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Physical education teachers’ continuing professional development in Health Related Exercise

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Physical education teachers’ continuing professional development in Health Related Exercise

**Background:** As a component of the physical education curriculum, Health Related Exercise (HRE) has been subject to intensive critique in terms of its status, organisation and expression in schools. Concerns and questions have also been raised about physical education teachers’ professional knowledge of health and the extent to which HRE features within their continuing professional development (CPD) profiles.

**Aims:** This paper presents findings from a research project which investigated English secondary physical education teachers’ experiences, views and understandings of HRE and related CPD (HRE-CPD). It also draws upon existing research, sociological theory and the concept of ‘philosophies’ in order to present an explanatory model which may help the physical education profession better understand the often problematic organisation and expression of HRE in schools.

**Methods:** The research was undertaken via a two-phase, mixed-method study. Phase one consisted of a survey questionnaire, which was completed by 112 secondary physical education teachers. Phase two involved semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers from the phase one sample.

**Results and Discussion:** The survey revealed that approximately half of the physical education teachers who participated in the study reported to have had no prior professional experience of HRE before teaching it, and most had not taken part in any CPD related to health and lifelong physical activity in the previous 12 months (80%) or three years (70%). Further, the teachers’ responses to both the survey and the interviews suggest that HRE within physical education continues to be characterised by incoherence and misunderstanding. The interdependent and emerging themes which provided an explanation for this include: i) the tendency for the teachers’ philosophies to bear the hallmark of sport and fitness related ideologies; ii) many of the teachers’ narrow understandings of HRE and how best to teach it; iii) the teachers’ largely misguided confidence in their ability to teach HRE; iv) a general lack of teacher engagement with any CPD related to health and lifelong physical activity.

**Conclusions:** With regard to HRE, both the ‘I’ in ITE and the ‘C’ in CPD appear to have been overlooked, and this inevitably raises questions about the degree to which teachers are prepared to teach this area of the curriculum. It is argued that now is the time for action, and that relevant, effective and ongoing CPD has the capacity to address the problematic teaching of HRE and develop in teachers the knowledge, skills and understandings that are necessary to promote healthy, active lifestyles among young people. Many physical education teachers are not engaging in HRE-CPD but in order to disturb common and often narrow understandings of HRE it is arguably necessary What a conundrum!

Keywords: physical education; teachers; continuing professional development; health related exercise, sociology.
Summary for Practitioners

This paper presents findings from a study that explored English secondary physical education teachers’ experiences, views and understandings of Health Related Exercise (HRE) and related continuing professional development (HRE-CPD). The results revealed that many of the teachers had not engaged professionally with HRE before being expected to teach it. There was a tendency for the teachers to demonstrate narrow understandings of HRE, with many seeming preoccupied with sport and fitness. Given the pressures upon physical education teachers to promote healthy, active lifestyles, their lack of HRE-CPD is an issue. This paper highlights the issue and discusses some contributing factors, and a forthcoming paper draws on broader findings from the same research project to suggest how it can be overcome.

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been increasing academic, political and media interest, on a global scale, in the role of schools and physical education in promoting healthy, active lifestyles. Indeed, there is a long-standing assumption that schools generally play a fundamental role in producing healthy nations (Penney and Jess, 2004; Salmon et al. 2007) and that physical education and Health Related Exercise (HRE) specifically are key vehicles through which to promote health and physical activity among young people (Harris, 2010; Kirk, 2006; Seghers, de Martelaer and Cardon, 2009; Stratton et al., 2008; Webb and Quennerstedt, 2010). In England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, this assumption has consistently been manifested within various government policies, initiatives and documents (Bulger, Mohr, Carson and Wiegand, 2001; Cale, 2000; Evans et al. 2008; Gard and Wright, 2005; Penney, 2008; Wright & Burrows, 2004). For example, ‘Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives’ (Department of Health and Department for Children, Schools and
Families, 2008), ‘Healthy Weight 2008: Australia’s’ Future’ (Department of Health and Aging, 2003) and the ‘Physical Education for Progress Act’ (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) have all served to reinforce the view that schools, and physical education in particular, have a responsibility to promote health and physical activity.

