

**Reproduction in physical education, society and culture: the physical education curriculum
and stratification of social class in England**

Stuart Whigham (corresponding author)

Department of Sport, Health Science and Social Work, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences,
Oxford Brookes University

swhigham@brookes.ac.uk

Michael Hobson

School of Sport, Health and Applied Science, St Mary's University, Twickenham

michael.hobson@stmarys.ac.uk

John Batten

Department of Sport, Exercise and Health, Faculty of Business, Law and Sport, University of
Winchester

john.batten@winchester.ac.uk

Adam J White

Department of Sport, Health Science and Social Work, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences,
Oxford Brookes University

adamwhite@brookes.ac.uk

Abstract

In contemporary British society, discussions of social class have become relatively marginalised in comparison to their historically eminent position within the domains of politics, social policy and, the specific focus of the forthcoming discussion, education. However, within the specific field of PE and sport, contemporary academic analyses have continued to highlight various class-based inequalities and evidence of social stratification in relation to these areas of education and society (Evans, 2014; Evans & Bairner, 2013; Evans & Davies, 2008, 2014; Horne et al., 2011). In light of this, this study seeks to explore the extent to which social class and socio-economic status are evident within the provision of PE within 288 English state secondary education schools (11-18 years of age), drawing upon the findings of a large-scale survey of the activities and qualifications offered within the PE curriculum at each sample school. Using publicly available data on the comparative provision levels of ‘free school meals’ (henceforth FSM) for pupils as an approximate indicator of the relative levels of socio-economic demographics for each sample school, this study seeks to explore how English state schools with contrasting levels of socio-economic deprivation cater for their students within their PE curriculum. The emergent results revealed some trends in the relative provision levels of certain activities across schools in different FSM quartiles, with activities such as rugby union, rugby league, Gaelic football, tennis, and field hockey demonstrating stratified provision, as was the case for the provision of accredited academic and vocational qualifications in PE and sport. These complex and nuanced findings are then critiqued by drawing upon a Bourdieusian theoretical conceptualisation of social class, utilising a number of theoretical concepts derived from Bourdieu’s past analyses of education and sport to critically reflect upon the validity of his theoretical claims when applied to this specific data set.

Key words: physical education, school sport, curriculum, Bourdieu

Introduction

In contemporary British society, discussions of social class have become relatively marginalised in comparison to their historically eminent position within the domains of politics, social policy and, the specific focus of the forthcoming discussion, education (Evans & Davies, 2006; Savage, Ward & Devine, 2005). Yet, the differential educational outcomes and variations in the quality of education provision associated with contrasting socio-economic demographics remains a pertinent issue for a number of leading academics; with studies emphasising that social class is a key factor with regards to attainment, provision and the lived experiences of pupils within the domain of education (Ingram, 2009, 2011; Reay, 2001, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Whitty, 2001). Therefore, understanding Physical Education (PE) as a socio-economically stratified entity and discussion of the structural inequalities which persist is important, alongside discussions around factors such as sport participation, family structures, and early socialisation (Green, Smith & Roberts, 2005; Pot Verbeek, van der Zwan & van Hilvoorde, 2016; Wheeler & Green, 2018). Indeed, contemporary academic analyses have continued to highlight various class-based inequalities and evidence of social stratification in relation to these areas of education and society (Evans & Bairner, 2013; Evans & Davies, 2008, 2014; Horne, *et al.*, 2011; Wheeler & Green, 2018). However, explicit investigation of PE curriculum remains open to further exploration.

In light of this, the present study seeks to explore the extent to which social class is inculcated within the provision of PE within 288 English state secondary education schools (11-18 years of age), drawing upon the findings of a large-scale survey of the activities and qualifications offered within the PE curriculum at each sample school. Specifically, this article aims to explore the extent to which the specific sport and activities offered within the curriculum of state schools can be deemed to be reflective of the socio-economic demographics and assumed sporting

preferences of their learners, and whether any degree of social stratification in this regard is evident. While studies into social class and education often emphasise the classed functions of the hidden curriculum (eg Willis, 1977; Anyon, 1980), the focus of this study is upon what Dodds (1985) refers to as the 'explicit' (what is included) and 'null' curriculum (what is excluded).

