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Pupil voice in physical education and the desire for (in)visibility

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ABSTRACT

The importance of children is a universally accepted concept in schools. However, do we actually listen to what children have to say? Rudduck and Fielding [2002. *The transformative potential of student voice: Confronting the power issues*. Paper presented at BERA Annual Conference, University of Exeter, p. 2] argue that the voices of pupils are 'silent' or 'silenced'. The aim of this study was to listen to the voice of pupils, concerning their experiences in Physical Education (PE) in schools, with the direction of the study being driven (although not co-designed) by pupils and thereafter following the issues that they raised. It involved 154, 14–16-year-old pupils across the two schools, one an independent school and the other a state academy. A focus group in each school (6 pupils per study) drove the direction of the study which then sort breadth through a questionnaire to the whole year group in both schools (154 respondents) and finally depth through 12 individual interviews. A theoretical framework (Social Field Theory) was selected post findings to ensure that it best represented the emergent data. Through this Pupil voice method, five themes emerged, those being Participation, Choice, Pressure, Ability and Development, and Health. These indicated that pupils have vastly different experiences in the PE lesson, in particular, if they are at either end of the ability spectrum. For some it is that of humiliation and censure, and for others it is about success and achievement. The uniqueness of the lesson with regard to physique and the exposure of both skill and body can affect this duality, negatively and positively. This can lead to the desire for, or coerced, (in)visibility for many pupils. Solutions from pupils, at both ends of the ability spectrum, to counter issues in PE involved giving choice of activity and having ability setting for classes.

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Introduction

The benefits of physical education (PE) are multi-faceted. They include health, life skills and physical learning. The life skills developed from PE vary but have been found to include social skills, communication, problem solving, leadership, teamwork, goal setting and decision making (Dyson et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2013). There is evidence of health-related benefits and illness prevention from PE for children, due to the physical activity involved (Warburton et al., 2006). PE develops physical learning and there is anecdotal evidence of a link between PE participation and becoming elite athletes from those athletes themselves (Green, 2014).

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Positive early learning experiences of physical activity are critical for lifelong participation (Kirk, 2005), as well as the other benefits cited, and PE in schools can be an ideal conduit for engaging pupils in such activity. However, disengagement of pupils in PE is a significant issue (Gray et al., 2019). PE in schools is very different to other subjects, as it is one of the few subjects where pupils receive instant feedback on their abilities. In PE, ability is exposed to all, which can lead to negative feedback and name-calling by peers who deem themselves more able or want to deflect criticism away from themselves (Lauritsalo et al., 2015). Several studies have suggested that these issues are widespread (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Fiset, 2011) and influence children's enjoyment of PE, which in turn affects their participation and reduces the associated benefits for them.

Given all the potential benefits of PE but equally the issues faced by some pupils, is school PE a good environment for the development of young people? The approach taken in this study was prompted by the guiding principle that children are the best informants and custodians of their experiences (Quarmby et al., 2021). Consequently, the study was shaped and driven by pupils from two secondary schools (independent and state) in England. The pupils steered the direction of the study by reflecting on their experiences of school PE and confirmed that the themes and findings identified accurately reflected their views. The paper's focus is to explore pupils' experiences of PE, in particular the overarching theme of (in)visibility in PE, from a pupil voice perspective.

The importance of pupil voice

The study's starting point was that pupils' views are important. Conventionally, many pupils' voices are 'silent or silenced' (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002, p. 2) and have been so as long as schools have existed (Arnot et al., 2004). Nevertheless, listening to pupils can help uncover dysfunction in schools (Smyth, 2016) and transform teaching. Children have rich experience (Holdsworth, 2001) and know what they experience, think and feel better than adults (Hall & Martello, 1996).