Public messages also continue to place schools and most notably physical education in a prominent position with regards to the health of young people (Kirk, 2006; Rich, 2011). An article from an English newspaper (The Guardian), for example, reported that a leading doctor “accused schools of making children more overweight after government figures showed rates of obesity rise” (Batty, 2008). In the same article “Dr David Haslam, Clinical Director of the National Obesity Forum called for children to do more physical education” in order to combat the rise in overweight children (Batty, 2008). These kinds of messages have, over time, presented physical education as both a problem and a solution in terms of particular public health issues such as obesity (Gard and Wright, 2005; Webb and Quennerstedt, 2010). Given claims that physical educators have a responsibility for public health promotion, it is considered important to explore their experiences, views and understandings of the most obvious vehicle through which physical activity and health can be promoted within the curriculum, namely HRE.

HRE is known by a range of terms globally (such as Health Related Fitness and Health Based Physical Education) and is a statutory component of physical education curricula in England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States and beyond. At the risk of over-simplifying, the purpose of HRE is to promote in pupils the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to lead healthy, active lifestyles (Harris, 2010; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007). Within the most recent National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) in England, for
example, HRE is concerned with the ‘key concept’ of ‘healthy, active lifestyles’ (QCA, 2007, 191) and it seeks to promote the ‘key process’ of ‘making informed choices about healthy, active lifestyles’ (QCA, 2007, 193). Essentially, HRE is a context within which pupils should learn through active participation in purposeful activity embracing a broad and balanced range of educative experiences (Cale and Harris, 2009b).

Although HRE has been a statutory component of physical education curricula since the late 1980s and early 1990s, literature reveals continuing concerns over its status, organisation and expression in schools (Almond and Harris, 1997; Harris, 1994, 2009; Trost, 2006). More recently, questions have also been raised about physical education teachers’ professional knowledge of health and the extent to which they have engaged with continuing professional development in the area (HRE-CPD) (Cale, Harris and Leggett, 2002; Trost, 2006; Ward, Cale and Webb, 2007). Armour and Harris (2008) have suggested that the physical education profession seems uncertain about its role in public health, unclear about the kinds of health knowledge required, and the level of responsibility it is willing to accept for delivering health outcomes.

The work of Leggett (2008) confirms concerns relating to the expression of HRE and suggests that whilst rhetoric within the physical education domain tends to focus on healthy, active lifestyles, HRE in practice often mitigates against this by focusing upon the ‘products’ of sport performance and fitness. This issue is not new and Harris (1997, 2010), amongst others, has continued to make this point for over a decade. While sport performance and fitness are valuable components of physical education, it is argued that an over emphasis upon these products as opposed to the processes underpinning them can limit pupil learning and engagement.
In terms of professional knowledge, the concerns surrounding physical education teachers’ HRE knowledge are not confined to England. Similar issues have been identified in Australia (Brown, 2003) and North America (Castelli and Williams, 2007). Castelli and Williams (2007) carried out a study whereby they tested the Health-Related Fitness\(^1\) (HRF) knowledge of 73 physical education teachers. Whilst the findings revealed that the teachers were very confident in their perceived knowledge of HRF, their test scores did not meet the standard of achievement expected of a ninth-grade student. It was thus concluded that a large proportion of the teachers did not have the necessary knowledge to teach pupils in, through and about HRF and consequently CPD was highlighted as an issue of “the highest importance” (Castelli and Williams, 2007, 14).

Over the past decade the concept of CPD has become increasingly valued, at least at policy level (Keay, 2005, 2007a), and it has been suggested that CPD is “an expectation of all professionals” (Day and Sachs, 2004, p.4) and “both a contractual right and a contractual duty” for all teachers (Johnson, 2001, p.5). That is to say, if teachers are to be ‘professionals’ then it is necessary for them to continually engage with professional development. The increasing value attached to CPD has been evidenced by extensive government investment in England through the National CPD Strategy (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2001) and the Department of Education’s ‘National Strategies’ (2008) which seek to raise standards of teaching and learning by encouraging teachers to maximise their CPD opportunities (Day et al., 2006; Keay, 2005). It has been argued that the heightened interest in teacher CPD is associated with the growing acknowledgement of its effect

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\(^1\) Health-related fitness is another term for HRE and one that is commonly used in North America. (HRF is also used by some in the UK).
upon pupil learning (Armour and Yelling, 2007; Borko, 2004; DfEE, 2001, Guskey
and Sparks, 2004). Whilst teacher CPD should not be viewed as a panacea for all that
is wrong with education (Armour and Yelling, 2007; Fishman, Marx, Best and Tal,
2003), research suggests that it can contribute in a positive way towards the quality of
teaching and learning in schools (Armour and Yelling, 2007). With regard to HRE in
particular, and as noted earlier, questions have been raised over physical education
teachers’ knowledge of the area, and the extent to which it features within their CPD
profiles (Almond and Harris, 1997; Armour and Harris, 2008; Armour and Yelling,
2004; Cale, Harris and Leggett, 2002; Castelli and Williams, 2007).