Using publicly available data on the comparative provision levels of 'free school meals' (henceforth FSM) for pupils as an approximate indicator of the relative levels of socio-economic demographics for each sample school, this study seeks to explore how English state schools with contrasting levels of socio-economic deprivation cater for their students within their PE curriculum. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the potential limitations of the conflation of socio-economic measures with the more elusive, constructed lived experiences of social class, the sector-wide practice of using FSM proportions as an approximation of the relative levels of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage within the field of education facilitates an opportunity to critically reflect upon socio-economic stratification with regards to PE provision in state schools (Gorard, 2012; Hobbs & Vignole, 2010; Taylor, 2018). These emergent findings will be then critiqued by drawing upon a Bourdieusian theoretical conceptualisation of social class (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984, 1988), utilising a number of theoretical concepts derived from Bourdieu's past analyses of education and sport to examine the extent PE curricula could represent 'cultural arbitrary' and reproduce class patterns through education structures.

Bourdieu and the 'Field' of Sport

Pierre Bourdieu's approach to society and culture challenged conventional modes of thought and division in intellectual inquiry. He argued for the 'primacy of relations' through understanding

the dialectical relationships between the individual and society to better comprehend society, as it is in these relations where social reality actually lies (Bourdieu, 1990; Wacquant, 1992, 2016). Positing the flexibility of his central concepts of 'habitus', 'capital' and 'field' allowed for the sidestepping of the problems associated with sociological dualisms. The concept of 'habitus' represents a system of embodied, durable dispositions which guide an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions, such as ways of moving, talking, appearance and sporting 'tastes' which appear to be part of the natural order (Bourdieu, 1990). It is viewed as a set of historical relations which are 'deposited' within the body to form the mental and corporeal schemata which allow an individual to act in all situations, whether previously experienced or unforeseen. (Wacquant, 1992, 2016). A crucial factor here is that different social conditions will also produce a different individual habitus, which have greater or lesser efficiency in varying social settings (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Laberge & Kay, 2002). Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus means that social class can be considered as a variety of collective behavioural patterns crystallised by dispositions, tastes and anxieties which are result of a cumulative process whereby individuals are exposed to different socio-economic and spatial relations (Savage, *et al.* 2005; Wacquant, 2013).

Developing upon this position, his notion of 'capital' differs from the solely 'economic' form of capital presented in Marxist social thought, as Bourdieu complements this with other forms of capital such as 'social', 'cultural', 'symbolic' and 'physical' capital (Shilling, 1991). Bourdieusian scholars therefore contend that social class is comprised of various economic, socio-cultural and spatial factors, with a central emphasis on exploring how relations between various groups in society result in social inequality (Roberts, 2010; Wacquant, 2013). Individual and social actions are seen to possess different levels and forms of capital depending upon their appraisal, and those with the highest levels of accrued capital are those who are dominant and

influential in society (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes, 1990; Laberge & Kay, 2002). For example, Horne, Lingard, Weiner and Forbes (2011) highlight the cultural value placed upon playing rugby in Scottish independent schools. In contrast, Bourdieu's concept of 'field' described a structured system which contains objective relations of power with regards to symbolic point. It therefore describes an arena in which historical relations between different positions of power can both compete and conflict with one another (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Wacquant, 1992). Fitzpatrick (2013) demonstrates one such instance in the socio-political context of 'urban' schools in New Zealand. Here, PE is often seen as a subject for working class Pasifika youth to gain qualifications compared to more traditionally 'academic' subjects, through their use of their 'physical capital' as a means to accumulate institutionalised 'cultural capital' in the form of qualifications.

For Bourdieu, sport represented a cultural practice in the same way that attending the theatre or reading literature do, and each practice has varying forms of capital (Laberge & Kay, 2002). It also plays a crucial role in analysing the embodiment of cultural practice through an individual's habitus, due to the practical nature of sport. Sport therefore represented a strategic research site for Bourdieu as it incorporated all of the key aspects of his theoretical perspective (Bourdieu, 1978, 1988). He argued that to study sporting practices effectively they must be considered in relation to the entirety of the sporting field, which is shaped by the distribution of sports in terms of their capital value and the type of body usage the sport demands (Bourdieu, 1988). This position is further perpetuated in Bourdieu's (1978; 1988) view of sporting practices as subject to 'supply' and 'demand' by different social groups. 'Supply' and 'demand' are shaped by the capital value of each sport, and the historical relations which dictate the individual's habitual dispositions depending upon their position in society (Bourdieu, 1978).