Pupil voice studies specific to PE like those collected in O'Sullivan and MacPhail (2010) remain rare. Many studies involve pupils, but the focus of the research is generally set by adults and its direction is not usually determined by pupils. Voices in PE, if they are heard at all, have tended to belong to girls in studies like those of Enright and O'Sullivan (2012), Fiset (2013), and Lamb et al. (2018), which explore evidence that PE is often male-dominated and gender-biased. Other studies have focused on the voices of groups which are often overlooked in relation to PE such as care experienced children (Quarmby et al., 2021) and children with special educational needs (SEN) (Coates & Vickerman, 2008). Boys' voices have been examined in relation to masculinities in PE in studies such as Bramham (2003). While these are all important studies which address different aspects of voice in PE, the study described here sought to engage, and listen to, as full a range of voice as possible in a year group setting in relation to PE. The approach was inclusive, encouraging all children to contribute regardless of their gender, ability, background and socioeconomic status. Given that state schools feature far more in PE research than independent schools (Morton, 2022), it also contributes to the evidence base by listening to the voice of pupils in the independent sector. This study explored the voices of boys and girls, focusing on their experiences in PE, in a state secondary academy and that of boys in PE in a single-sex independent school, using an approach which allowed pupils to determine the areas of the study and describe their feelings and experiences on, and in, their terms.

Listening to pupils' voices was central to the research from the beginning. In this, the approach was informed by theoretical conceptualisations of the pupil's voice which acknowledge the closeness and dangers of purporting to speak for and about others (Alcoff, 1991), the risk of appropriating others' voices (Humphries, 1994), and the need to find spaces to encourage the creation of what Fielding (2004) calls 'dialogic encounters' between pupils and researcher. Restricting all forms of adult voice as far as possible was regarded as crucial to minimise adult influence and appropriation. Therefore, teachers did not contribute to the data collection. All information about the schools came from the pupils, and the findings (from pupils) informed the development of the literature review

and theoretical framework. In this study, pupil voice refers to children speaking themselves about their own real-life situations and experiences. However, pupils were not formally involved in the study as co-researchers because its focus was on listening to their voices, rather than actively including them in the research in a participatory action research approach like some pupil voice studies, such as Howley and O'Sullivan (2021). Power dynamics are also a key concern in pupil voice studies (Robinson, 2011) and minimising their effect was a prime consideration throughout all forms of data collection (see Methods discussion).

The definition of pupil voice used in this study (and subsequent method of enquiry) is derived from Littlefair (2023) and combined the following elements:

- Pupils determine the focus of the research into PE (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).
- Exploring what pupils think, know and feel (Graham, 1995).
- Enabling democratic inclusivity so that all participating students were supported to express their views (Fielding, 2004; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).
- Pupils as participants are central to the research process (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).
- Being aware of and addressing the inequality of power relations (Robinson, 2011; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Social field theory

Social field theory was employed as the theoretical framework for this study because the initial data collected by pupil voice seemed to embody and reflect its characteristics such as habitus (disposition of a person), capital (ability to maximise opportunities), field (social structure or arena) and doxa (common beliefs or rules) (Bourdieu, 1984). It was critical to the study that this theoretical framework was also tested iteratively during data collection and analysis to ensure it was appropriate and to minimise the influence of adult voice, while remaining aware of the tensions created by applying this adult-derived theoretical framing within the broader child-led approach. Although this study is about children regardless of status or gender, some of the differences between certain groups that were identified in the data can be categorised in terms of power, gender, ability and socio-economic status. These factors suggested the relevance of applying social field theory to the study.

Grenfell and James (1998, p. 2) argue that applying Bourdieu's theory of practice to educational phenomena 'offers insights and understandings not readily visible in other approaches'. The practice under investigation in this study was constituted by the activities which take place ('what goes on') in the schools' PE lessons. As Maton (2014) suggests, this practice is the consequence of the interaction of individuals' dispositions (habitus), positions in and through networks and relationships (capital), and the social arena (field). The concepts only make sense when related to each other and practice (Smith, 2020), as Bourdieu's (1984) summarising equation indicates:

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice.}$$

In PE there are labels, happenings and practices that are immanent and, in a sense, 'waiting to happen' (Colley et al., 2003, p. 478), which Bourdieu (1982) describes as the 'subjective expectation of objective probability'. A Bourdieusian perspective might argue that practice in PE lessons is only in small part the result of pedagogic actions and 'to a large extent the automatic, agentless effect of a physical and social order' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 24) consistent with the social field. It is within this field that certain skills and abilities (e.g. proficiency at football) are valued at the expense of others (e.g. dance skills). The habitus that some children bring to PE is not sufficient to gain any status in that world and, as a result, they may not have the capital to draw on to move beyond this habitus and increase their status in the field (Vincent & Ball, 2006).

