

Examining gendered grouping practices in secondary school physical education in England

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Introduction

Historically, PE in secondary schools in the United Kingdom (UK) has typically taken the form of single-sex groups, with sex-differentiated patterns of staffing and boys and girls taught different activities in the curriculum based on perceptions of biological sex differences (Scraton, 1986, 1992; Kirk, 1992; Lines & Stidder, 2003). Research over the past four decades has repeatedly shown, however, that single-sex grouping reinforces gender inequalities in PE, most notably by restricting the curriculum activities that boys and girls are able to access and experience (Scraton, 1986, 1992; Wright, 1996; Lines & Stidder, 2003; Hills & Croston, 2012). More recent research has also highlighted that single-sex grouping underpins many of the negative experiences of transgender (trans) and non-binary students in PE because it often requires them to participate in a class that is incongruent with their self-identified gender identity (Williamson & Sandford, 2018; Ferguson & Russell, 2023).

Mixed-sex grouping has been identified as a means of addressing these issues, with it suggested that this practice can ensure that boys and girls receive equal access to the full range of curriculum activities in PE, including those that challenge traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity (Scraton, 1992, Wright, 1996; Lines & Stidder, 2003). Mixed-sex grouping is also identified as reducing the likelihood of trans and non-binary students being misgendered (Williamson & Sandford, 2018; Ferguson & Russell, 2023). Nonetheless, research has repeatedly shown that mixed-sex grouping is not an assured solution to the provision of equal opportunities in PE (Scraton, 1992; Hills & Croston, 2012; Stride et al. 2022). Indeed, although mixed-sex grouping may provide boys and girls with equal access to a common curriculum in PE, a wealth of evidence indicates that the activities included in the curriculum are often more closely aligned with the interests and experiences of boys than girls. Research further suggests

that boys tend to dominate play in game situations (e.g., by refusing to pass to girls) and receive more time and attention from PE teachers (Scraton, 1992; Hills & Croston, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, many girls have reported strong preferences for single-sex grouping in PE, with the practice perceived as providing a space of protection from the domineering and physically aggressive behaviour of boys (Lirgg, 1993; Wright, 1996; Treanor et al. 1998). Boys tend to be more ambivalent in their attitudes, with some perceiving that they compete harder in single-sex PE classes because they do not have to modify their behaviour (e.g., by reducing their levels of aggression) to accommodate the safety of girls and others reporting that the presence of girls motivates them to try harder to impress them with their abilities (Lirgg, 1993, Treanor et al. 1998; Wright, 1996).

While a substantial international literature has explored single- and mixed-sex grouping practices in PE, there is an absence of contemporary research examining the incidence of these practices across the years of secondary schooling in England. This research was designed to provide a national picture of current single- and mixed-sex grouping practices in PE in secondary schools in England.

Method

The research was conducted using an online survey (designed using JISC Online Surveys) that was administered to all co-educational mainstream state-funded co-educational secondary schools in England (2,873 at the time of study). The survey comprised multiple-choice and free-text questions, with multiple-choice questions focusing on the incidence of single- and mixed-sex grouping, and free-text questions designed to gain insight into the reasons for using

these practices¹. The survey was distributed by email to the subject leader of PE in each school (either directly when an email was found or indirectly through the school office email). The survey was open for a period of one month, commencing 20 September 2021, and one reminder email was sent to nonrespondents two weeks prior to the survey closing. A total of 818 surveys were completed, giving a response rate of 28.5 percent. The characteristics of responding schools are reported in Wilkinson and Penney (2023).

The data were analysed in two ways. First, descriptive statistics were gathered from JISC Online Surveys to determine the frequencies and percentages of responses to multiple-choice questions. Next, data generated by free-text questions were analysed using content analysis. This involved reading and re-reading the entire corpus of data to determine the presence of certain words or phrases that appeared to capture key concepts and thoughts. These words or phrases were then assigned a provisional category label and the data were further assessed to determine their accuracy and comprehensiveness. This process was repeated until the point of saturation (e.g., where no new category labels were emerging). Frequency counts were then calculated by summing the number of times a category label appeared in the data.