Bourdieu's explanation of socialisation revolves around his concept of 'habitus', whereby the development of an individual's habitus affects their perceptions, thoughts and actions. Applied to the context of sport, he argued that the learning of sport as an embodied process in an individual's socialisation shapes their attitudes towards sport throughout their life. Importantly, Bourdieu argued that individuals do not have a natural disposition or traits for specific sports, and that these are actively constructed through the socialisation process. This theoretical position fosters an interesting debate in terms of the role of social class in shaping participation trends in sport, suggesting sport practices act as taste signifiers which can be used to gain or maintain 'distinction' for a certain social group within the social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984). Social class groups were argued to have different perceptions of the relative 'capital' profits and expenditure required to participate in a sport, and that the dominant classes had the power to dictate which activities had the highest symbolic value in society in order to distinguish themselves (Bourdieu, 1978). He also argued that sports could be practiced in different manners by different social classes (Bourdieu, 1988). This was illustrated by different bodily usages in sports, with the working class tendency for an instrumental use of their body as a means to be socially mobile or earn a living, whereas the middle and upper classes tended to view the body as a project where sport can help to improve the body's physical nature and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1978; Clement, 1981; Pociello, 1983), arguments reinforced by contemporary research by Wheeler *et al.* (2019) and Stuij (2015).

Bourdieuian Theory in Physical Education

Given the fact that the British context can be argued to have historically clear notions of class and social hierarchy, the heuristic application of Bourdieusian concepts to the context of English state school PE provision remains pertinent. Past studies of PE and sport have highlighted a prevailing view held by parents regarding the potential for PE and sport in terms of enhancing

their children's future opportunities and achievements, both within the sporting domain and within the broader career aspiration, even if these lie outside of the domain of PE and sport (Evans & Davies, 2010; Lareau, 2002; Stirrup, Sandford & Duncombe, 2015; Stuij, 2015). Indeed, these studies have also argued that this view is particularly salient for parents from middle and upper socio-economic class backgrounds.

To this end, past research has identified that the actions of such parents are more likely to include exposing their children to a broader range of enrichment activities, such as sport, music and arts (Ball, 2004, 2010; Collins, Collins & Butt, 2013; Dagkas & Quarmby, 2012; Evans & Davies, 2010; Lareau, 2002; Stirrup et al., 2015; Vincent & Maxwell, 2015). Numerous scholars (Dagkas & Quarmby, 2012; Stirrup, Evans & Davies, 2016) therefore argue that sport has been used to improve the symbolic and social 'capital' of children by their parents, whilst reinforcing distinctive class 'habitus' patterns with regards to provision of enrichment activities linked to PE and sport for children from middle class and aspirational working class families. Building upon this notion, Wiltshire, Lee and Williams (2017) and O'Flynn (2010) both indicate difference in specific class-based 'habitus' in relation to PE curricula through small-scale qualitative studies, suggesting both differences in what sports are delivered and how these are practised. Furthermore, Aldous (2014, 2016) contends that different levels and types of participation in different sports, and the associated 'capital' generated, can lead to class-differentiated decision making patterns and opportunity. This is reflected in the contrasting fashions in which sport is practiced and consumed by individuals and families from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, acting as a further method of achieving 'distinction' through sporting practices, both within schools and outside (Bourdieu, 1978; Evans, 2014; Laberge & Kay, 2002; Pot *et al.*, 2016; Smith, Haycock & Hulme, 2013). Adding to this literature, the intention of this study was

to explore the activities offered as part of the PE curriculum, as well as the qualifications available to learners, with a particular focus on social class.

Material and Methods

Freedom of Information Act

The Freedom of Information Act, 2000 (FOIA) is a useful vehicle for the collection of data from public institutions for research purposes. In some instances, it is the only method for eliciting information that may be hidden or obscured from the public domain. Schools - including academies and free schools - are publicly funded institutions, meaning like all other public institutions they are required by the FOIA to respond to requests for data. If the organisation holds the information requested, the institution must respond with the data within 20 working days. If an organisation refuses a request, it must explain its reasons for doing so.