This theoretical framework has been applied in other studies exploring various aspects of PE. For example, Evans (2004) used Bourdieu's theory to conceptualise ability in PE as an alternative to biological and psychological approaches. Hay and Macdonald (2010) argued that in PE physical

appearance (physical capital) can be traded for ability recognition, and the PE classroom was analysed as a social space using Bourdieu's theory by Lisa Hunter (2004). Along with the data analysis, this suggested that social field theory was considered an appropriate theoretical framework to apply to this study's thematically open examination of the pupils' experiences in PE, not least because it was considered that the interplay and tensions between adult theorising and the child-directed approach enriched the data analysis.

Methods

This study drew on a broadly phenomenological perspective in capturing perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, emotions and meanings from its participants (Denscombe, 1998). As Neubauer et al. (2019) explain, 'The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of participants' experiences – both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced' (p. 91). It is a key component of phenomenology that, 'the researcher must be vigilant in his/her bracketing work so that the researcher's individual subjectivity does not bias data analysis and interpretations' (Neubauer et al, 2019, p.93). However, we also acknowledge Bourdieu's call for a 'sociologically grounded phenomenology' focused on 'the relation between different types of fields and different types of habitus' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). This helped us to ensure that pupil's voice was captured and propagated in the description of their experiences of the practice of PE and limit the influence of adult voice.

The study was undertaken in two schools in England. Children aged 14–16 were involved, chosen so that the pupils involved had experienced PE in school over a longitudinal period and were old enough to be able to reflect on their experiences. The schools determined the year groups involved – Year 10 in the state-funded academy and Year 11 in the independent school – to suit their logistical and educational needs. The independent school was single-sex (boys), located in an affluent area of a city, and the state school was mixed (boys and girls), located in a socially deprived area in a large town. This enabled the study to access the voices of pupils from different social and school backgrounds. The only selection criterion used in approaching the schools was to ensure that they were located in contrasting areas in relation to deprivation. The single-sex nature of the independent school and the fact that the state school had more males than females meant that more boys than girls participated in this study, countering the fact that boys tend to be under-represented in studies of pupil voice in PE. However, both genders were included in all data collection. The study was founded on the view of reflecting pupils' real-life experience. Therefore, having one single-sex and one mixed school reflected common characteristics of the independent and state sectors and underlined this focus.

The data collection methods were sequential and involved a focus group in each school, a questionnaire survey, and interviews, all exclusively involving pupils. At every stage of this process, informed consent was a prerequisite for participation. This is central to the ethics of social research (Homan, 2001) and particularly important when researching with young people. Anonymity in the questionnaire survey and interviews and group confidentiality in the focus groups were maintained throughout the study. The study's ethics approach was founded on a triple lock of gaining informed consent from pupils, parents, and the school. If parents had consented for their child to participate and their child did not, then they were not involved. Unfortunately, if a pupil wished to take part but a parent did not provide consent, then, they could not be involved, which restricted the range of pupil voices accessed.

In order to address power dynamics, steps were taken in organising the environment and interactions to ensure that pupils felt at ease and free to voice their views, for example by informing the focus group and interviewees that whatever they said was 'right' because it reflected their opinions and experiences. There were no teachers present in the focus groups or interviews and the settings were familiar and informal, with the facilitator distancing themselves from the school and reassuring pupils that their thoughts, feelings, opinions and experiences were the focus of the research and

Table 1. Questionnaire survey response.

School	Responses (<i>n</i>)	Population (<i>n</i>)	Response rate (%)
State	131	184	71
Independent	23	54	43

would be anonymised in reporting. For the questionnaire survey, all changes made by the pupils prior to its use were accepted without question. During the survey procedure, it was made clear that completing it was entirely voluntary and their responses would be treated anonymously (see Table 1).

