

1 “It’s like it doesn’t really matter”: Are teachers accountable and equipped for teaching  
2 primary physical education?  
3

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11

12 **Abstract**

13 In light of the recent trend of outsourcing PE teaching, the aim of this study was to examine  
14 primary teachers’ perspectives of primary PE delivery. 14 in-service primary school teachers  
15 took part in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis led to the development of six  
16 themes. Findings were presented as a written playscript, representing dialogue between a  
17 group primary school teachers, with reflections of four PE subject leads included to  
18 supplement the dialogue. The findings suggest a greater emphasis on accountability, subject  
19 advocacy, teacher professional development and effective deployment of resources are  
20 needed to address the issues raised by the primary teachers.  
21

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45

## 46 **Introduction**

47 Despite the acclaimed benefits and value of Physical Education (PE) (Bailey 2018; Fisher,  
48 Repond, and Dinez 2011; Bailey et al. 2009; McLennan and Thompson 2015), teacher  
49 competency in primary PE has been a persistent concern across the literature (Freak and  
50 Miller 2017; Harris, Cale, and Musson 2011; Lynch and Soukup 2017; Clohessy, Bowles,  
51 and Ní Chróinín 2019). Globally, and historically, these concerns have been attributed to  
52 inadequate initial teacher training (ITT) and professional development (Tsangaridou 2012;  
53 Harris, Cale, and Musson 2012; Elliot et al. 2013; Freak and Miller 2017; Randall and Griggs  
54 2020), insufficient professional knowledge confidence (Randall 2019; Xiang, Lowry, and  
55 McBride 2002) and the subject's perceived low status in schools (Bleazby 2015; Blair and  
56 Capel 2011; Duncombe, Cale, and Harris 2018). Since 2002, English primary schools have  
57 received funding in excess of £2.5 billion with the aim to improve the provision of PE and  
58 school sport (Lawless, Borlase-Bune, and Fleet 2020; APPG 2019; Parnell et al. 2017; Griggs  
59 2018). Funding has been afforded through successive Government initiatives, including the  
60 PE and School Sport Club Links Strategy (£1.5 billion)(DfES/DCMS 2003), PE and School  
61 Sport and Young People strategy (£755 million) (DCSF 2008) and more recently the Primary  
62 PE and School Sport Premium (£1.4 billion) (DfE and ESFA 2017). However, a prevailing

63 trend has been to use funding to replace teachers with lesser qualified outsourced physical  
64 activity and sports providers (Randall and Griggs 2020; Griggs 2010; Parnell et al. 2017;  
65 Smith 2015; Rainer et al. 2012).

66 With an agenda of ‘outsourcing’ now widespread across England, it appears such  
67 highly funded schemes may have inadvertently ‘deskilled’, rather than ‘upskilled’, the  
68 teaching profession in terms of primary PE delivery (Griggs and Randall 2018; Key and  
69 Spence 2012; Smith 2015), therefore creating a further deficit in teacher professional  
70 knowledge and subject confidence. Indeed, Randall and Griggs (2020) reported that it was  
71 not just sports coaches who are now a feature of primary PE delivery. Their findings showed  
72 that 61 different permutations of the PE workforce were observed by 1194 pre-service  
73 teachers across England when they were on an assessed school placement. The conclusion of  
74 this research being that the PE workforce has expanded beyond what was understood initially  
75 by Jones and Green (2017) to be comprised of the generalist teacher, a specialist teacher and  
76 sports coach, to now frequently include apprentices, teaching assistants, volunteers,  
77 secondary school teachers, university students (not on pre-service teacher training courses)  
78 and other external providers (Randall and Griggs 2020). Within this context, the purpose for  
79 our research is to gain insight into teachers’ current perceptions of the organisation and  
80 delivery of primary PE delivery. Ultimately, by listening to the experiences of teachers, we  
81 hope to gain further understanding of the status and standard of PE being delivered in English  
82 primary schools and how they might best be supported. Furthermore, by presenting our  
83 findings in a novel way through a narrative play script, we hope to engage a broad audience  
84 of PE stakeholders and invite debate around the current delivery of PE in primary schools.