Acknowledging that ITE is, of course, also a crucial part of the teacher CPD
process, it is therefore concerning that the structure and funding of ITE in England often
serves to “limit prospective teachers’ experiences of Health-Related Exercise within the
curriculum” (Harris, 2005, p.91). Similarly, in North America there is evidence to suggest
that ITE “may inadequately address the needs of prospective physical educators in the
areas of physical activity promotion and health-related physical fitness” (Bulger et al.,

While physical education teachers’ experiences of HRE-CPD have been raised
as a matter of concern, the reasons underpinning these remain relatively unexplored.
In light of the issues identified above and the relative gap in the literature, this paper
presents and discusses findings from a research project which explored English
secondary physical education teachers’ experiences, views and understandings of
HRE and HRE-CPD. The concepts of ‘philosophies’² (Armour and Jones, 1998;

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² Teachers’ philosophies are grounded in their context, and comprise an array of beliefs and underlying
ideologies that result from “personal and sporting biographies and…working context” (Green, 2003,
p.146).
Evans, 1992; Green, 2003) and ‘residual ideologies’ (Kirk, 1988) are drawn upon in order to illuminate the role of prior knowledge and experience in teachers’ knowledge construction as it relates to HRE (Kirk, 1988). Finally, a model is presented in order to explain the relationships between some of the concepts and themes which emerged from the study.

The Research Process

The objectives of inquiry were addressed via two phases of research. Phase one involved a survey questionnaire completed with a sample of physical education teachers from secondary schools across England. Phase two comprised semi-structured interviews with a sample of twelve teachers drawn from the original broader sample. From a figurational sociological perspective, if one is to understand a particular social phenomenon it is imperative to trace its socio-historical development. On this basis it was important not to address the teaching of HRE as an issue in time but, rather, to attempt to trace the teachers’ experiences, views and understandings over time (i.e. from their own school experiences, to their experiences of ITE, to their current experiences and views of HRE and their CPD).

Acknowledging that teachers do not exist in a vacuum, a process or ‘figurational’ sociological approach (Elias, 1978, 2000) allowed for an appreciation of the complex and dynamic web of human interdependencies within which the teachers were enmeshed (van Krieken, 1998). As part of a socio-historical frame, characteristic of a figurational approach (Mennell, 1992), the central concept of ‘figuration’ was used to illuminate the network of interdependent relationships (figurations) which served to both enable and constrain the physical education teachers’ engagement with

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3 The term ‘residual ideologies’ refers to the influence of prior knowledge and experiences upon physical education teachers’ orientation and practices.
HRE and HRE-CPD. The concept of figuration encouraged a consideration of the ways in which the teachers were enabled and constrained in certain ways as a result of ever-changing, multi-directional relationships with others (Green, 2003; Mennell, 1992). For example, teachers’ day-to-day practices can be influenced by the pupils they teach, their past and present colleagues and policy makers.

**Phase One**

A total of 112 teachers agreed to participate in the study. They were selected from a proportionate, stratified random sample of schools from Local Authorities (LAs) across England. The Schools’ Web Directory (www.schoolswebdirectory.co.uk) for England identified 148 LAs and each was categorised according to size⁴ - small, medium, large - and a proportionate number of schools were selected from each category. Based on these categories, there were two small, 121 medium and 24 large LAs. Two schools were selected from each small LA, three schools from each medium LA, and four from each large LA. Within each LA, schools were listed in alphabetical order and, where possible, every tenth school was selected. With LAs with less than 10 schools, every fifth school was chosen. The majority (90%) were state schools, 13% of which were Specialist Sports Colleges⁵, and the remainder were independent or academies. Having selected the schools, questionnaires were sent to the Head of Department (HoD) for physical education within each. Accompanying the questionnaire was a self-addressed envelope and a covering letter requesting permission for a physical education teacher within the department to take part in the study.

