained by, the social class locations of the schools which they attended (Green, 2003).

The young people in the study evidently preferred PE when the format became more leisure-like in the sense that they were given greater scope to choose what they wanted to do, with whom they liked, in a manner they preferred (Bramham, 2003; Flintoff &

Scraton, 2001; Roberts, 1996a; Smith & Parr, 2007). In this regard, the 15-16-year-olds appeared to attach a great deal of importance to the ways in which the activities provided them with 'the opportunity to engage in the same or similar activities to those older than themselves' (Jeffs & Smith, 1998, p. 52). Young people, it seems, want to experience activities within PE that they enjoy in their leisure-time and anticipate participating in when they are older. It was, therefore, unsurprising to find that many of the youngsters (and girls, in particular) appeared keen to avoid highly-structured, teacher-organized, sports activities and favoured 'adult-like' sports and physical activities (for example, 'going to the gym' and aerobics) undertaken in contexts where teachers were likely to treat them more like young adults. In this vein, the young people in the study tended to speak positively about opportunities to choose activities associated with the transition to adulthood and 'growing up' more generally. In short, it seemed that the provision of more individualized, adult-like activities alongside other more conventional team sports in the later secondary years and a corresponding reduction in adult (teacher) control over their experiences of PE was important to many young people's desire for increased autonomy and control over their lives more broadly (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Smith & Parr, 2007).

The general preference among the youngsters in the study for more informal, recreational and adult-like forms of sport and modes of participation is consistent with the changing sporting and leisure preferences associated with youth's new condition in recent decades (Roberts, 1996a). In this regard, it was interesting to note that the young people in the study took the view that their teachers did not really understand their sporting

preferences. While they have evidently changed over time (Roberts, 1996b), PE teachers' perceptions of youth (sports) cultures may remain a mixture of myth and reality. Indeed, while PE teachers may in a very practical sense be aware of the need to adapt to the changing demands of teaching young people in the twenty-first century, they may not, however, fully appreciate the significance for PE of the twin processes of democratization and informalization, both of which help explain young people's growing preference for choice in PE and in other social contexts.

### **Democratization, informalization and activity choice**

Since the second half of the twentieth century, in particular, social life has been increasingly characterized by the '*democratization* of relations between adults and children and a decline in inequality between them' alongside 'a more general *informalization* of relations between adults and children' (van Krieken, 1998, p. 156; emphases in the original). The reduction in the power differentials and social distance between groups and between young people and adults in particular (Elias, 2000; Kilminster, 1998; Wouters, 1977, 1986, 1987) has found expression in 'less formal regulation of the spoken and written language, clothing, music, dancing and hair styles' (Kilminster, 1998, p. 151). The diminishing social distance between adults and younger people is expressed not only at the relatively superficial level of more frequent use of Christian names and informal language (Wouters, 2007) but at a more profound level in more frequent occurrences of negotiation rather than prohibition (Kilminster, 1998; Wouters, 1977, 1986, 1987).

The data from our study suggest that the tendency for teachers to provide young people for whom they were responsible with a greater degree of activity choice (alongside ‘acceptable forms of informality’ [Kilminster, 1998, p. 152] in the mode of delivery of activity choice) might be seen to represent a democratization of PE experiences (among older pupils at least) and, at the same time, an expression of the reduction in the power differentials and social distance between adults and younger people.

Indeed, the growing dependence of teachers upon the expectations and ‘demands’ of their pupils (Green, 2003) was manifest in this study in the ways in which 15-16-year-olds showed some signs of expressing their ability – or, as they saw it, their ‘right’ – to ‘have their say’ and, to some extent, purposefully shun more formal, adult-led activities in favour of those that had adult-like features in school (such as gym) where they could. The ways in which the youngsters spoke about PE in Year 11 suggested that they viewed activity choice as indicative of a different, more appropriate, relationship between themselves, as young adults, and their teachers. And with this expectation in mind, they expected to be consulted a good deal more than they tended to be.