To gain access to pupils and hear their voice, it was necessary to go through adult gatekeepers, namely the headteachers and heads of PE in the two schools. In order to get a broad range of experiences, their brief was to invite pupils across the ability range in PE to take part in the initial focus groups. Twelve pupils in total were involved – one group per school and six pupils per group, with mixed gender in the state school. Aware of Fielding's (2004) concern that supportive pupil voice activities do not preclude 'the danger of a specifically adult, situated perspective getting in the way of deeper understanding' (p. 303), the focus groups were as open-ended as possible, with broad and non-leading questions used to stimulate discussion, such as asking for their thoughts on PE and inquiring 'why'. Following such stimuli, the pupils then freely shared their varied experiences of PE. This determined the topics for investigation in the subsequent data collection and hence drove the research. Thus, while the study was not co-constructed as its focus on PE experience and the methods deployed were planned in advance, pupils identified the issues raised and solutions discussed, and thus determined the direction of the study.

Pupils in the focus group initiated the topics of the study but it was essential to engage a wider group of pupils to capture their experiences to maximise pupil voice. The questionnaire survey was designed to give the breadth of voice as the whole year group, and thus the whole ability range, was invited to respond (see Table 1). The questionnaire survey was solely based on the issues raised by the pupils in the focus groups, but also allowed pupils in the survey to raise their own issues if applicable. The focus group pupils had input into the survey's design through validating it before it was made available. Their input resulted in changes made to ensure that it accurately represented the areas they had identified such as enjoyment, relationships and opportunities.

Following analysis of the focus groups and the questionnaire survey, volunteers were requested for individual interviews. Twelve were undertaken, six per school, with a gender split in the state school. Selection was purposive, based upon the initial need to include (but not identify) pupils whom the school regarded as high and low ability because analysis of the data from the focus groups and survey suggested that PE has the greatest impact on these groups. This could be seen as a limitation on voice, however, this inclusive approach to voice (across two whole-year groups) indicated that the biggest issues they faced lay principally at either end of the ability spectrum. As the survey had been conducted anonymously, the study relied upon the PE teacher's ability judgements to create the interview sample. This was the only area in which adult opinion influenced the study by drawing on teachers' knowledge and attitudes. However, the study's findings are based on pupils' own designations of their ability ('low', 'high' or 'neither') via a question in the survey and their utterances in the focus groups and interviews.

Data were analysed thematically across the three data collection methods using inductive reasoning. The quantitative data from the questionnaire survey were used primarily descriptively to give breadth, as they captured voices from the larger year group that the study did not otherwise access and identified, for example, how many 'low ability' children (so designated by themselves in relation to the field of PE) enjoyed or did not enjoy PE. The method used for thematic analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). We created coding and subsequent categories from the data in a posteriori form, drawn from our analysis of the experiences of the pupils. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) approach, we identified first-order themes (e.g. being

shouted at), and then grouped them into second-order themes (e.g. extrinsic pressure). We subsequently collated these themes into conceptual themes (e.g. pressure) and finally into an overarching theme. Our approach to thematic analysis thus required reflexive engagement using ‘the researcher’s subjectivity as analytic resource’ (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 3) to foreground the pupils’ voices and concerns as thoroughly as possible.

Findings: the centrality of visibility

The five conceptual themes which data analysis identified in the research were: ‘participation’, ‘choice’ ‘health’, ‘development and ability’, and ‘pressure’. All the themes had distinct features but were also interlinked, reflecting the complexity of pupils’ perspectives. Further analysis revealed the overarching theme of visibility. As this paper focuses on this overarching theme, the summary of the findings offered here describes each conceptual theme briefly, before describing how it is related to the overarching theme of visibility with reference to relevant literature. Only limited findings and pupil data are presented for each theme because the focus of the paper is the overarching concept of visibility, rather than a detailed delineation of the study’s themes. Visibility should be regarded as a continuum on which pupils seek varying degrees of visibility or invisibility at different times and in response to different activities in PE. While the data indicated that pupils who identified as ‘low ability’ were more likely to associate themselves with invisibility, for example, it should be recognised that experiences varied, reflecting the complexity of pupils’ attitudes to PE.

Participation

PE is a compulsory National Curriculum foundation subject. Although neither school in the study has to follow the National Curriculum, as both independent schools and academies are technically exempt from the National Curriculum, in practice PE remains mandatory for all pupils in both schools. This ‘forced’ participation (as some pupils referred to it) was not an issue for a number of pupils, particularly those identifying as high-ability who were positive about participation. However, those of low ability often expressed reservations and some would have not participated in PE if it were optional.