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⁴ Small (comprising 2-5 secondary schools), medium (6-49 secondary schools) and large (more than 49 secondary schools).
⁵ Specialist Sports Colleges are part of a broader government initiative, ‘Specialist schools’, which position PE and sport at the centre of the curriculum, using it as a vehicle to develop and improve learning opportunities for all.
study. More specifically, and in order to reduce the risk of ‘sampling error’, male and female physical education teachers representing different levels of teaching experience were included within the sample (Day et al., 2006) by asking each HoD to ensure that a teacher of a particular sex and experience completed the questionnaire. Experience categories comprised of: i) 0-7 years; ii) 8-15 years; and iii) 16 plus years of experience, organised around the ‘Professional Life Phases’ proposed by Day and colleagues (2006). Emphasising the difference between professional life phases highlights the processual nature of teaching and furthermore acknowledges that teachers are dynamic, continually changing and far from homogenous (Elias, 1978; Green, 2008; van Krieken, 1998).

The survey questionnaire was developed to explore the physical education teachers’ experiences, views and understandings of HRE and HRE-CPD. Their engagement with physical education CPD (PE-CPD) more generally was also investigated in order to provide a benchmark for comparison. From a figurational perspective, social phenomena are determined by socio-historical processes and are directed towards future events (van Krieken, 1998). When designing the questionnaire, therefore, it was considered important to avoid being present-centred (Elias, 1987) but to look at the teachers’ engagement with HRE and HRE-CPD over time.

The survey comprised four sections which focused on: i) demographics; and the teachers’ experiences, views and understandings of ii) HRE; iii) PE-CPD; and iv) HRE-CPD. With reference to Tsangaridou’s (2006, p.487) ‘categories of experience’, and in order to explore engagement over time, particular attention was paid to the teachers’ HRE and HRE-CPD experiences, as applicable: i) at school as a pupil; ii) during their ITE; iii) whilst teaching; and vi) within their general life experiences. The
questionnaires were coded for follow-up purposes. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were entered into SPSS 16.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for analysis and descriptive statistics were employed. Responses to qualitative questions were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo 8 software. The use of this software is explained in the following section.

**Phase Two**

A purposive sample of twelve teachers\(^6\) (six male and six female) was drawn from the phase one sample. In selecting the teachers, the intention was to obtain a group that included males and females from different types of schools within different LAs. Attention in selection was also paid to the teachers’ reported experiences of HRE, PE-CPD and HRE-CPD, with those chosen having varying amounts of each. The interviews provided an opportunity to expand upon, clarify and add meaning to the questionnaire findings. Whilst each interview schedule was slightly different, all were organised into five sections and, as with the survey, focused broadly on the teachers’ experiences, views and understandings of HRE, PE-CPD and HRE-CPD. Interviews took place in a quiet room, were recorded with permission from the interviewees, and lasted between 50-90 minutes. Following the interviews, the transcripts were prepared and electronically mailed to each teacher for them to check for accuracy.

The transcripts were coded using NVivo 8 software. This allowed for the generation and organisation of ideas, and the gathering of data by topic or ‘node’ (Silverman, 2006). Examples of the nodes which emerged included ‘professionalisation’, ‘sport’ and ‘fitness’. In analysing the data, the work of Elias (1978) and, in particular, the concept of ‘figuration’ proved useful. As highlighted

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\(^6\) The decision to interview 12 teachers was informed by the literature including a review of 22 studies involving teachers which revealed an average sample size of 12 (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004).
earlier, locating the teachers within their historically-rooted figuration encouraged an appreciation of the social interdependencies (e.g. with their Head of Department) and processes (e.g. the privileging of sport within physical education) which had come to both enable and constrain their experiences of HRE and HRE-CPD over time.

Physical Education teachers’ experiences of HRE over time

The findings revealed that less than half (43%) of the teachers reported to have been taught HRE whilst they were at school. Of those who had, many (63%) had had a positive experience of the area. Most of the teachers were taught about HRE as pupils, mainly through cross-country running (59%) and circuit training (38%). Focusing upon ITE, approximately half (49%) of the teachers had engaged with HRE but approximately three quarters of the sample felt that the amount (76%), content (74%) and structure (73%) of their HRE-ITE, as well as the support (79%) they received was inadequate. Over half also felt that their ITE had failed to prepare them to teach PE generally (58%) and HRE specifically (73%). That said, most of the teachers reported to be ‘confident’ or ‘very confident’ in teaching HRE (86%) and viewed it as a ‘valuable’ or ‘extremely valuable’ aspect of Physical Education (96%).