Findings

The prevalence of single- and mixed-sex grouping practices in PE

The results reaffirm earlier findings (Bayliss 1984; Scraton 1992) that single-sex grouping remains a significant structural feature of PE in many mainstream state-funded co-educational secondary schools in England. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, a significant proportion of schools were ‘fully’ or ‘mostly’ using single-sex grouping arrangements in core PE in Key Stages 3

¹ The full survey can be accessed at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373425355_GroupingSurvey.pdf

and 4, with the highest incidence found in Year 9 (78.8 percent). By contrast, mixed-sex grouping was the dominant mode of grouping in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and/or Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) (or equivalent courses) PE in Key Stage 4, typically because there were not enough students (or a gender imbalance in the students) opting for these courses to accommodate single-sex grouping arrangements. As one respondent explained:

“GCSE and BTEC PE groups are mixed-sex because we don’t have enough students in one group to justify splitting them between two teachers. Also, most of our GCSE students are male.”

Table 1. Single- and/or mixed-sex grouping by year groups in PE in Key Stage 3.

Description	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
Fully single-sex	324 (39.6%)	339 (41.5%)	352 (43%)
Mostly single-sex	245 (30%)	286 (35%)	293 (35.8%)
Fully mixed-sex	189 (23.1%)	138 (16.9%)	103 (12.6%)
Mostly mixed-sex	47 (5.8%)	42 (5.1%)	56 (6.9%)
A balance of single- and mixed-sex	11 (1.3%)	11 (1.3%)	13 (1.6%)
Not-applicable	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)	1 (0.1%)

Table 2. Single- and/or mixed-sex grouping by year groups in PE in Key Stage 4.

Description	Year 10 (Core)	Year 10 GCSE/BTEC	Year 11 (Core)	Year 11 GCSE/BTEC
Fully single-sex	278 (34%)	20 (2.5%)	251 (30.7%)	32 (3.9%)
Mostly single-sex	279 (34.1%)	56 (6.9%)	268 (32.8%)	51 (6.3%)
Fully mixed-sex	142 (17.4%)	619 (75.7%)	162 (19.8%)	612 (74.8%)
Mostly mixed-sex	101 (12.3%)	105 (12.8%)	116 (14.2%)	100 (12.2%)
A balance of single- and mixed-sex	11 (1.3%)	10 (1.2%)	9 (1.1%)	9 (1.1%)
Not applicable	7 (0.9%)	8 (0.9%)	12 (1.4%)	14 (1.7%)

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Reasons for single- and mixed-sex grouping in PE

The responses highlighted that single- and mixed-sex grouping decisions in PE were complex and contingent on many interrelated factors, including curriculum content and structures, the planning and organisation of the school timetable, the nature of the student cohort (e.g., size, religion, gender identity), the number and availability of PE staff, and/or rules on competitive sport. Of those respondents who provided comment on single- and/or mixed-sex grouping in PE (n=809), several (15.7 percent) reported that single-sex grouping was used to ameliorate concerns about body image and appearance, particularly for girls. Specifically, single-sex grouping was purported to create a safe space for girls that fostered greater levels of participation and confidence because they were not subjected to scrutiny and judgement by boys. The following comment was typical:

“We have noticed that girls learn better when they are taught in single-sex groups because it alleviates some of their concerns and anxieties regarding body image.”

In a similar vein, a smaller number of respondents (4.9 percent) were sensitive to the requirement that Muslim girls were taught in single-sex groups in PE to avoid them from exposing their bodies and performances to boys. This was explained in the following way by one respondent:

“It’s single-sex based on religious guidelines. We have a high proportion of Muslim girls who have religious beliefs that do not allow them to wear PE kit in front of boys.”

These points are supported by research indicating that most girls are less self- and/or body conscious performing in front of same-sex peers in PE (Lirgg, 1993; Treanor et al. 1998; Wright, 1996). Muslim girls also frequently raise objections to mixed-sex grouping in PE on the grounds that it conflicts with their religious and cultural requirements for body modesty and privacy (Dagkas et al. 2011).

It was also evident that single-sex grouping in PE was a student-centred approach in some schools, with several respondents (11.6 percent) reporting that they had consulted with students (typically using a survey) to ensure they receive selected a grouping approach that aligned with their preferences. One respondent commented:

“We surveyed students and around 80 percent said they wanted single-sex grouping in PE.”

While we cannot claim to have a full understanding of the processes followed in schools such as this, we recognise the potential dangers that the voices and preferences of some students will remain marginalised or silenced if the approach taken privileges the preferences of the majority. Further, when the approach taken is limited to single-sex grouping (and thus reflects the presumption of a gender binary), it may restrict some students from performing their gender in ways that are affirming to them (e.g., those who identify as non-binary and those who are not currently open about their gender identity).