The major reason expressed for enjoying PE was having fun: 38% of pupils surveyed cited this factor. Comments such as ‘it’s fun and enjoyable’ (MS)¹ and ‘because it can be really fun and I learn a lot of new things’(MS) suggest they regarded enjoyment of PE as key to participation. Some felt that the social side of PE was important for enhancing enjoyment and building friendships, stating that PE was, ‘very fun and a good way to build relationships and teamwork’ (MI)¹ and ‘I like playing sport with friends’ (FS)¹. This was also related to the type of sport they were undertaking:

I really like PE, but it depends what we’re doing. So, if it’s football or something, I feel like that’s a little bit more boring. Where, if it’s like volleyball or the gym, I really enjoy it because I feel like it’s a good time to interact with your friends, as well. (FS)¹

Visibility in PE is most obviously related to participation. A pupil who dislikes participating in PE may intentionally keep to the periphery of the lesson, going through the motions and trying not to attract (or receive) the teacher’s attention. One pupil noted:

... I have to admit that I don’t really care. More focus has been put on the people who are better. They’ve been, sort of, improving. Admittedly, I don’t really want to improve. (MI)

In contrast, a pupil who enjoys PE is likely to be at the heart of the action, being as involved and visible as possible, enjoying PE as, ‘I am sporty so my ability for PE is better than others’ (FS) and ‘because of the competition aspect’ (MI). This can become self-reinforcing as competitive pupils’ desire for success increases their visibility, motivated by accolades from the powerful agents in the field (teachers and peers) or other pupils involving them in a game or team due to their

social capital or habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Lacking a sporting physique can create a desire in pupils for less physical exposure and a retreat into invisibility, '... a lot of people feel quite self-conscious, and they tend not to get into the game' (MI), which can result in their marginalisation as others do not recognise potentially valuable traits in these pupils.

The findings suggest that factors such as whether pupils enjoy PE, the way it is delivered, the curriculum, and its socially constructed environment have an impact on all pupils. This impact is magnified by the situational exposure of both skill level and physique (Fisette, 2011; Hay & Macdonald, 2010), which makes participation more visible than in most other subject areas and can create a desire for invisibility among some pupils. The strength of desire or coercion in relation to visibility is affected by habitus, capital, powerful agents, and experiences (Bourdieu, 1984), which play a role in shaping where a pupil finds themselves on the visibility continuum. Some pupils, such as the independent school pupil who described PE as 'morally degrading', and the state school pupil who sought PE to be optional, wanted to take invisibility to the extreme of non-participation.

Choice

Although the issue of choice in PE was initially raised in the focus group in the independent school, the survey responses suggested that choice was a bigger issue in the state school as only 9% of its pupils felt they had a choice in PE: 'the teachers always choose what we do and we never have a choice'(FS). Pupils also offered solutions to create choice and increase engagement in sport, as one female pupil underlined:

I think there should be something or, I guess, maybe a system in place where students can say what sports they prefer, and maybe they could focus on the ones that they prefer because it would be more enjoyable. A lot more people would get involved. (FS)

Choice was also perceived as a freedom, preventing negative experiences and indicating a desire to engage in the subject. Fielding and Rudduck (2002) concur that 'pupils do wish to have more choice about what they learn' (p. 2). For low-ability pupils, who are more likely to face censure (Lynstad et al., 2016; Portman, 1995), this freedom of choice was linked to pressure, which they felt would be reduced if the choice was available, then thereby leading to their increased participation and enjoyment (Prochaska et al., 2003). It is reasonable to conclude that increasing the voluntary element of participation would have benefits for pupils in terms of skills development and physical and mental health (Quennerstedt, 2019).

In relation to visibility, it is important to note that the two pupils cited above in relation to participation who did not want to be involved in PE did not feel this antipathy for all physical activities. They enjoyed dance and cycling, and it was clear that if they had the choice to undertake these activities in PE, they would likely not feel forced into participating or seek the option of invisibility. This key issue of choice is explored in more detail below.