Overall, the survey revealed that only half of the physical education teachers reported to have had prior experience of HRE (either at school or during their ITE) before being expected to teach it. Furthermore, only a minority had taken part in any related CPD in the previous 12 months (20%) or three years (30%) (see Figure 1).

INSERT TABLE 1

These findings confirm concerns highlighted in previous research which suggest that health and lifelong physical activity are two areas which tend to be absent from teachers’ CPD profiles (Armour and Yelling, 2004; Castelli and Williams, 2007; Harris, 2010; Kulinna, McCaughtry, Martin, Cothran and Faust, 2008; Trost, 2006).
The findings also raise questions about the extent to which the physical education teachers in the study were equipped to teach pupils about health and lifelong physical activity.

The teachers’ lack of professional engagement HRE was also reflected in the interviews, with many of the teachers reinforcing how their professional development had not adequately prepared them to teach HRE:

I’ve never been on a course for HRE… I guess that it’s (HRE-CPD) just never been made readily available. (Nathan, male, 4-7 years of experience)

In terms of HRE I wouldn’t say I’ve really learnt how to teach it. (Toni, female, 8-15 years of experience)

There hasn’t been CPD to do with HRE. (Ethan, male, 8-15 years of experience)

As stated earlier, teachers are enabled and constrained in certain ways as a result of ever-changing, multi-directional relationships with others. During their ITE, for example, pre-service teachers’ engagement with HRE is very much constrained by often time-poor teacher educators. As just noted, almost three-quarters (73%) of the teachers felt they had not been adequately prepared to teach HRE during their ITE.

The quotations below are representative of most of the teachers who were interviewed.

It would have been valuable to have had some insight into HRE (during ITE)... I had to work my ass off to build my resources and knowledge around it. (Sophie, female, 0-3 years of experience)

Regarding HRE, my ITE was pretty much bog standard. I definitely would have wanted more training on the course and info on delivery. (Stuart, male, 4-7 years of experience)

These quotations support previous work which discusses the importance of ITE, whilst also acknowledging that it may not be adequately preparing prospective
physical educators to meet their professional responsibilities related to HRE (Bulger et al., 2001; Fox and Harris, 2003).

While many of the teachers had not engaged with HRE-CPD, most (87%) had participated in some form of professional development in the previous 12 months and the majority reported positive experiences. These findings thus highlight the disparity between the teachers’ engagement with professional development generally and health related CPD specifically. As highlighted earlier, given the on-going concerns surrounding the teaching of HRE, together with the responsibility placed on physical education teachers to promote healthy, active lifestyles, the lack of teacher engagement in health related CPD is an issue.

Opportunities for HRE-CPD do exist in England (for example, HRE modules were offered as part of the National CPD Strategy [DfEE, 2001]) but the earlier quotations from Nathan and Ethan suggest that a limited awareness of these is an issue. Given the teachers’ general lack of awareness of the HRE-CPD available, it is not surprising that many of the teachers had not experienced any. Clearly, if teachers are not aware of opportunities to engage in HRE-CPD they will not access them, regardless of whether they recognise the need to do so. This issue needs addressing sooner rather than later.

For the minority of teachers who had experienced HRE-CPD, both the survey and interview data suggested that their experiences had typically focused upon fitness testing, circuit training and how to use fitness equipment. For example, during the interview one teacher stated “We recently just did fitness testing which was run by the Head of Department and the year coordinator” (Ethan, male, 8-15 years of experience). While this experience may have been useful in some respects, it does not
reflect the broad and multi-dimensional nature of HRE and is likely to do little to further enhance or develop teachers’ experiences and understandings of the area.

With regards to the teaching of HRE, in a third of the schools (33%) the physical education teachers did not have access to unit or lesson plans or resources to support their practice. As Harris (1997) noted following similar findings from her study, a lack of planning and resources raises questions about structure, progression and coherence within HRE. Moreover, their absence in some schools could be taken to reflect a generally ‘ad-hoc’ attitude towards HRE and perhaps teaching more broadly, as evidenced by comments from some of the teachers interviewed:

It’s an easy lesson to deliver more to the point... **ad hoc.** (Toni, female, 8-15 years of experience)

We don’t have a unit on health-related issues unless they [the pupils] opt for GCSE PE. A health-related strand runs through all units but the topic **is not set in stone.** We don’t have a scheme of work. (Joanne, female, 4-7 years of experience)

While planned and well-resourced HRE (or physical education more generally) does not necessarily equate to a progressive, coherent and educationally sound programme, it would seem to be one way of maximising this possibility.