85

## 86 **The Importance of Primary Physical Education**

87 Some of the benefits of PE include opportunities for pupils to partake in physical activity, the  
88 development of basic motor skills and encouragement towards the adoption of a socially and  
89 physically active lifestyle (Fisher, Repond, and Dinez 2011; Doherty and Brennan 2014;  
90 Bailey et al. 2009; Gallahue and Ozmun 2011; Graber et al. 2008). Although a contested  
91 debate, PE nonetheless holds an important role in the promotion and acquisition of a healthy  
92 lifestyle during childhood and adolescence (Parnell 2018; Granero-Gallegos et al. 2014). The  
93 importance of PE has also been highlighted in its crucial role in supporting physical activity  
94 habits due to the marked increase globally of childhood obesity (Parnell 2018). However  
95 primary school PE is also believed to make a significant contribution to children's broader  
96 educational experiences, including their cognitive, emotional and social development (Bailey  
97 et al. 2009; Morgan and Bourke 2008; Morgan and Hansen 2008) as well as Character and  
98 Values education (Cloes 2017; Lee 2010). However, the standard and magnitude of PE  
99 delivered within primary education is a determining factor regarding the observation of these  
100 benefits (Bailey et al. 2009) and thus, highlights the essential need for consistent standards of  
101 PE being delivered within schools.

102 Several studies have been undertaken in an attempt to understand the competence of  
103 in-service classroom teachers and their perceptions towards PE teaching (Blair and Capel  
104 2011; Fletcher, Mandigo, and Kosnik 2013; Freak and Miller 2017; Garrett and Wrench  
105 2007). Amongst the literature, broad barriers for facilitating quality primary PE programmes  
106 have been recognised as inadequate ITT and professional development (Elliot et al. 2013;  
107 Harris, Cale, and Musson 2012; Duncombe, Cale, and Harris 2018) and institutional [school]  
108 factors (Coulter and Woods 2012; Pickup 2006; Morgan and Hansen 2008; Randall and  
109 Griggs 2020). Morgan and Hansen's (2008) comprehensive overview of frequent barriers  
110 experienced by in-service primary teachers, concluded that their findings were closely  
111 aligned to those already identified in the literature from 15 years prior. Today, a lack of

112 sufficient specialist knowledge and confidence to teach PE remains a persistent problem for  
113 primary teachers and has also been associated with PE being perceived as less important than  
114 other school subjects (Bleazby 2015; Griggs 2007; Duncombe, Cale, and Harris 2018). This  
115 further emphasises that issues about the overall status of PE, as a subject within the primary  
116 education curriculum, goes much further than the challenges of quality teacher delivery.  
117 Despite enjoying an increased profile in England since the London 2012 Games, PE still  
118 battles broader contemporary and media perceptions that is still a ‘Cinderella subject’ in  
119 many schools, playing a subordinate role to other subjects, deemed to have a more leading  
120 role due to their greater importance in children’s education (APPG 2016).

121

### 122 **The Diversifying Primary Physical Education Workforce**

123 In 2013, the United Kingdom’s House of Commons Education Select Committee (2013)  
124 suggested Government funding had led to an increase in commercial sports providers offering  
125 services to primary schools. It was thought that employment of sports coaches would increase  
126 levels of participation and develop engagement in a wider range of sporting activities as well  
127 as relieving schools of pressure by allowing more time to focus on other curricular demands  
128 (Smith 2015). In England, the involvement of sports coaches has been largely implemented to  
129 cover teachers’ planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time, introduced in 2003 as part  
130 of a commitment to workforce remodelling (Griggs 2010; DfES 2003; Griggs 2012). Smith’s  
131 (2015) found that the use of sports coaches to deliver primary PE often meant teachers were  
132 not involved in the planning and delivery of the subject, and removed from all the PE duties  
133 occurring in school. Thus, the initial concept of using sports coaches to enhance teacher  
134 confidence and competence to teach primary PE, appears instead to have led to the  
135 replacement of the teacher in favour of this new ‘other’ (Petrie 2011; Randall and Griggs  
136 2020).

137           With the growth of external professionals delivering PE in schools, their quality and  
138 competence have been questioned (Cope, Bailey, and Parnell 2015; Clohessy, Bowles, and Ní  
139 Chróinín 2019). Harris (2018) suggests that a lack of pedagogical knowledge has led to  
140 coaches being unable to meet the needs of children and has caused a narrower delivery and  
141 worsened physical experience, with Blair and Capel (2011) further proposing that sports  
142 coaches prioritise sporting objectives over educational outcomes. Smith (2015) considered  
143 that these implications have been a result of Head Teachers employing various external  
144 providers without sufficient knowledge of their expertise. This practice of ‘outsourcing’ is  
145 well entrenched across primary schools in England (APPG 2019; Randall and Griggs 2020;  
146 Griggs 2017; Duncombe, Cale, and Harris 2018). It is thought that the Primary PE and Sport  
147 Premium has unintentionally opened the door to those who lack the professional knowledge  
148 to take over the subject effectively (Randall 2019).