Health

Almost all (90.9%) high-ability pupils felt PE was good for their health, but this fell to 57% among lower-ability pupils, with 21.1% of this group thinking it was not good for their health. Pupils who strongly disliked PE also tended not to think it was good for their health. One male pupil emphasised PE's role in supporting both physical and mental health:

It keeps you fit, I think. That is a massive benefit. [...] When I was doing revision it's like a break in the school day. You might have had a full morning of Maths or something, Maths and English, and then you've got this little chunk of PE that splits it up and allows you to just sort of calm down and start the day sort of again. (MI)

The fact that a number of pupils felt PE was not good for health, usually citing mental health, was reinforced by five of the 12 pupils interviewed. However, one male pupil who identified as being

less able in PE was able to distinguish between what he regarded as problematic methods and positive outcomes:

I'm very confident, and if someone criticises me, I'd, sort of, contest that. I'd be, like, "Why?" I stand up for myself. I think those are quite good skills to have in life, but I don't think you should have learnt them by being shouted at and, like, having mental and moral pain. (MI)

In relation to visibility, pupils deemed 'overweight' or who felt PE was detrimental to their mental health were more likely to seek invisibility than those with capital assets such as a sporting physique, who were more likely to desire and enjoy visibility. A state school pupil spoke of how weight has curtailed his sport participation:

I was quite a good cyclist. I was top of my county, but I had some issues with eating, and I got quite overweight, and I don't do that anymore. Cycling was something I enjoyed. (MS)

Virtually all pupils understood the physical health benefits, but the situational reality of PE affected their engagement. There was no universal consensus among pupils about the potential mental health benefits of PE. Although the literature tends to associate PE with improved mental health (Carter & Micheli, 2012), it also refers to pupils being or feeling bullied, marginalised, and humiliated (Lauritsalo et al., 2015). Pupils may feel the pressure of being watched much more intensely in PE than any other subject (Cameron & Humbert, 2020). This was reflected in this study, where mental health was also related to issues of physique and physicality. In PE, pupils' bodies and physique are exposed and their skill levels are exposed in ways that are not replicated in other subject lessons in school. Perhaps as a result, the issue of weight emerged in the findings. One pupil advocated for PE to, 'lose loads of weight so no one bullies you' (FS). Children deemed to be overweight are more likely to be victims of bullying (Brixval et al., 2012) and consequently can try to avoid the visibility of PE (Puhl & Luedicke, 2012). Although both male and female pupils raised these issues, it was a bigger issue for girls and the exposure associated with the changing room affected their self-esteem and socio-cultural standing. Pupils with an 'acceptable' sporting physique gained capital through visibility (Bourdieu, 1986; Fiset, 2011).

Development and ability

Pupils who identified their ability in PE as 'good', were far more likely to feel that PE develops skills (65%) than those who felt that their ability was 'not good' (21%). This could obviously be linked to performance and how the pupils see skills development. They felt that PE and sport, 'develop skills and improve your ability in the sport you choose to do' (MS) and 'learning how to play sports and to get better by playing it outside and inside school' (MI). Although these comments relate to sports skills, they did see PE and sport developing other abilities, notably social skills, and life skills. One pupil advocated for pupils of the same ability to be put together in a group to help their development:

If you're already at a really good standard in school, obviously there's people going to be in your set who aren't as good, so you're not really going to progress in a PE lesson. (MS)

This is explored in more detail below. Another pupil had a personal experience of being given fewer opportunities to develop due to his perceived low ability in rugby:

Because I wasn't ever good at rugby because I can't even catch a ball, I automatically got put in the D team and often ended up not playing anything, so I wasn't then involved. (MI)

Extending the discussion from the previous section, notions of physique also contribute to ability construction. Ability construction, like skill level, is open to scrutiny from peers and teachers and can promote or marginalise pupils due to their habitus or capital (Evans, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010). This in turn can stimulate or reduce pupils' desire for visibility in PE. Ability construction can limit or enhance opportunities for pupils. Pupils in both schools revealed how 'less able'

Table 2. Themes and visibility.

Theme	Visibility	Invisibility
Participation	Enjoyment	Dislike
	Competitiveness	Marginalisation
	Hegemonic masculine traits	Non-hegemonic masculine traits
Choice	What to do in PE	No choice: what to do in PE
	How to do PE	No choice: how to do PE
	Who to do PE with	No choice: who to do PE with
Health	Sporting physique	Overweight
	Supports mental health	Detrimental to mental health
	Fitness	Lack of fitness
Development and ability	High ability	Low ability
	Skills development	No skills development
Pressure	Praise	Censure
	High self-esteem	Humiliation

pupils were neglected or sidelined by teachers from early in their school career, and ‘ended up sitting on the grass watching them [high ability] play’ (MI), thus rendering them invisible.

