Having their say: Young people on healthy, active lifestyles

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INTRODUCTION

There is a curricular expectation in England that teachers will address health outcomes within physical education (PE), in line with the National Curriculum, where one of the four overarching aims across all age ranges is “to ensure that all pupils lead healthy, active lifestyles” (Department for Education, 2013, p.1). But the effectiveness of pedagogical practice around promoting healthy, active lifestyles has been questioned, and concerns have been raised about some of the ways in which it is being approached (Cale et al., 2016). Research has suggested that young people can have somewhat limited knowledge and understanding about leading healthy, active lifestyles. For example, it has been identified that many children view health almost exclusively in the physical sense and can be preoccupied with diet and exercise as moderators of health (Harris et al., 2016). The present study sought to explore pupils’ knowledge, understanding and conceptions of healthy, active lifestyles and to consider the influence that schools and, in particular, PE can have on these, in light of the current National Curriculum for PE.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The study had four phases which took place between June 2015 and December 2016 (see Figure 1). A case study methodology was employed, with two schools in the East Midlands region of England acting as research sites. Phases 2 and 3 involved pupils at each school participating in two focus groups (with the key findings presented being taken from these phases). Participatory methods were employed within pupil focus groups, including the use of concept cartoons (see Figure 2). A ‘youth voice’ approach underpinned the study, which sought to provide a facilitative space for pupils’ voices to be heard, acknowledged and acted upon (Long and Carless, 2010). Data generated were analysed using discourse analysis.

Figure 1: The four phases of the study.

<table>
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<th>PHASE 1</th>
<th>PHASE 2</th>
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<td>• Survey sent to all state secondary schools within the East Midlands region of England (n = 293)</td>
<td>• Focus groups with 120 pupils (aged 11-12) in two case study schools and interviews with 13 PE teachers at the same schools</td>
<td>• Further focus groups with the same 120 pupils at the two case study schools</td>
<td>• Focus groups with the same 13 PE teachers at the two case study schools</td>
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**KEY FINDINGS**

- Almost all pupils thought it was important to lead a healthy, active lifestyle.
- The vast majority of pupils wanted to learn more about how they might lead a healthy, active lifestyle.
- The vast majority of pupils viewed ‘health’ mainly in the physical sense.
- Most pupils talked about health in negative terms, by describing what *not* to do to be healthy, rather than what *to* do.
- Almost all pupils considered health to be a confusing topic and had gaps or errors in their knowledge, with some misunderstandings evident. For example, many pupils conflated health with fitness.
- The vast majority of pupils felt they learned about health mostly outside of school.
- Most pupils did not associate learning about healthy, active lifestyles with PE.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

- PE teachers should endeavour to teach healthy, active lifestyles as a broad and positive concept.
- Consideration needs to be given to what children already know and understand about leading healthy, active lifestyles.
- Learning about healthy, active lifestyles within PE needs to be made explicit to pupils.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Pupils are provided with much health information from a range of different sources and can struggle to comprehend, reconcile and assimilate such information within their own individual assemblages of ‘health’. At present, schools and PE may not be supporting pupils as effectively as they could to interpret health information. However, engaging with pupils’ voices might be a positive step in enhancing pedagogical practices in this area.

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**REFERENCES**


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