149

## 150 **Methods**

151 This study is underpinned by ontological relativism (and epistemological constructivism (i.e.,  
152 knowledge is constructed and subjective). A narrative approach to analysing and presenting  
153 the data was chosen, consistent with the philosophical beliefs and the aims of the study, in  
154 order to describe and interpret how those involved perceived their reality and made sense of  
155 their world (Griffin & Phoenix, 2016). Such an approach is appropriate for exploring the  
156 stories that teachers tell to illustrate their own perspectives of the delivery of PE in primary  
157 classrooms and to illustrate in-practice ‘lived’ experience. This narrative approach involved  
158 using Creative Analytical Practices (CAP) in the presentation of the data. More specifically,  
159 we used ethnodrama, a written form of CAP, to present the data as a written script, which  
160 involved creating a dialogue between the primary school teachers discussing issues around  
161 teaching PE. Interviews were initially conducted with a group of teachers, and data

162 thematically analysed, before creating a play script that drew upon direct quotes from the  
163 interviews to create each scene. To supplement this process, and as a form of member  
164 reflections, we presented the play script to a group of primary PE subject leaders (SLs). The  
165 reflections from these SLs were gathered to enrich the dialogue in the ethnodrama and  
166 provide additional insight (Smith and McGannon 2018).

167 CAP has been used by a small number of researchers in a sporting context to present  
168 results in an innovative and accessible way. For example, (McMahon, McGannon, and  
169 Zehntner 2017) used ethnodrama to explore three elite swimmers presentation of self,  
170 drawing on data from visual images of the swimmers (e.g., on Twitter or Instagram), direct  
171 quotes the swimmers made to the media, and autoethnographical data from one of the  
172 participants. Techniques from previous research using ethnodrama was used to develop the  
173 play script which illustrates the opinions of the participants who are directly involved in the  
174 teaching of primary PE, and those who support this delivery (i.e. SLs). Sparkes and Smith  
175 (2014) support the use of such creative processes as they can be used to present findings in a  
176 thought-provoking context, which allows both the researchers and the audience to understand  
177 data in a different way. The script developed in the present study illustrates perceptions of  
178 teaching PE from differing perspectives.

179

## 180 **Participants**

181 Initially, purposeful sampling was utilised to recruit participants that were current in-service  
182 primary school teachers. Participants were selected from a range of six institutions in the  
183 south of England to gain insight from a variety of school structures. In total 18 in-service  
184 primary school teachers participated in the study. From this fourteen participants took part in  
185 semi-structured interviews. Twelve participants were generalist experienced teachers; one  
186 assumed the position of PE SL and one was a newly qualified teacher. Collectively the

187 teachers had an average of 13 years teaching experience. Following the completion of the  
188 results as a play script format, a further four PE SLs were recruited through a regional SL  
189 network hub, who were asked to reflect upon the script, to add further insight and accuracy of  
190 context to the findings.

191

### 192 **Procedure, Interview Guide, and Analysis Strategy**

193 Once institutional ethical approval was granted, primary school teachers were approached.  
194 The research aims and concepts were explained to potential participants ahead of the study  
195 being undertaken. Interviews took place inside school meeting rooms and classrooms where  
196 each was recorded and audiotaped with appropriate consent. As recommended by Maykut  
197 and Morehouse (1994), an interview guide was developed, with the broad initial question,  
198 “Can you tell me about your experience of teaching Physical Education?”. This promoted a  
199 range of descriptive responses and provided the opportunity for the interview to be  
200 participant led.

201         The interview data was thematically analysed following Braun, Clarke, and Weate's  
202 (2016) six-phase procedure. The first author read and re-read the interview transcripts to  
203 gather initial codes. These were then shared with the second author to agree six overall  
204 themes arising from the data. These were finalised as: accountability for PE; subject priority;  
205 monitoring of PE; expectations of teachers and curriculum content; barriers to teaching PE  
206 and perceptions and impact of sports coaches. These themes were then discussed with the  
207 interviewed participants as member reflections, to ensure accuracy of the data against the  
208 themes. The researcher presented the title of each theme followed by an overview of how the  
209 theme had emerged from the data.

210         Following data analysis, we devised the ethnodrama, taking on the role of the  
211 ‘storyteller’ by linking together the data about perceptions of delivering PE in primary



212 schools in an interesting and explanatory way (Dowling 2012). We took the words from the  
213 data and pieced them together with the aim of making it a relatable context illustrated through  
214 a ‘live’ conversation. The main themes from the analysis provided an outline of the script,  
215 with the theme headings emphasised in italics and used as labels for sections of the script.  
216 This process of editing and amending also increased the conciseness of the dialogue, and  
217 where possible, direct quotes from the interviews were maintained as much to preserve  
218 participants’ voices. However, for literary purposes, certain amendments were made, for  
219 example, altering the tense, adding stage direction and removing names, so that the dialogue  
220 would be more realistic with people actually speaking together face-to-face.