While young people are dependent upon teachers for the content and style of the sporting experiences they receive in the guise of PE, the latter are also dependent upon the former in a variety of ways: not least amongst which is the willingness or otherwise of young people to take part at all in PE and display appropriate and manageable behaviour (Green, 2003). In the present study, the ways in which the dynamic power balances characteristic of the relations between young people and the teachers tilts towards young people as they

approach the later years of secondary school, was expressed particularly clearly in the provision of a greater degree of activity choice at Key Stage 4. Notwithstanding the tendency for PE teachers as a whole to provide pupils with little or no activity choice at Key Stage 3, as young people approach the end of compulsory schooling teachers become increasingly constrained to give greater consideration than formerly to young people's changing sporting and lifestyle preferences.

It should be noted, however, that despite the prevalence of 'activity choice' the power differentials between young people and the teachers remain tilted in favour of the latter, albeit not in any absolute sense. That was clearly reflected by the ways in which what teachers actually offered as activity choice (for example, the provision of tennis, badminton, football, netball and aerobics) was, in many respects, a supplementation and extension of the traditional sport- and team-game-oriented PE curriculum that characterized pupils' experiences of PE at Key Stage 3 (Green, 2003). It was, in effect, a loosening up of the portfolio of activities but largely on the teachers' terms and was structured according to social class and gender in particular. For example, in schools located in relatively deprived social areas, and for girls especially, the range of sports the 15-16 year-olds were involved with in curricular PE was narrower and concentrated around particular (usually team-) games (especially football) for working-class boys and recreational types of activities for girls.

It is important to note that the unintended consequences of restricting activity choice to a more conventional diet of PE activities may result in 'costs' that outweigh the potential

benefits for young people's participation in and experiences of the subject. 'Options' that result in girls and boys playing sports together in mixed-sex groupings runs the very real risk that PE will be a context in which traditional and dominant patterns of gendered experiences will be generated and sustained further. More particular, it holds out the possibility that some males will, by virtue of their greater power chances and greater ability to use physical power, strength, aggression and competitiveness, constrain the involvement of other males and many females in PE and other sporting contexts (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Skille & Waddington, 2006; Wright, 1999). Traditional gender inequalities in PE divisions along gender lines are almost always retained in games where many boys have a tendency to discriminate against other boys and girls and several aspects of those situations where, as a consequence, the latter tend either to 'give up' or acquiesce (Skille & Waddington, 2006).

## **CONCLUSION**

When placed alongside other studies (see, for example, Bramham, 2003; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Green, 2003; Smith, 2006; Smith & Parr, 2007), our data suggest that, despite their deep-seated preferences for 'traditional', games-dominated PE curricula and the constraints in a similar direction of government policy over the last two decades, many PE teachers continue to provide young people with a degree of activity choice. In the later secondary school years in particular, PE lessons (and not only those that ostensibly involve 'activity choice') both in terms of their structure (organization, teaching styles, and teacher-pupil relations) and content are characterized by varying degrees of formality and informality, and it was when the balance between these two

poles tilted in favour of the latter that the 15-16-year-olds in this study appeared to derive greater satisfaction from lessons. Simultaneously, however, it also appeared that teachers have, in some respects, continued to work against the grain of developments in young people's preferred sporting and leisure styles and preferences. Thus, if it is the intention of PE teachers and policy-makers to increase their impact upon young people's participation in PE (and, as a corollary, their adherence to sport and physical activity into their adult lives) then it would seem desirable, not to say necessary, that they recognize the significance of processes of democratization and, more specifically, informalization; in other words, that they recognize the extent to which relations between adults and younger people have become increasingly characterized by negotiation rather than mere prohibition and constraint.