With the PE curriculum, including issues of choice, it was deemed an appropriate and necessary strategy for obtaining this research data from organisations. Initially, the research was designed to use a survey with schools being able to voluntarily participate or not. Yet, of the 20 requests sent as part of a pilot study, none (despite numerous follow-ups) yielded a response. As such, the FOIA was deemed a suitable and required method for the collection of this public data.

In terms of the relevant data requested using the FOIA for this study, schools were asked to provide information on: 1) PE and school sport activities offered both inside and outside of curriculum time; and 2) compulsory PE and school sport activities.

Sample

Within England, there were 3,408 state-funded schools that educate pupils aged between 11 years and 16 years in the 2016-2017 academic year (Department for Education, 2017). Of the 48 geographical counties of England, all of the schools from 11 were pooled resulting in a total of 788 eligible schools. These counties represent a split of metropolitan and rural areas from across the country.

INSERT TABLE 1

All of the schools were then randomized using <https://www.random.org/lists/> and the first 400 schools were the contacted sample. Details of the response demographics are presented below. Given the randomisation process, there is no foreseeable reason as to why the sample of schools contacted would not provide a representative sample from the national sample as a whole.

A total of 296 responses were yielded, of which 8 data entries were duplicates. Duplicates were identified by school name and IP address, with each duplication manually checked for similarity and data matching identically on every occasion. As a result, all duplicates were subsequently excluded from the study, leaving a total sample size of 288 schools. This is 8.43% of the number of secondary schools in England and based on pupil numbers (293,414) is 9.1% of secondary school students nationally.

While data for school type is unavailable nationally, our sample was dominated by Academy Converters ($n = 160$, 55.5%), followed by Academy Sponsor-Led ($n = 49$, 17.0%), Community ($n = 32$, 11%), Foundation ($n = 15$, 5.2%), Voluntary Aided ($n = 14$, 4.9%), and other school types ($n = 13$, 4.5%). While all of these schools are state-funded, they have varying levels of flexibility with regards to the PE curriculum; e.g., Academy Converter schools can opt to ignore

the National Curriculum for Physical Education. The mean average school size, based upon the number of pupils at the school, was 1,018 pupils (SD = 461), while the national mean average school size was 946 pupils, showing our sample has slightly larger schools, than average.

Based upon the schools' latest Ofsted rating, 55 schools were classified as 'outstanding' (19%), 168 schools were classified as 'good' (58%), 31 schools were classified as 'requires improvement' (11%), 8 schools were classified as 'inadequate' (3%), with data unavailable for 26 schools (9%). Again, national data for Ofsted categories is unavailable.

Within our analysis, we opted to categorise schools into quartiles using FSM as a proxy measure for socio-economic status. Although the use of FSM has acknowledged limitations regarding its reliability and data returns for all pupils (Hobbs & Vignole, 2010), it remains a relatively useful indicator of socio-economic disadvantage in education given that it "is official and routinely collected for nearly every pupil, has a relatively simple legal binary definition, is strongly related to education and other outcomes and has been collected since 1989" (Gorard, 2012: 1015). Therefore, FSM was viewed as preferable over other measures of socio-economic status such as the Office of National Statistics data on socio-economic classification which focuses on broader geographical regions rather than individual school settings. Although categorisation is not without its limitations, it is also common practice in social science research to group variables and present data in quartiles. The FSM eligibility quartiles were 1 = < 5.725% FSM (lower quartile), 2 = 5.725 – 8.649% FSM (lower-middle quartile), 3 = 8.650 – 14.599% FSM (upper-middle quartile 4 = > 14.599% FSM (upper quartile), with 72 schools in each quartile.

Procedure

Schools were identified using the above random sampling strategy. An initial polite and cordial request for information was then sent to each school, with no mention of the FOIA. Schools were then emailed 20 working days later and were sent the more formal FOIA request. After 20 more working days, further letters and follow-up emails were sent to the schools who had not responded, reminding them of their need to do so. Data was collected between the 9th January 2017 and the 21st July 2017.