221 Dowling (2012) suggests that in developing the story, events and actions are drawn  
222 together by an appropriate plot that links incidents together, and allows the characters to be  
223 introduced appropriately. Our story describes a typical and realistic scenario where a group of  
224 primary teachers respond to a notice in the staff room informing that PE sessions in the hall  
225 are cancelled due to another activity (the school play) taking priority. This is followed by a  
226 conversation that provokes deliberation towards other issues regarding PE.

227 The final stage of the data collection process was the presentation of the draft play  
228 script to four primary PE SLs, who were then asked to make further written comments in  
229 response to the script’s narrative; specifically, to provide their reflections on the dialogue in  
230 each of the scenes, how it relates to their own context and their understanding of PE more  
231 broadly, and to consider how they would respond if they overheard a group of teachers  
232 talking about PE in this way.

233 The play script presents five specific composite characters that the dialogue is based  
234 around; i) Teacher one: Julie (a frustrated and pragmatic teacher of 30 years who has taught  
235 only within that one school); ii) Teacher two: Sarah (a conscientious and dedicated teacher of  
236 15 years, having taught in multiple schools); iii) Teacher three: Nicki (an optimistic and

237 committed first year teacher; and iv) Ed an experienced multi-skills sports coach (who has  
238 worked across schools in the area over the last four years). In the final epilogue, reflecting the  
239 comments from the SL's member reflections, our fifth character is introduced: v) Tasnim (a  
240 new SL for primary PE who works at a different school to Julie, Sarah and Nicki). In part two  
241 of the 'epilogue', a conversation between Ed and Tasnim is depicted to bring about to an  
242 appropriate and reflective conclusion (Saldaña 2003).

243

## 244 **Findings – The Play Script**

245

### 246 ***Scene One: The Accountability Question***

247 *Primary school staff room, 4.30pm. An afterschool meeting to discuss Literacy training has*  
248 *just concluded. Most of the staff exit but three teachers are left looking at a memo written on*  
249 *the noticeboard.*

250

251 *The memo reads “No use of the hall from November 10<sup>th</sup> – December 12<sup>nd</sup> due to school*  
252 *play rehearsals. **PE OUTSIDE ONLY** (weather permitting) – Head Teacher.”*

253

254 **Nicki:** I've only taught a couple of PE lessons this year. I really want to do more but no one  
255 seems bothered if I do or don't. There's always something else going on like meetings,  
256 assemblies or school trips. And now the school play!

257

258 **Sarah:** Yes, either something gets in the way, or someone else is teaching it for us!

259

260 **Nicki:** Do we have any responsibility for PE as teachers?

261

262 **Julie:** No, I don't believe we do. It's ridiculous. Nobody is ever going to check and say, you  
263 didn't do your PE lesson this week, did you?

264

265 Imagine if we didn't do our literacy lessons, everybody would know! When we're visited by  
266 school inspectors, they never have time to look at PE, how it's taught, what our outcomes are.  
267 People aren't bothered whether children can or can't do PE. I just don't feel the expectation is  
268 there.

269

270 **Nicki:** What about assessment for PE? At the end of each year, does anyone come in and  
271 check?

272

273 **Julie:** There's no government testing for PE, it's all directed towards SAT's<sup>1</sup> in Years 2  
274 [aged 6-7 years] and 6 [age 10-11 years]. That's what it's all about, whether anyone likes to  
275 admit it or not. That's all that is seen as important. It's all about data and targets for the core  
276 subjects<sup>2</sup>. Considering how many hours of PE we are supposed to do, I don't know how  
277 truthful schools are about it. I think that they just play 'the game'.

278

279 **Sarah:** Well of course, accountability is a massive factor. The subjects that get done are the  
280 ones that are always being asked for by senior leaders. I think the bigger picture is held by  
281 somebody further up. The government and senior leadership teams have got to make us more  
282 accountable if they really want us to do PE.

283

284 **Julie:** That would probably turn people against PE altogether. The government aren't  
285 bothered about us assessing children in PE. As long as they are burning calories and being  
286 active, no one is worried whether we teach a series of PE lessons or not.

287

288 **Nicki:** To be honest, I've noticed that parents very rarely ask about PE. Are we the ones  
289 sending out that message? Although, I quite like having no objective slips to fill out for PE.  
290 It's nice! You can go out and have a bit of fun, a bit of light relief for us and the children.

291

292 **Julie:** I'm glad nobody asks me about PE, I've got enough to worry about thanks! If  
293 somebody said, "I need to see your PE evidence", I'd probably have a fit!

294

295 **Sarah:** Yes, but if somebody *did* ask for your PE evidence, you would get it done, and that's  
296 the difference.