Other reported reasons for using single-sex grouping in PE related to injunctions about safety, particularly in activities requiring bodily contact between students (10.8 percent), the requirement to supervise same-sex changing rooms (7.7 percent), the difficulty of providing a

common curriculum that would meet the specific and shared needs and interests of all students in PE (3 percent), and/or staff preferences (1.9 percent).

The most frequently reported reasons for using mixed-sex grouping in PE related to pragmatic considerations, including timetabling (13.1 percent), the number and availability of teaching staff in the department (6.8 percent), the composition of student cohorts (e.g., a disproportionate number of boys or girls in a particular year group) (12.1 percent), and/or student numbers (8.4 percent). For example, several respondents explained that there were not enough staff and/or groups of students timetabled to attend PE together to accommodate single-sex grouping arrangements. One respondent summed up this situation as follows:

“We’re limited to one class per side of the timetable and one member of staff, so we don’t have the option to split students [into single-sex groups] in PE even though it would be our preference.”

Slightly fewer respondents (7.2 percent) noted that mixed-sex grouping was important in addressing equality in curriculum provision and ensuring that students had access to activities that provided scope to challenge traditional gender boundaries and expectations. This was particularly so in Key Stage 4, where the greater flexibility inherent in the curriculum meant that some schools were offering more individualised, lifestyle activities that were perceived to be gender-neutral. One respondent explained:

“We use mixed-sex grouping to provide equality in the curriculum. Students follow the same curriculum which involved less contact and traditional sports and more generic and non-gender specific ‘new’ sports such as handball and ultimate frisbee.”

Mixed-sex grouping was also seen as important by some respondents (5.3 percent) in fostering a learning environment that was inclusive, safe, and respectful of an increasing number of trans and non-binary students, most notably because it did not require them to feel positioned in a specific gender category. This was explained as follows:

“We use mixed-sex grouping to be inclusive of non-binary and transgender students. It means they aren’t put in a group that doesn’t match the way in which they identify.”

In many instances, research indicates that trans and non-binary students are strongly in favour of mixed-sex grouping in PE because it creates a situation where there is less emphasis on binary gender labels and traditional gender roles and expectations (Ferguson & Russell, 2023).

Other less frequently reported reasons for using mixed-sex grouping in PE were to encourage positive social interactions between students (1.8 percent) and promote a sense of familiarity and continuity for students transitioning from primary school (where most PE lessons are taught in mixed-sex groups) (1.5 percent)

The applied implications of the findings

It is important to recognise that there is insufficient evidence to support a recommendation to use single- or mixed-sex grouping ‘across the board’ in PE. Our findings underscore the challenges and contradictions of providing a grouping arrangement that is responsive to the needs and interests of Muslim girls, students who identify as trans or non-binary, and/or students who express preferences for different arrangements in PE. Hence, no one grouping arrangement will be appropriate in every case, consistently offer the best prospects of

advancing gender equity and inclusion, nor necessarily suit all students' needs and interests in PE. Instead, schools should explore varied, flexible, and situation-specific arrangements to advance inclusion and equity for all students in PE. This could involve (where feasible) providing single-sex classes as an option alongside mixed-sex classes and allowing students to choose the class where they feel most comfortable.

Teachers also need to undertake accompanying review of established curriculum structures and recognise that equality of opportunity is not simply determined by providing students with access to the same curriculum (e.g., a male-oriented model of PE). Previous research suggests that less overtly gendered activities, including outdoor and adventurous activities, handball, hockey, korfbal, softball, and tchoukball, have the potential to break down gender stereotypes, provide greater parity of experience for boys and girls, encourage greater mutual respect between boys and girls, and result in more equitable and enjoyable learning experiences in PE (Humberstone, 1990; Scraton, 1992; Hills & Croton, 2012). As Green and Scraton (1998, p. 283) note, "mixed-sex grouping is most likely to work where skill imbalances are minimal, participation by boys and girls is on equal terms, and boys are not able or are prevented from side-lining girls". Relatedly, teachers using single-sex grouping in PE should look beyond the traditional gender-differentiated curriculum and consider offering a wider range of activities that are not based on dominant definitions of masculinity or femininity (e.g., greater access to dance for boys and rugby for girls). This approach would diversify the experiences of students and provide scope to challenge sex-differentiated patterns of participation in PE. Initial teacher education is clearly a site where historical patterns of provision (that teacher education students have invariably experienced in schools), can be re-visioned. We encourage teacher educators to work in partnership with teachers in schools to support future teachers to develop skills and

experience in gender inclusive pedagogy, with grouping practices and curriculum planning integral to that end.

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