Pressure

The questionnaire survey revealed that significant numbers of pupils in both schools felt under pressure in PE: 35.4% in the state school and 42.8% in the independent school felt under pressure. Pupils also highlighted their feelings of discomfort in PE, with one pupil commenting, ‘I feel pressured to do sports that I don’t feel comfortable doing. I also feel that sport gets taken very seriously all the time which I don’t enjoy’ (MI). Another remarked that, ‘I just hate it and it makes me feel uncomfortable’ (FS).

Although pressure was felt by some pupils in every ability grouping, it increased as self-identified ability decreased. One reason for this was alluded to by a pupil who identified a negative feedback loop which was created by being criticised:

I think if it’s happened to me it will happen to other people, and they’ll feel the same way. Obviously, if you’re better at sports then you won’t get shouted at, or if you do it correctly the first time, you won’t get shouted at, and then you won’t have this whole chain reaction. (MI)

The relation of pressure to visibility is immediately apparent, as increasing pressure to perform at a given level or succeed makes those who do so more prominent and those who do not more likely to seek invisibility, as the final quotation above underlines. Hills (2007) found that in girls’ PE, exclusion tends to be related to judgements about bodies, teasing and marginalisation in team games, all forms of pressure which can have enduring intrinsic consequences. It is important to emphasise that these factors are all also apparent in boys’ PE (Hay & Macdonald, 2010) and had been experienced by some pupils in this study.

In summary, the preceding discussion of the findings underlines the interdependence of the conceptual themes which emerged from the data analysis and the centrality of the overarching concept of visibility. Table 2 maps pupils’ tendency towards visibility or invisibility on to each of the themes.

Pupils’ solutions

The pupils also proposed solutions aimed at improving their experience of PE. They centred around two issues relevant to visibility: grouping by ability and increasing choice. These issues could suggest pupils had an intuitive understanding that they could not change doxa due to the powerful agents involved and the associated capital in PE (Bourdieu, 1986).

Ability grouping

Grouping by ability was the more common solution proposed by pupils. Importantly, it was suggested by pupils at all stages of the ability spectrum. It was felt that ability grouping would

make less able pupils feel more comfortable, which would reduce the censure and pressure they faced, encouraging them to become less marginalised (Hills, 2007) and hence more visible. More able pupils were concerned with being offered more opportunities for development and challenge, to allow them to be stretched by able peers towards higher achievement. In each case, visibility could be enhanced.

The preoccupation with ability grouping reflects Wilkinson and Penney's (2021) finding that low-ability pupils are more likely to participate in PE when grouped by ability. It contrasts with research on ability grouping in education in general, which has repeatedly found few or no benefits and indeed disadvantages for low-attaining groups (Francis et al., 2017). However, this research has tended to focus on subjects other than PE. Although relational interaction occurs in all subjects, it appears that such relationships can be more extreme in PE, which affects pupils' desire to be visible. Pupils often develop techniques to hide in PE in order not to lose face either in the subject or socially (Ntoumanis et al., 2010). Translated into an approach for encouraging visibility, ability setting can be regarded as allowing differentiation in how much pressure individuals accept (high for some, reduced for others). This is likely to increase their enjoyment, a precursor for participation, and lead to positive outcomes for development, health, and learning. However, pupils may contest the ability group in which they are placed or be 'typecast' in a particular group across sports or activities, which could inhibit educational opportunities for those in 'lower' groups (Wilkinson & Penney, 2021). This would have to be balanced against the potential benefits in terms of increasing participation and visibility.

Increasing choice

The desire for more choice was the earliest theme to emerge from the study, in the first focus group, and was also central to the second solution offered by pupils. They identified three aspects of choice: what they do, how they do it and who they do it with. The latter links choice to their other solution of ability setting, as many were unambiguous that they wanted to undertake PE with pupils of equivalent ability.