---

<sup>1</sup> SATs are standard attainment tests for primary school children who are in schools that are legally required to follow the National Curriculum in England. These tests take place when children are aged 6 – 7 years and 10-11 years old.

<sup>2</sup> The National Curriculum for primary education (ages 4–11) outlines the programme of study and attainment targets for all children in all state maintained schools in England. It is divided into two categories of subject: Core subjects (Maths, English and Science) and Foundation subjects (Art and Design, Citizenship, Computing, Design and Technology, Geography, History, Languages, Music and PE. The current iteration of the National Curriculum was introduced in September 2014 but has been present in the English Education system since its introduction following the Education Reform Act (1988).

297

298 -----

299

300 ***Scene Two: Priority Subject Pressures***

301 *Julie begins pouring herself a coffee. Nicki watches on as Sarah paces aimlessly around the*  
302 *staff room.*

303

304 **Julie:** We are under pressure in so many other areas of the curriculum already! Whether you  
305 like it or not, English and Maths are prioritised. It's no wonder that PE slips!

306

307 **Nicki:** I agree... With pressure on other subjects, PE always gets pushed down to the bottom  
308 of the pecking order.

309

310 **Sarah:** I suppose you're right. I guess that's the way the whole education system is set up.  
311 Maths and writing are what matters to the government, because that's what schools are  
312 judged on; those are the main priorities for us. But we have to take into account the wellbeing  
313 of the child too. Surely?

314

315 **Julie:** Tell me how can we consider the child as a whole if we are being told by people higher  
316 up that we need to get x, y and z results in other areas? The pressures of the core subjects are  
317 just too overwhelming. If you asked me 15 years ago, I would never have said that!

318

319 **Sarah:** You know, this is going to sound really awful... but if you were to ask me what my  
320 subject priorities are right now it goes; English, Maths, Science, RE, History, Geography...  
321 and if you keep going along, pretty much last would be PE.

322

323 **Julie:** Exactly, I hear people saying, "oh, I'm not doing PE today, I've got my Literacy or  
324 Maths to finish".

325

326 -----

327 ***Scene Three: Insufficient Monitoring of PE in schools***

328

329 **Julie:** I don't really know where teachers find time to do PE. Although I know for a fact  
330 everybody does literacy every day.

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**Sarah:** Well, in theory the PE subject leader should come around and monitor. I don't know who the PE subject leader is actually. Do you know who it is now?

**Nicki:** I don't know, nobody's ever told me!

**Julie:** No one monitors PE. In sixteen years, I think I've been observed once. From the word go, you're left to your own devices.

**Sarah:** That's the problem. I'm teaching PE, I enjoy it, but am I doing it right? I have absolutely no idea!

**Nicki:** I never had a PE lesson observed because I'm always told that I should be teaching a topic or Literacy lesson instead.

**Sarah:** Across my whole teaching career I have never been observed in PE. That is appalling, isn't it? Maybe it would help?

**Nicki:** No thanks! I wouldn't be confident enough for somebody to come and watch me teach PE! I'd feel so uncomfortable.

**Sarah:** I will happily take my class for PE because there's never anybody watching you... I think if I had an official observation I would feel a lot more pressure. It would help to have some more direction for teaching PE.

**Julie:** I'm glad they leave me alone! I don't want to be spoken to about PE, I've got enough to worry about thanks!

-----  
***Scene Four: Curriculum Learning in PE and Expectations***

*Sarah stands up, opens the store cupboard doors and pulls out the National Curriculum folder.*

364 **Sarah:** Yes, but without any guidance I'm not sure whether I'm teaching the right thing.  
365 Especially using this current curriculum! There's hardly any guidance on what I should be  
366 doing or when.

367

368 **Nicki:** I find that there's no guidance on how to actually deliver PE. It's so limiting and  
369 unsupportive, especially compared to the other subjects.

370

371 *(Flicks through pages of National Curriculum, lands on 'PE')*

372 **Sarah:** See, come look at this.

373

374 The statements are so minimal and aren't separated for each year group. It gives no guidance  
375 on progressing the children's skills. Look, what you do for Year 3 is exactly the same as Year  
376 6, when their capabilities are obviously different. Yet, in core subjects, the statements  
377 progress every year.

378

379 **Nicki:** I wouldn't have a clue what the progressions of skills are, for say Year 3, or how that  
380 would look any different in Years 4, 5 or 6. I wouldn't know where to start.

381

382 **Sarah:** The progression is the hardest bit.

383

384 **Julie:** Yet, if you compare that to English or Maths, we know the progression from where  
385 they start and where we need to get them to. But, we have no idea where we've got to get  
386 children to in PE.