The majority of responses were submitted via a pre-populated online survey, to allow for effective data management. This online survey captured information on school demographics (e.g., number of pupils, school type, Ofsted Rating, FSM provision, number of teachers) and the PE curriculum (e.g., a list of all possible activities available to male and female students at different key-stages). Any responses that were submitted by post were entered online upon receipt (total of 16) and the hard copies were disposed of in university confidential waste bins to be destroyed in accordance with university processes. The amount of curriculum time devoted to each activity was not collected and is a limitation of this study. Instead, this study presents a descriptive account of the percentage of schools that offer activities in PE, as well as the qualifications available to learners, according to FSM quartiles.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Faculty Ethics Board prior to the start of this study. The use of FOIA requests means that this research is solely focused upon using public data. As a result, the sample are compelled to participate and provide data, unless a legitimate reason is given. Likewise, the sample schools do not have the right to withdraw. While it is not necessary to anonymise data in accordance with the FOIA, it was deemed ethical to do so, and as such all school names have been removed from the data set.

Results

Data on the nature of the activities selected for inclusion within the range of curriculum activities offered in these contrasting settings demonstrated a degree of social stratification in terms of which sports or activities were deemed appropriate for the respective learners. It should be noted here however that data did not always demonstrate clear trends between FSM provision and curriculum provision. Nonetheless, consideration of the nuanced trends emerging in data did demonstrate a number of interesting findings, despite the need for a degree of caution in terms of the strengths of the assertions that can be drawn out of data on each activity.

Indeed, data on the different ‘codes’ of football offered within the English PE curriculum (i.e. soccer, rugby union, rugby league, tag / touch rugby, rugby ‘sevens’, and Gaelic football) in relation to the FSM-quartiles of the sample schools revealed some trends, as shown in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2

With regards to the most popular form of football in this study, soccer, there was only a very slight trend towards the upper quartile of FSM provision with 98.6% of these schools offering football, compared to 94.4% for the lower quartile. Therefore, despite the traditional associations of soccer with the English working classes (Holt, 1989; Holt & Mason, 2000; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2000), it appears that the popularity of soccer encouraged almost all providers to offer this activity as part of the curriculum.

In contrast, however, the various codes of rugby offered demonstrated some disparity between schools from contrasting socio-economic demographics. This is illustrated by comparing the

‘union v league’ code divide, whereby rugby union was more likely to be offered at relatively advantaged schools in the lower two quartiles of FSM provision (86.1% for lower and 87.5% for lower-middle), in comparison to schools in the upper-middle quartile (76.4%) and the upper quartile (76.4%). The opposite was found for rugby league, with greater provision of this activity within schools in relatively disadvantaged catchment areas in the upper quartile of FSM provision (25.0%) as well as middle quartile schools (19.4% for upper-middle and 20.8% for lower-middle), whilst lower FSM-quartile schools rarely provided rugby league as part of their curriculum (8.3%). These findings might therefore be argued to reflect the traditional class-based schism between the union and league codes of rugby discussed in past analyses of these sports (Collins, 1998, 2009; Dunning & Sheard, 1976), and subsequently internalised and reproduced through the choices, actions, knowledge and experience of teachers (Casey & Quennerstedt, 2015).

With regards to the other forms of football offered in English curriculum PE, namely tag / touch rugby (a non-contact derivative of rugby union / league), rugby ‘sevens’ (a small-sided contact-based derivative of rugby union) and Gaelic football, some degree of social stratification was again evident (see Table 2). The most popular of these three forms in terms of levels of provision was tag / touch rugby; however, this was less likely to be offered in the most-advantaged schools with lower levels of FSM students (41.7%), in comparison with the other three quartiles (56.9% lower-middle; 51.4% upper-middle; 56.9% upper). Rugby ‘sevens’ provision was more varied in terms of its association with FSM levels, with a slight under-representation of upper FSM-quartile schools (16.7%) in comparison to the other quartiles (25.0% for upper-middle and lower-middle; 20.8% for lower) which renders the identification of a clear pattern of social stratification difficult for this activity. This possibly suggests that socio-economically advantaged schools were less likely to embrace non-contact derivative forms of

rugby such as tag or touch rugby, instead opting for contact-based derivatives or small-sided forms of rugby. This emphasis on contact forms of football in relatively advantage state schools is also evident in the higher provision of the contact-based activity of Gaelic football, with 11.1% of schools with low FSM demographics offering this activity in comparison with the other quartiles (5.6% upper; 4.2% upper-middle; 5.6% lower-middle).