The NCPE in England outlines the content to be taught within physical education but does not stipulate how it should or could be taught. Given this flexibility, it seems the majority of the teachers in this study chose to teach HRE predominantly though fitness related activities (usually fitness testing and circuit training), with links often being made to sports performance. For example:

Implicit in all lessons, all physical education lessons is the fitness element… it’s gotta run through all the activities that you run, they’ve gotta have that fitness element, it has to be there. (Philip, male, 30+ years of experience)

Fitness is prioritised… HRE is obviously to do with how fit we are. (Fred, male, 8-15 years of experience)
For rugby and football we try and do a number of fun tests with the kids based around the bleep test and we incorporate tackle bags, kicking skills and things like that so we try and make it a bit more specific to sport … and basketball skills into circuit training, so instead of just doing weights and press ups and sit ups, they are doing skills of a certain game so they are learning skills and doing repetitions of skills instead of repetitions of press ups. (Nathan, male, 4-7 years of experience)

The fitness orientated approach to HRE reflected in these quotes is not a new phenomenon (Capel, 2007; Green, 2008; Leggett et al., 2008; Penney, 1998). Indeed, the findings suggest that little has changed since the earlier work of Harris (1994; 1997) which revealed that physical education teachers often focused upon fitness rather than the broader concept of health.

While the findings paint a relatively bleak picture for HRE, it is important to highlight that there were also some positive findings from the research. For example, one teacher, Sophie (female, 0-3 years of experience), was an anomaly with regards to her experiences, views and understandings of HRE. During the interview with Sophie it was clear that, in comparison to the other teachers, her philosophies and practices were not as heavily circumscribed by residual sport and fitness related ideologies. Rather, she was found to have a broader HRE biography, and ‘physical activity for health’ featured more heavily within her philosophies. After competing in gymnastics at regional level, Sophie suggested that her interest in HRE was:

mostly down to working in the gym at university. After my boss forced me to deliver classes, I learned I actually loved it and so I brought that into school with Fit ball and Boxercise lessons. I also enjoy doing the Pump It Up DVDs ‘n’ stuff like that at home so I like challenging the kids with the routines I pick up. (Sophie, female, 0-3 years of experience)

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7 Although sport and fitness ideologies are discussed together, they are indeed separate but often related.
8 The term ‘HRE biography’ refers to the teachers’ views and experiences of HRE across their life span.
From the above it is interesting to note that the experiences which Sophie valued and which had prepared her most to teach HRE tended to be from general ‘life experiences’ (O’Sullivan, 2005; Tsangaridou, 2006) as opposed to experiences gained at school, during her ITE or whilst teaching. Similarly, another teacher stated during his interview that “A lot of my HRE knowledge comes from personal interest - magazines, websites and DVDs” (Stuart, male, 16-30 years of experience).

Although popular media can provide useful information it may not always be wholly accurate, reliable and appropriate for an educational context. In our view, the resources physical education teachers primarily draw upon to inform their teaching of HRE should be specific to the area and in keeping with National (or State) Curriculum requirements. As revealed earlier, the teachers were rarely aware of CPD opportunities and resources that could support and guide their teaching of HRE. Consequently, some may have felt it necessary to acquire HRE knowledge through more ‘popular’ or ‘public’ means. This trend has been discussed in broader terms by Giroux (2004) and more recently Rich (2011), who argue that learning and ‘public pedagogies’ related to health occur in and through “sports and entertainment media, cable television networks, [and] churches...” (Giroux, 2003, 497), as well as in schools and universities. With this in mind, the perhaps limiting influence of popular pedagogies upon physical education teachers’ (and therefore pupils’) knowledge and understandings of health and HRE should not be underestimated.

The limitations of teachers uncritically drawing upon popular pedagogies are further heightened when we consider the numerous developments within education in recent years which are of relevance to HRE (such as curriculum revisions, new physical activity recommendations for young people, and the introduction of government initiatives such as ‘Healthy Schools’). If physical education teachers are
to be effective, then it would seem important that they are kept abreast of such developments via accessing appropriate resources and CPD opportunities. The findings from the present study, however, suggest that this is not happening in all schools.