It might with equal validity be noted that if it is beheld on PE teachers 'to "flow with the flow" rather than try to "buck the trends" of patterns of sports participation' (Coalter, 1999, p. 24) among young people, then increasing young people's involvement in choosing activities through periods of consultation and reflection with them would appear to be an important prerequisite in doing so. Moreover, should policy-makers and teachers employ strategies that focus on making Key Stage 4 PE, in particular, a context in which young people are able to participate more recreationally and in a more leisure-oriented manner with friends, then such policies are more likely to 'work with the grain of young people's predispositions and interests, rather than work against them' (Feinstein et al., 2006, p. 324). While policy-makers may be sceptical about the value of the relatively unstructured ways in which 15-16 year olds participate in leisure-sport and physical

activity, promoting more individualized lifestyle activities alongside team sports that can be played more informally or in modified ways (for example, 5-a-side or kick-about football) in PE would appear – on the basis of the evidence outlined here – to be one of the most effective ways of promoting participation and, if young people are to be believed, it will reinforce their involvement in sport. Furthermore, not only would such strategies be more consistent with actual trends in youth sport and physical activity participation, they would match more closely young people’s preferred sport and leisure styles and preferences because they would promote activities that can be done individually, or by small groups, at times of their own choosing, and which allow them to participate with friends (Feinstein et al., 2006; Roberts, 1996a, 1996b; Smith, 2006). The provision of a wider range of activities and the facilitation of activity choice, we would argue, is a strategy that is more likely to flow with, rather than against, developments in contemporary youth lifestyles and holds out the promise of contributing towards the goal of increased participation in PE among older pupils, if that is, indeed, a premise on which justifications for the provision of activity choice in PE is based.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Free school meals are offered to children of families who are in receipt of Income Support or Income Based Job Seekers Allowance, and to those of families who are in receipt of Child Tax Credit only, but who are not entitled to Working Tax Credit, and whose annual income does not exceed £13,910. The IMD 2004 score is a Super Output Area (SOA) level measure of multiple deprivation that relates to income deprivation, employment deprivation, health deprivation and disability, education, skills and training

deprivation, barriers to housing and services, living environment deprivation and crime. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is a formal public examination available to young people in the final two years of secondary schooling in England and Wales.

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**Table 1 Key characteristics of the participating schools<sup>1</sup>**

School	Age of pupils	Specialist Status	Male focus group participants (n)	Female focus group participants (n)	5A*-C GCSEs (%) <sup>5</sup>	Pupils taking GCSE PE (%)	Religious affiliation	Type of governance	Pupils Eligible for Free School Meals (%) <sup>6</sup>	Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Score <sup>7</sup>
A	11-16	None <sup>1</sup>	6	5	27	22.5	Non-denomination	Community	41.9	39.64
B	11-18	TC <sup>2</sup>	8	7	55	19.2	Non-denomination	Community	19.4	25.32
C	11-18	MCB&E <sup>3</sup>	6	7	70	20.2	Non-denomination	Community	4.3	8.65
D	11-16	None	27	16	15	13.7	Non-denomination	Community	39.7	44.53
E	11-18	None	11	8	66	27.2	Non-denomination	Community	7.4	12.2
F	11-18	SSC <sup>4</sup>	7	7	29	89.3	Catholic	Voluntary	31.0	44.56
G	11-18	SSC	20	18	70	13.4	Non-denomination	Community	6.3	5.78

All schools are state-funded, mixed-sex and comprehensive; <sup>1</sup> At the time that the study was conducted, this school was in the process of applying for Specialist Sports College status. The school has since been granted such status; <sup>2</sup> Technology College; <sup>3</sup> Mathematics, Computing, Business and Enterprise College; <sup>4</sup> Specialist Sports College; <sup>5</sup> Based on the results for academic year 2003/2004; <sup>6</sup> Based on the total number of pupils on roll for academic year 2003/2004; and <sup>7</sup> Based on 2004 IMD Scores for England (ODPM, 2006), with the exception of School E, which is based on Rank of IMD for Wales (National Assembly for Wales, 2006).