387

388 **Sarah:** Some sort of guidance is needed that tells us, when they first enter this year group  
389 they may only be able to do this and if they're not quite there yet, here's what you can do to  
390 help. Do you know what I mean?

391

392 **Julie:** I don't know what the rules are of what you can and can't teach in PE anymore, I just  
393 make it up. I can't follow those awful session plans either. It's all online now and I don't  
394 know how to use it. Sorry but I don't. They're not easy to follow.

395

396 **Sarah:** Yes! The scheme we bought last year was so complicated! It's not in our normal  
397 lesson plan format either. You have to click on so many links, I get lost in what the purpose  
398 of the lesson is. It doesn't seem to follow any kind of journey.

399

400 **Julie:** What a waste of time and money, I don't know a single teacher who uses it!

401

402 **Sarah:** I just haven't found a scheme that I can get on board with. Far too complicated.

403 -----

404 *Scene Five: Barriers to Teaching PE*

405

406 **Julie:** We're not to blame. I've had no professional development in PE for a long time. In  
407 fact, I'd say nothing in about 10 years. It's appalling.

408

409 **Nicki:** No, I've not had any PE training this year either.

410

411 **Sarah:** Training would be so helpful to increase our subject knowledge. I would much rather  
412 be shown how to teach PE through a training course! It would help me clarify if the things  
413 I'm doing are right.

414

415 **Nicki:** I agree, the lack of knowledge has a huge impact on my teaching. I don't have the  
416 knowledge or experience to be able to teach PE confidently.

417

418 **Sarah:** I know we're under some timetable constraints, but we still need to increase our  
419 competency. My university training didn't give me a great start. I think I had six lectures on  
420 PE the whole time.

421

422 **Julie:** What use is the training when you go into a lesson, pick up the beanbags and the beans  
423 falls out. Bit demoralising really.

424

425 *(Chuckles)*

426 **Sarah:** Sorry I shouldn't laugh, yes, our resources could do with updating and the hall space  
427 isn't ideal. But there is always outside.

428

429 **Julie:** PE isn't something I would choose to do. I would hardly join in sports club outside of  
430 school. I do it because I have to. And considering how time consuming and inaccessible PE is  
431 in our school, it seems like a whole lot of effort for something that's not even considered a  
432 priority.

433

434 **Nicki:** I'll be honest I didn't really like PE in school. It has put me off teaching it a bit. But  
435 despite my experience, I still want it to be enjoyable for the children.

436

437 **Sarah:** It's just our own insecurities coming out, isn't it? We don't want to make fools of  
438 ourselves. Sometimes I get the kids to demonstrate so it's less embarrassing.

439

440 -----

441 ***Scene Six: Perceptions and Impact of Sports Coaches***

442 *Ed the sports coach walks into staffroom, nods towards the teachers and makes himself a*  
443 *coffee after finishing his after-school club.*

444

445 **Julie:** Thank goodness we have Ed teaching our PE now; it takes away most of our  
446 responsibility.

447

448 **Sarah:** No offence Ed, but I don't know how good that is if I'm honest. For the children, I  
449 know they get fun sessions with you, but I think I am becoming deskilled.

450

451 **Nicki:** I wouldn't say I'm becoming deskilled, I didn't know what I was doing in the first  
452 place!

453

454 It does make you feel less bad about your own PE lessons though, doesn't it? Takes the  
455 pressure away.

456

457 **Julie:** Ed, you can pretty much do whatever you want though as you are confident to do so.  
458 Does anyone come in to see you at all?

459

460 **Ed:** No, not here anyway. The Head Teacher just asked me to take the lessons to ease the  
461 pressure off you guys.

462



463 **Sarah:** Hmmm. If we asked our Head Teacher what was happening in PE I would say it's the  
464 one subject she couldn't answer for.

465

466 **Nicki:** Having you guys [sports coaches] in to cover our non-contact time doesn't quite work  
467 then does it, because we should be allowed in their too to observe and learn from you?

468

469 **Ed:** Sure, that's what happens in some other schools I go to, but I can't make that decision  
470 without you Head Teacher's approval.

471

472 **Julie:** We can't compete with you anyway! The children enjoy being with you and you have  
473 the 'expertise' and 'knowledge'.

474

475 *Ed looks at Julie with an unconfutable smile. He picks up his coffee and leaves the staffroom.*

476

477 **Sarah:** They said in September there would be a shared programme between the teachers and  
478 sports coaches. Involving a mixture of dance, gymnastics and erm...games! In reality, there's  
479 no way that happens.

480

## 481 **Epilogue Part 1**

482

483 **Julie:** It's almost like PE doesn't really matter, so they just get any one to cover it rather than  
484 the class teacher. Let's face it; we're unaccountable and unequipped for PE. Plus, it doesn't  
485 matter how we feel, how much we want to be better at teaching PE or how we would like the  
486 standards to increase. We have to accept that they won't make any changes because it simply  
487 is not really a government priority. On that note, I'm off. Enjoy your evening ladies.