**Health Related Exercise: What a conundrum!**

The previous section highlighted physical education teachers’ experiences of HRE over time and revealed a number of issues associated with these. Drawing upon these findings, previous research and the concept of ‘philosophies’, this section presents a model (see Figure 1), referred to as ‘The HRE Conundrum’, in an attempt to explain these issues and better understand the often-problematic organisation and expression of HRE in schools. The model comprises four stages, each of which is discussed in turn.

**INSERT FIGURE 1**

**Physical education teachers’ philosophies: The privileging of sport and fitness**

The tendency for the teachers to focus upon sport and fitness within HRE was arguably a manifestation of their deeply-rooted and often persistent ‘philosophies’ which, for the most part, were strongly attached to sport and fitness ideologies (e.g. sports participation equates to health). This claim supports that of Kirk (1988) and Green (2003) who proposed that residual sport and fitness ideologies permeate many physical education teachers’ philosophies, with their past experiences of physical education and sport leading them to privilege the latter. As a result, teachers generally tend to apply a sporting frame when teaching other components of physical education, including HRE. While the presence of sport and fitness ideologies within physical education is not necessarily negative, an over emphasis upon them at the
expense of a broad and balanced curriculum may limit pupil learning in this context.

Further, given that a large proportion of the teachers had not engaged with HRE-CPD in the three years prior to the research, there will have been limited opportunities for their philosophies to be meaningfully challenged or changed in any way.

**Narrow understandings of HRE: The manifestation of privileged ideologies**

Findings from both phases of the study suggested that the majority of the teachers held narrow, inconsistent and at times contradictory views with regards to the aims of HRE. For example, when asked what they viewed the aims of HRE to be, one teacher reported that it “is to improve fitness levels” (Sarah, female, 4-7 years of experience), whilst another claimed “HRE is a massive way of keeping people within sport” (Nathan, male, 4-7 years of experience). Not only do these quotations reflect a narrow understanding of HRE but also a privileging of sport and fitness in this context.

Traditionally the terms ‘fitness’ and ‘health’ have been confounded (Waddington, Malcolm and Green, 1997) and, as such, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the teachers tended to use one term, usually ‘fitness’, to refer to both concepts. It is suggested that the ideologies and core assumptions that seem to have infiltrated physical education teachers’ philosophies (Capel, 2007; Green, 2003) have constrained their understandings and the development of HRE and reduced the focus to the ‘product’ of physical fitness as opposed to the ‘process’ of lifelong physical activity and health. This reductionist approach was also evidenced by the narrow range of teaching methods which the teachers appeared to adopt. Previous research has likewise acknowledged this as an issue (Harris, 1997; Leggett, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, both the survey and the interview data suggested that fitness testing and circuit training were the most popular vehicles through which to
teach HRE. Yet, Cale and Harris (2009b, 103) suggest that fitness testing in schools “may well represent a misdirected effort in the promotion of healthy lifestyles and physical activity, and that physical education time could therefore be better spent”. Similarly, Garrett and Wrench (2008, 21) contend that “the continuing and unproblematic use of fitness testing in schools and universities might actually contribute to narrow learning outcomes that cause more pain than pleasure”. It is maintained, however, that if carried out appropriately, in an individualised and educational manner as part of a planned HRE programme, fitness testing could be valuable in terms of promoting physical activity (Cale and Harris 2009b; Cale et al., 2007).

**Physical education teachers and HRE: Misguided value and confidence**

How physical education teachers express HRE is likely to be influenced by how they view and understand the area. The survey findings suggested that most of the teachers valued HRE (96%) and were confident in their ability to teach it (86%). The subsequent interviews provided an opportunity for teachers to communicate the reasons underpinning the value they attached to HRE, with one teacher stating:

> If physical education was a wheel, HRE would be the hub. Although it’s the smallest bit, without that everything falls apart... Understanding as well, we really need to push that. Later on, you hope that they will continue to do activities ‘cause they enjoy it, but also for the benefits for their body. (Philip, male, 30+ years of experience)

Whilst it is perhaps encouraging that most of the physical education teachers in this study valued HRE and felt confident teaching it, according to Cale (2000, 167), if teachers are to be successful in promoting healthy, active lifestyles amongst young people it requires “more than an enthusiasm for and belief in its value, importance and role”. Indeed, if the aims of HRE are to be achieved, teachers need to have a clear
understanding of the area, and of the distinction between the terms health, fitness, physical activity and sport. The findings suggest, however, that this was not the case.