One of the most nuanced discussions in this study came when reviewing the provision of sports and activities with historic associations with the middle and upper class of English society, such as tennis, field hockey, squash, equestrian, rowing and golf (Holt, 1989; Holt & Mason, 2000; Lowerson, 2006; Mangan, 2006). While some evidence of social stratification in terms of PE curriculum provision in English state schools was found, these trends often showed a difference between the upper and lower FSM quartiles, with variability across the two middle-quartiles, creating a complex set of emergent findings. For example, with regards to tennis and field hockey, two of the most popular activities within this category in terms of overall provision, there was a trend for greater provision in socio-economically advantage schools, as per Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3

Here, tennis was offered in 81.9% of schools with low levels of FSM provision across the lower and lower-middle quartiles and 77.8% of schools in the upper-middle quartile, compared with 66.7% of upper quartile schools. A similar, but less pronounced, trend was evident in field hockey when comparing FSM quartiles, with provision percentages of 75.0% (lower), 79.2% (lower-middle), 66.7% (upper-middle) and 67.6% (upper), respectively. Some trends were also evident in squash and equestrian, with lower provision in disadvantaged state schools in the

upper quartile; although the trends across the quartiles were highly variable so these findings should be considered with a degree of caution.

Furthermore, these trends did not hold true for golf and rowing, which were in fact less likely to be offered in lower FSM-quartile schools with more privileged demographics (12.5% golf and 6.9% rowing provision), in comparison with schools with high FSM levels (16.7% golf and 12.5% rowing provision). It is important to note, however, that adapted versions of activities, such as mini-golf, tri-golf and indoor rowing, may provide an opportunity for pupils from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds to sample these activities in PE, without necessarily having access to the more expensive facilities or equipment of the full versions of these sports, without having the same cultural standing. This suggests that whilst some of the traditional assumptions regarding the association of certain activities with the middle and upper classes in England may be reflected within the curriculum provision for these activities to an extent, these assumptions do not hold true for all of these sports, and the reality is much more nuanced and requires further exploration.

Data from a wider range of PE curriculum activities with no clear trends with different socio-economic class backgrounds provides further evidence of this nuance and complex pattern with regards to the social stratification of sports and activities within English state schools. For example, data from the contrasting FSM provision quartiles in relation to a number of popular activities such as athletics, rounders, cricket, basketball, dance, gymnastics and volleyball showed very little discernible difference in terms of their relative provision levels within the PE curriculum, remaining relatively consistent regardless of the socio-economic demographics of a chosen school, as per Table 4.

INSERT TABLE 4

However, again, a slight trend became evident elsewhere in certain PE activities which had no traditional associations with different socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, a number of activities were identified to have relatively higher levels of provision in socio-economically disadvantaged school contexts, including netball, badminton, table tennis, trampolining and handball, as illustrated in Table 5.

INSERT TABLE 5

The only activity in this category which had relatively higher levels of provision in more advantaged school settings was swimming, with 51.4% provision in lower and 54.2% provision in lower-middle FSM-quartile schools, in comparison to 36.1% for the upper-middle quartile and 40.3% for the upper quartile schools with the highest levels of students on FSM. However, as was the case with the previous findings, a degree of caution regarding these trends across socio-economic quartiles is required for these activities, with variations emerging within the middle-quartiles, which question the possibility for a simplistic reading of class stratification for these activities.

The final aspect of the PE curriculum provision explored within this study focused upon the relative provision of accredited qualifications in PE and sport in English state schools, focusing upon the most commonly offered ‘academic’ qualifications (i.e. GCSE Physical Education; AS / A Level Physical Education) and ‘vocational’ qualifications (i.e. Level 2 Edexcel BTEC Sport; Level 3 Edexcel BTEC Sport; Level 1-3 Sports Leaders UK Sports Leadership Awards). Again, the provision of these qualifications in relation to the levels of FSM provision was explored, and

a degree of socio-economic stratification became evident in the emergent findings, as illustrated in Table 6.