Choice was closely related to participation, as many pupils thought that taking part in more enjoyable activities would boost their confidence and self-esteem, which has been associated with multiple benefits for learning more generally (Hattie, 2009). In such circumstances, although still mandatory, participation would no longer seem forced. For example, an independent school pupil, who was the first in the study to raise the issue of choice, enjoyed playing badminton outside of school with a friend. If badminton had been offered in school, it may have encouraged him to be more visible in PE. As an approach to encouraging visibility, choice might create enjoyment, which is a precursor of visible involvement and hence participation. It may also reduce pressure, creating benefits for health and development. However, the challenge lies in balancing choice with practicality in terms of what can be offered simultaneously and ensuring that additional choice does not create additional pressure on pupils. Further research is required to explore the viability of these proposals.

Conclusion

The voices of pupils accessed by this study suggest there is a stark duality of co-existence between those who flourish and those who struggle in PE. One pupil feels highly able, has developed the habitus necessary to enjoy the social field of PE, finds it relaxing and healthy and feels they have choice in what they do. In the same lesson, another pupil dreads PE because they regard themselves as 'low ability', lacking the capital to thrive in the social field of the PE lesson, suffer from pressure that affects their health, and feel they have no choice in what they do in a subject they have to endure until they are 16. The experiences

of pupils in the latter group are largely negative, whereas, for those in the former, PE can be self-affirming. This manifests itself in their differing attitudes towards visibility in PE. Listening to pupils' voices has not only exposed this dichotomy, but also suggested solutions which pupils feel could improve and enrich the experience of all in PE. Some may argue implementing pupil-led policy and practice is risky. Potentially unforeseen consequences of the proposals suggested have already been identified. In addition, pupils' views may be feared by some teachers and institutions (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002). In comparison with core subjects such as Maths, PE is itself relatively 'invisible' as a curriculum subject (BBC, 2019). This may be related to the fact that although it remains compulsory until age 16, only a minority of pupils take PE at GCSE level (national subject qualification in England usually undertaken from ages 14–16). Consequently, the performance of most pupils is not reflected in accountability measures, making it perhaps less risky for schools to act on pupils' proposals to improve PE. Doing so has the potential to lead to benefits in terms of health, skills development, and attitudes towards learning.

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Based on the experiences of pupils in two-year groups in two schools, its findings are not generalisable but are contextualised so that schools in similar contexts can find parallels in them. Its focus was on 'high' and 'low' ability pupils, rather than those who locate themselves between these extremes. The views of other powerful agents in schools, teachers, and school leaders, were deliberately excluded, which has restricted the scope of its suggestions for change. However, significance should be found in the fact that the pupils in this study were able to express their views extensively, demonstrate a coherent and mature understanding of the nature of PE and its effects on them, and propose solutions to improve others' experiences. Schools tend to offer PE as a single diet, but it is noticeable that the improvements suggested were aimed at increasing differentiation and were made by pupils across the proficiency spectrum, which would enable the diet to differ in form and content. This study suggests that schools need to adopt a more nuanced approach to PE, which takes into account the complexity of its social field and the variation of children's experiences of and responses to it. This might involve listening more carefully to pupils' voices, but also allowing them opportunities to engage and interact with adult constructions of PE, reflecting this study's bringing together pupil voice with adult analysis and theorising.

The process of listening to a pupil's voice is arguably at least as important as its outcome. While it is difficult to learn from pupils' views if schools or teachers are not prepared to hear them (Bragg, 2001), if they speak, schools and teachers must listen and respond, even if their views are familiar (Cook-Sather, 2006, 2009). The independent school involved in the research has already listened to the voice of their pupils and implemented change based on the findings. It is proposed that further research will analyse the impact of these changes on how PE is taught. Pupil voice in relation to PE remains relatively silent, but the fact that the study has highlighted the importance of another sense metaphor, that of (in)visibility, suggests that schools need to take a multi-level and sophisticated approach to improving PE, loosening some of its connections with competitive sport, and encouraging young people *actively* to participate in a range of physical activity, which has so many important long-term benefits.

Note

1. Pupils are identified in three categories by gender and school (FS, MI, MS), so that 'FS' indicates a female pupil at the state school, 'MS' a male pupil at the state school and 'MI' a male pupil at the independent school. However, these three categories contain a range of individual voices.

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