488

489 *Julie exits the staffroom. Sarah and Nicki exchange looks of unease before also parting ways.*

490

491 -----

## 492 **Epilogue Part 2**

493 *Tasnim (Tas) (PE subject leader) and Ed are leaving in the school minibus with Year 5 and 6*  
494 *(children aged 9 – 11 years) to a local schools' multi-skills festival.*

495

496 **Ed:** Tas, can I ask your opinion about something?

497 **Tasnim:** Yeah sure!

498

499 **Ed:** Do you think most teachers lack the confidence to teach PE? You know...*[Ed pauses for*  
500 *a few seconds]* they just don't know what to do, or even value it?

501

502 **Tasnim:** Well, I know I'm really lucky in my school as the staff and our Head Teacher are  
503 really supportive and positive about PE. But I do appreciate that's not the same in all schools.

504

505 But I don't think it's always because they don't value it. I think there is a lot of pressure on  
506 teachers to know and be able to teach all subjects well. But, I think it's possible to have  
507 quality across all subjects. It's just a matter of offering support and mentoring. You  
508 know...making it a priority. I see that as my role as a subject leader to do that.

509

510 Why do you ask?

511

512 **Ed:** It's just a few of the schools I have been working in this year don't seem to want to  
513 engage. They don't join in the lessons and disappear to get on with other things. I feel slightly  
514 powerless to enforce them to do so as I'm only there for a few hours a week. If the PE  
515 funding were to stop tomorrow, I am not sure they could afford for me to stay on. And then  
516 what would happen?

517

518 In one school, last Friday, I walked into the staffroom and heard some teachers talking about  
519 PE [referring to Julie, Sarah and Nicki]. I then overheard them say 'it's like PE doesn't really  
520 matter'.

521

522 **Tasnim:** That's sad to hear. I think this is probably the case in many schools though. While I  
523 think the government should probably put more emphasis on PE, I do think the PE funding  
524 has helped raise the subject's profile. It certainly has for us.

525

526 Anyway, as teachers we have a responsibility to the children to set a positive example and  
527 make PE engaging, regardless of whether accountability is being used as a motivational stick  
528 or not. We have really valued you coming in this year to work alongside our staff. With me  
529 mentoring too. But I agree. If they are not using the PE funding, or you effectively, to upskill

530 and improve PE, what impact do they think the money is going to have in the long term? I'd  
531 want to know what else are they have been spending the funding on?

532

533 **Ed:** I got the impression that PE is not being monitored at all there. One teacher also said in  
534 her school most of the staff feel unequipped to teach PE and that she doesn't see how sports  
535 coaches coming in has helped. But the school hasn't asked me to help them. All I have been  
536 asked to do is take the lesson.

537

538 **Tasnim:** I think if I were their subject leader, I would start from scratch with a teacher  
539 conference to find out what the teachers need to help make PE more accessible to them.  
540 Perhaps starting a bank of accessible recourses including lesson plans, teaching tools and  
541 video demonstrations. I expect, if they were encouraged, they would be keen to be mentored  
542 and work alongside their subject leader, or you, to develop their skills and confidence.  
543 Perhaps access courses or other training as well.

544

545 Why don't you mention it to the Head Teacher next time you are in? Share your concerns?

546

547 **Ed:** That's a good idea. I will have a think about doing that.

548

549 **Tasnim:** It might be worth passing on to the teachers that they also do the same, and that no  
550 one will be passing judgement if they raise concerns for PE. We want to work together to  
551 build teacher confidence, further develop the PE curriculum and increase enthusiasm for the  
552 subject. I am happy to help in any way I can. Please pass them my details if you feel you can.

553

554 **Ed:** Great. Thank you, I will!

555

556 Look, we're here already! I'll get the equipment out the back and we can walk the children  
557 over together.

558 *Ed and Tasnim get out of the minibus and lead the children off to their multi-skills festival.*