INSERT TABLE 6

For example, provision of ‘academic’ qualifications such as GCSE and AS/A Level PE was higher in state schools in relatively affluent areas with low levels of FSM provision (94.8% and 82.8% for lower quartile; 98.0% and 79.6% for lower-middle quartile), with provision levels dropping in the upper-middle (81.4% and 53.5%) and the upper FSM quartiles (86.1% and 38.9%). Conversely, the provision of ‘vocational’ qualifications such as Level 2 and Level 3 BTEC courses was lower in more affluent demographic contexts (20.7% Level 2 and 24.1% Level 3 for lower quartile), rising to 38.8% Level 2 and 53.1% Level 2 for the lower-middle quartile), with the highest provision figures for these qualifications in schools with upper-middle FSM levels (53.5% and 65.1%) and upper FSM levels (52.8% and 72.2%). This suggests that school curriculum leaders, consciously or subconsciously, were more likely to offer academic PE and sport qualifications over their vocational equivalents as part of their curriculum provision for students from relatively affluent demographic backgrounds, with vocational qualifications apparently deemed more appropriate and popular for students from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, interestingly, the Sports Leaders UK suite of Sports Leadership qualifications appeared to be deemed as more appropriate vocational qualifications for schools in more affluent areas, given their relatively higher provision levels.

Discussion

In light of the results outlined above, a consideration of the relevance of Bourdieusian theoretical concepts as a means of reflecting on these emergent patterns raises a number of interesting discussion points with regards to the social stratification within PE curriculum provision in English state schools.

First, it may be argued that the choices made by curriculum leaders within contrasting school contexts reflected contrasting appraisals of the suitability of certain sports and activities for their pupils within the field of PE based upon numerous social and cultural factors of which social class constitutes but one consideration. As highlighted above, there was little difference between schools from different FSM-quartiles in terms of the range or number of activities provided, suggesting that there was a broad acceptance of the need for a wide range of contrasting activities regardless of the socio-economic context. However, what is more instructive in terms of understanding issues regarding socio-economic stratification in PE is the specific types of activities which were deemed suitable, given that trends emerged for certain activities in terms of the proportion of schools offering those activities in contrasting socio-economic contexts. For example, the increased provision of sports with particular associations with the middle-classes (e.g. tennis, field hockey, squash, equestrian, and swimming) in schools with moderate and low levels of FSM provision could be argued to resonate with Bourdieu's arguments regarding the desire for 'distinction' for the middle-class through participation in such sports (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984). Indeed, it appears that state schools from relatively advantaged backgrounds in some ways appeared to be replicating the types of sporting activities offered in the independent school sector.

These results therefore chime with the findings of past studies such as the work of Wiltshire (2017), O’Flynn (2010), and Stirrup, Evans and Davies (2017). However, it is important to avoid over-emphasising the role of PE practitioners in terms of solely dictating the contents of the PE curriculum to their students, given that in practice students possess a degree of power in terms of their willingness to engage with the specific activities offered to them. Given this, the stratified nature of the PE curriculum might be argued to emerge from a process which has a degree of negotiation between the practitioners assumptions regarding student preferences and the actual engagement of students with the activities offered, considering factors such as student’s interests and classroom behaviour (Smith, Green & Thurston, 2005; Cothran, Kulinna & Garrahy, 2009).

Second, trends for class-based stratification within the PE curriculum were evident within the data on the provision levels of the various ‘codes’ of football offered across the different demographic contexts. For the schools with more disadvantaged pupil demographics, there was a trend towards the provision of codes of football with traditional associations with the working classes such as soccer and rugby league (Collins, 1998; Holt, 1989; Holt & Mason, 2000; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2000), suggesting that the ‘symbolic capital’ associated with these particular sports might be deemed to be higher for pupils from such backgrounds. In contrast, rugby union (in both its full 15-a-side and ‘sevens’ formats) was more likely to be offered to pupils as the socio-economic demographics of the pupil population improved, thus replicating a well-established historical social class divide between these various codes of football. Whilst it is important to state that both football and rugby union were included in the PE curriculum across the spectrum to a large degree, these trends across the quartiles suggests that a degree of stratification remains evident.