In terms of the teachers’ confidence, these findings support those of Castelli and Williams (2007), reported earlier, in that while the teachers claimed to be confident in their ability to teach HRE, their experiences and understandings of the area were often limited. Given that approximately half of the teachers had not formally experienced HRE in any capacity prior to being expected to teach it, it is surprising that the majority felt so confident.

It is proposed that the teachers’ misguided value and confidence were rooted, at least in part, in their philosophies and narrow understandings of HRE. It appears that the teachers felt confident in their ability to promote knowledge, skills and understanding through sport and fitness related activities (such as fitness testing and circuit training), but were less aware of other means by which they could do this. For example, when asked if he felt confident teaching HRE in comparison to other areas of physical education, Thomas (male, 0-3 years of experience) stated,

Yeah, I’m quite a confident teacher through my own sport. When I was playing sport as a participant, a lot of the things we did were related to HRE, fitness testing ‘n’ stuff, so I’ve had experience of doing it myself.

Despite Thomas’s claims of confidence, by focusing upon sport and fitness within his response he highlighted the privileged ideologies within his philosophies, as well as his narrow understanding of the nature and purpose of HRE. While sport may be one valuable vehicle through which to deliver HRE, an over-emphasis on it at the expense of other broader educational experiences is considered limiting.

**HRE and the status quo**

The preceding discussion has confirmed that the historically rooted concerns surrounding the organisation and expression of HRE continue to be evidenced and
reinforced across multiple levels and over time. Further, the present findings suggest
that some of the contributing factors (such as the nature of teachers’ philosophies) to
these concerns are not being addressed. If these findings are representative of physical
education teachers generally, as other literature suggests they are likely to be, then
this is an issue which needs to be addressed. With reference to the HRE conundrum
introduced earlier (figure 1), it would seem that physical education teachers’
philosophies and practices, often bearing the hallmark of sport and fitness ideologies,
need to be challenged via relevant, effective and ongoing HRE-CPD. In the absence
of sufficient challenge, status quo prevails and HRE will continue to be characterised
by incoherence, misunderstanding and an overriding focus on sport and fitness related
knowledge and practice.

Whilst it has been acknowledged that this issue is not confined to England, the
findings presented in this paper originate from the English context and the authors are
therefore not in a position to comment on their transferability to other countries or
contexts. That said, some of the findings may be generalisable in similar curriculum
contexts where HRE (or the equivalent) is a recognised component. It is argued that
now is the time for action, and that relevant, effective and ongoing CPD has the
capacity to address the problematic teaching of HRE and develop in teachers the
knowledge, skills and understandings that are necessary to promote healthy active
lifestyles among young people. Potentially, CPD has an important role to play in
challenging the status quo and in equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills and
understandings they need to effectively teach HRE. The process of CPD is especially
pertinent when the growing acknowledgement of its effect upon pupil learning is
recognised (Armour and Yelling, 2007; Borko, 2004; DfEE, 2001, Guskey and
Sparks, 2004). Yet, given the misguided confidence physical education teachers seem
to have in relation to HRE, encouraging them to participate in any related CPD remains a challenge. Indeed, it appears that, with regards to HRE, both the ‘I’ in ITE and the ‘C’ in CPD have been overlooked and this inevitably raises questions about the degree to which teachers are prepared to teach this area of the curriculum. If physical education teachers’ experiences, views and understandings of HRE are to be broadened, this persisting cycle needs to be disturbed. It seems ironic however, that in order to disturb common and often narrow understandings of HRE, HRE-CPD is arguably necessary. What a conundrum!

References


Table 1. The physical education teachers’ experiences of HRE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Percentage of Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School (as pupil)</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITE</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPD (36 months)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPD (12 months)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: The HRE Conundrum

The HRE Conundrum

- Teachers feel confident in their ability to teach pupils about sport and/or fitness and do not perceive a need to engage with HRE-CFD.

- Teachers have narrow understandings of HRE and tend to teach it through sport and/or fitness related activities (namely fitness testing and circuit training).

- Teachers begin ITE with philosophies which are heavily circumscribed by sport and/or fitness ideologies.

- Dominant ideologies and practices are not challenged and status quo prevails.