559 *Which they are all very excited for.*

560

561 **END**

562

563 **Discussion**

564 The aim of this study was to examine primary teachers' perspectives of the organisation and  
565 delivery of PE in schools. Presented as an ethnodrama, with six distinct scenes and epilogue,  
566 the narratives of primary teachers and SL member reflections have highlighted that the  
567 following areas were central themes for framing the teachers' daily practices: accountability,  
568 subject priority, insufficient monitoring, unclear subject expectations, barriers to teaching and  
569 the impact of sports coaches teaching PE. Collectively, the findings from this paper continue  
570 to reinforce the historical and systemic issues identified from within the literature, which  
571 have been well illustrated in the teachers' comments from this study. Firstly the teachers  
572 demonstrated a lack of confidence to teach the subject, which they felt had stemmed from  
573 inadequate ITT preparation and limited professional development (Freak and Miller 2017;  
574 Harris, Cale, and Musson 2011; Lynch and Soukup 2017), but conflated by external  
575 outsourcing that had removed them from any responsibility to teach PE (Blair and Capel  
576 2011; Griggs 2010; Parnell et al. 2017; Randall and Griggs 2020). Although there was a  
577 recognition that the presence of sports coaches had given teaching colleagues more time to  
578 focus on other priorities in their role, this was contributing to a 'deskilling' of their PE  
579 practice (Keay and Spence 2012; Griggs and Randall 2018) and reinforced the low subject  
580 status PE had in relation to other subjects (Duncombe, Cale, and Harris 2018; Griggs 2007;  
581 Bleazby 2015).

582 This final point, notably a more contemporary issue from within the literature, but one  
583 that gives further evidence to the presence and impact on primary PE in schools, is the  
584 implications for use of sports coaches as deliverers of PE. Since the introduction of  
585 workforce remodelling in 2003 (DfES 2003), allowing teachers non-contact time away from  
586 their class, sports coaches were seen as a solution in how to cover the staffing shortfall  
587 (Griggs 2012). This has since become an accepted pattern of PE delivery for many schools  
588 (Duncombe, Cale, and Harris 2018), resurged once more with the introduction of the Primary

589 PE and Sport funding in 2013 (Parnell et al. 2017; Griggs and Randall 2018). Our findings  
590 illustrate how teachers feel a lack of confidence in teaching PE, as a result of simply being  
591 removed from delivery, and a diversion of funding to replace teachers has meant a  
592 subsequent lack of training and development that invests in the teaching profession longer  
593 term. Over time, the ‘handing over’ of PE to outside providers (Griggs, 2008; Randall and  
594 Griggs, 2020) has created a perception that you need to be a ‘specialist’ in order to teach PE  
595 (Randall and Griggs 2020) and has ultimately risked ‘deskilling’ many generalist teachers  
596 (Keay and Spence 2012; Griggs and Randall 2018).

597         The teachers’ voices in the script, while presenting a generally ‘gloomy’ outlook of  
598 primary PE in their schools, does indicate a willingness to be involved in PE and recognition  
599 of the important role it has for young people’s wellbeing, with the teachers from this study  
600 arguing that it should be more than just giving a light relief and a fun experience. SL  
601 reflections (presented in the Epilogue part 2), further state that the culture for primary PE is  
602 in a position that can be transformed, but to enable this to happen there must be support from  
603 the school’s senior leadership and PE SL. The Primary PE funding, and the use of sports  
604 coaches, were therefore seen by the SLs as an opportunity for teacher professional  
605 development and for raising the subject profile within the school. There is also a suggestion  
606 about working together across schools to create, as Duncombe, Cale, and Harris (2018), also  
607 allude to, ‘a community of practice’. The SLs also identified willingness from teachers to  
608 engage and develop themselves as primary physical educators alongside the many other roles  
609 they take on. In particular, one SL felt there was no reason why quality and subject  
610 importance could not be achieved in all subjects all of the time.

611

## 612 **Conclusion**

613 This study has provided important insights into daily practices and perceptions of primary  
614 teachers in PE. Based upon the teacher narratives and SL member reflections, the study  
615 shows that persistent issues continue to be present in primary PE practice in schools,  
616 perpetuating a cycle of low subject status, inadequate teacher professional development, low  
617 teacher confidence, and curriculum outsourcing. However, teachers did report a willingness  
618 and commitment to address this cycle in order to improve the quality of primary PE in their  
619 schools. From this paper, we suggest that change will not come from Government funding  
620 alone, but from strategic leadership at the school level. We therefore suggest that a greater  
621 emphasis on primary PE subject leadership is recognised in policy guidance and any future  
622 primary PE funding. Secondly, implementation of PE leadership in school must have greater  
623 emphasis on accountability, subject advocacy, teacher professional development and  
624 effective deployment of resources. The final point must first and foremost be about  
625 addressing the resourcing of the subject's workforce. Finally, while we recognise the  
626 limitations of this study, and its contextualised focus on in-service teachers from one region  
627 in England, we believe the voice of teachers' and SLs' has been represented. However,  
628 further research is now needed to increase the evidence base if we are to make conclusive  
629 judgements about curriculum effectiveness of PE practices. This study has shown that while  
630 systemic issues in primary PE continue, there is both an opportunity and a willingness from  
631 teachers and SLs to break this cycle once and for all.

632

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