A final emergent discussion point in relation to Bourdieu's theories and social stratification in the PE curriculum provision data outlined above concerns the contrasting provision of academic and vocational qualifications in PE and sport. As highlighted in Table 6, there was a trend towards a preference for 'academic', exam-based qualifications such as GCSEs and AS / A Level PE in state schools with pupils from relatively advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, suggesting that these qualifications were deemed to have a greater degree of 'educational' and 'symbolic' capital for middle-class pupils and the expectations of their parents. Given that students from such backgrounds have been found to be more likely to pursue further study at universities (Aldous et al., 2014, 2016; Ball, 2010; Ingram, 2001, 2009; Reay, 2001, 2006), it can be argued that the ongoing preference for 'academic' qualifications such as GCSEs and A Levels for university entry has at least in part shaped the decision-making of curriculum managers in state schools. In contrast, the increased provision of 'vocational' PE and sport qualifications in schools which have relatively disadvantaged socio-economic demographics suggests that dualistic aims of these qualifications as a preparation for both employment and higher education are deemed to be more suitable for the aspirations of working-class pupils and their parents' expectations (Thompson, 2009; Connolly et al., 2015). Furthermore, the desire for Sports Leadership qualifications in affluent schools could reflect the demand for appropriate enrichment activities among more advantaged students. The stratified nature of the curriculum provision in this regard again suggests that the degrees of 'capital' associated with these contrasting qualifications may be perceived differently by educators, pupils and parents from different socio-economic contexts (Colley et al., 2007; Lehmann, 2009), and thus acts to reproduce and further perpetuate the 'parity of esteem' debate which has critically examined the higher status given to academic qualifications in the British context (Hodgson & Spours, 2008; Oates, 2010).

Conclusions

We have argued that the data presented above from this extensive sampling of the sporting activities provided within the English state schooling PE curriculum demonstrates that a degree of stratification in relation to socio-economic demographics remains evident. By using FSM as a proxy measure of the relative levels of socio-economic disadvantage for a given school, it is possible to determine that the nature of the PE curriculum is at least partially shaped in terms of the proportion of schools providing certain activities according to social class. Specifically, in relatively disadvantaged schools with higher levels of FSM, sports such as soccer, rugby league, netball, badminton, trampolining, boxing, judo and taekwondo were more likely to be offered to their pupils; whereas schools with relatively advantaged socio-economic demographics were more likely to offer sports such as rugby union, tennis, field hockey, squash and equestrian. Furthermore, in terms of PE and sport qualifications offered in these settings, a preference for academic qualifications such as GCSE and AS/A2 Level PE was found in relatively advantaged schools, in comparison to a higher proportion of vocational qualifications such as BTEC sport in disadvantaged school contexts.

As a means for theoretically examining these emergent findings, Bourdieu's arguments on both the field of education and sport, as well as the work of past academics who have used Bourdieu in relation to these topics, have proved to possess a degree of analytical utility in terms of exploring the nature of socio-economic and class-based stratification in the PE curriculum. In particular, Bourdieu's (1978, 1984) contentions regarding the pursuit of 'distinction' by the middle classes in the fields of education and sport resonate with the trends of stratification evident in the current study. In light of his arguments regarding the contrasting perceptions of the relative levels of 'symbolic', 'economic' and 'cultural' forms of capital associated with the contrasting sports and qualifications offered within the PE curriculum, it might be argued that

curriculum managers in these contrasting state school settings are deciding the content of their PE curriculum based upon their perceptions of the value of each activity/qualification for their pupils and their parents. In Bourdieusian terms, such a process can be viewed as an attempt to align the PE curriculum with the 'tastes' and 'dispositions' of pupils and parents with contrasting class habituses, dependent upon their relative socio-economic demographics.

It is therefore argued that this critical examination of the stratified nature of the contemporary PE curriculum in English state schools sheds new light on an issue of continued importance for practitioners and educators within the field of PE and sport. Whilst it is without doubt laudable that curriculum managers are attempting to tailor their PE curriculum to suit the preferences of their pupils and their parents, it is important to consider how the nature of this offer may be shaped in relation to socio-economic demographics. In particular, consideration should be given as to whether certain students are missing out on the opportunity to engage with specific activities based upon the presumptions of curriculum managers and teachers. Given the importance of compulsory PE as means for providing students with an opportunity to sample a diverse range of sporting activities and qualifications, it is our contention that future emphasis should be given to readdressing the potential inequalities in provision highlighted above.

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors..

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