

What is PE and who should teach it? Undergraduate PE students' views and experiences of the outsourcing of PE in the UK

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This paper investigates beginning BSc Physical Education (PE) students' views and experiences of the outsourcing of PE in the UK. Outsourcing involves the provision of PE by external providers such as sports coaches. PE in the UK (and other neoliberal Western contexts) is a site in which outsourcing has become increasingly normalised. I anticipated that, as first year undergraduates, the participants would have relatively recent experience of outsourcing as pupils/students (i.e. experience of receiving outsourced PE provision). Data were generated through written narratives (n = 16), completed on the participants' first day at university, and follow-up semi-structured interviews (n = 10). Drawing on a Foucaultian theoretical framework, I employed a poststructural type of discourse analysis concerned with analysing patterns in language. Referring to PE, the participants drew heavily on a sport discourse, often conflating PE and sport and emphasising the necessity of teachers having knowledge and experience of sports content and skills, as well as a pedagogical discourse (and, to a lesser extent, a 'healthy lifestyles' discourse). The participants had a range of experiences of outsourcing in PE, particularly at primary level. They were in favour of primary PE being taught by either specialist PE teachers, or sports coaches (rather than generalist teachers alone). They spoke positively about their experiences of external provision at both primary and secondary school. While few critical comments were provided, participants raised concerns about external providers' pedagogical knowledge, and some questioned if teachers might feel devalued by external providers being brought in to teach aspects of their curriculum. In general, while the participants recognised teachers' pedagogical expertise, they also valued external providers' perceived content knowledge and sporting experience. As such, by conflating PE and sport, they considered that PE should be taught by sport 'experts' and that external providers could enhance schools' internal capabilities.

Keywords: outsourcing, external provision, discourse, Foucault, qualitative

Introduction

This paper investigates the meaning of physical education (PE) to beginning Bachelor of Science (BSc) PE¹ students, and explores their views and experiences of the outsourcing of PE in the UK. I initially examine the discourses the participants drew on when describing

what PE meant to them. Numerous studies have explored undergraduate PE students' perceptions of the nature and purpose of PE, in various international contexts such as Norway (Mordal-Moen & Green, 2014) and New Zealand (Philpot & Smith, 2011). Similarly, in Ireland, Ní Chróinín and Coulter (2012) explored primary education students' written responses to the question 'What is PE?' These studies report that sport and health discourses, in particular, underpinned students' responses, especially at the start of their undergraduate studies. The current paper investigates if beginning BSc PE students in the UK draw on similar discourses. It then delves into their views and experiences of the outsourcing of PE, and explores how these views and experiences relate to what the subject means to them.

Evans (2014) notes that PE in the UK (and other neoliberal Western contexts) is a site in which outsourcing has become increasingly normalised. Thorburn's (2020, p. 308) argument that 'schooling in many Anglophone countries is very unlikely to return to pre-privatisation days' indicates that this normalisation has continued, with the prevalence of outsourced PE reported in numerous international contexts (Sperka, 2020). Outsourcing is a form of educational privatisation, which involves PE being disembedded from the organisational structures of schools and transferred to sources based in the market (Lair, 2012, cited in Sperka & Enright, 2018). As such, outsourcing refers to the provision of PE by external providers such as sports coaches or health promotion businesses (Evans, 2014; Sperka & Enright, 2018). External providers have particular experience and/or expertise deemed to be relevant to the curriculum (Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019). Sperka (2020) highlights the different forms outsourcing can take. She defines outsourcing as 'a practice that involves establishing and maintaining some form of strategic and bilateral relationship with an external entity with the intention for that entity to either extend, substitute, or replace internal capabilities' (Sperka, 2020, p. 275). This definition emphasises the partnerships

involved in outsourcing, as well as the various purposes or intentions behind it; importantly, outsourcing may involve extending internal provision, rather than necessarily replacing it.

Some literature has reported the potential value of external provision in supporting children's learning in PE (Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019). However, educational researchers have expressed concern about the potential consequences of increased outsourcing, with Williams and Macdonald (2015, p. 57) describing it as a 'complex, controversial and pervasive practice' that has generated significant interest among PE researchers in recent years. The literature surrounding this topic is growing (Sperka, 2020), with research conducted in various international contexts including Australia (e.g. Sperka & Enright, 2019), Ireland (e.g. Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019), New Zealand (e.g. Powell, 2015) and the UK (e.g. Smith, 2015). A key concern regarding the outsourcing of PE is what it means for how the subject (and therefore learning and teaching) is conceptualised and experienced (Evans & Davies, 2015). Increased outsourcing can impact on people's views of 'the purpose of PE, what quality PE looks like, who the PE expert should be' (Powell, 2015, p. 86). Commercial providers often do not have pedagogical expertise, which raises concerns about children's learning experiences in PE (Macdonald et al., 2008) and the potential de-professionalising and devaluing of teachers (Powell, 2014).

A recent scoping literature review (Sperka & Enright, 2018, p. 366) concluded that outsourcing must be 'a focus of inquiry for the [PE] field' and that future research should ensure that a range of stakeholders' voices are heard. Most previous research has concerned primary schools (Sperka & Enright, 2018), and largely focused on the views of school staff, particularly teachers (e.g. Jones & Green, 2017; Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019; Powell, 2015; Smith, 2015). Sperka and Enright (2018) note that a gap in the current body of knowledge concerns students' perceptions of outsourcing. Sperka (2020, p. 277) further highlights that 'students have important perspectives that deserve to be heard'. Furthermore, as only a small

number of studies have been conducted in secondary school contexts (e.g. Sperka & Enright, 2019; Williams & Macdonald, 2015), Sperka and Enright (2018) report that little is known about the outsourcing of secondary PE, in particular.

This paper contributes to addressing these gaps by exploring first year BSc PE students' views and experiences of PE in a context in which the outsourcing 'genie is out of the bottle' and so likely to be here to stay (Thorburn, 2020, p. 308). In designing the study, I anticipated that, as first year undergraduates, these students would have relatively recent experience of outsourcing as pupils/students (i.e. experience of receiving outsourced PE provision). In addition, as prospective teachers, outsourcing is an issue that is likely to be relevant to their careers, as they may be involved in decisions to outsource PE in schools in the future. The fact that they were likely to have had experience of receiving outsourced PE themselves meant they may have had different views on this issue than current teachers, and therefore additional insights to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. By initially exploring their perceptions of PE, I hoped to gain an insight into the knowledge and 'truths' underpinning their views on who should (or should not) teach it. As such, the purpose of the first line of inquiry was to inform the analysis of the data specifically related to outsourcing.

Methodology

The study was approved by the ethics committee of The Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Life Sciences, University of Chester. This paper focuses on addressing the following research questions:

- (1) What is the meaning of PE to BSc PE students at a university in England?
- (2) What are the participants' views and experiences of the outsourcing of PE to external providers?

Similar to a number of previous studies on the outsourcing of (health and) PE (e.g. McCuaig et al., 2020; Powell, 2015), the study is underpinned by a Foucaultian theoretical framework. Like Powell (2015), I draw on Foucault's work around discourses. As noted above, I aimed to explore if and how the way the participants conceptualised PE related to, and helped explain, their views on who should (or should not) teach it. As such, my intention was to gain an insight into the knowledge and 'truths' – i.e. discourses – underpinning these views. Previous research indicates that various sport and health discourses (e.g. emphasising skill development, performance, fitness and healthy lifestyles) are prevalent in PE (McEvelly et al., 2014). Discourses are sets of truths that are produced and reproduced through power relations and social practices operating in institutions (Foucault, 1973), such as schools. From this perspective, knowledge is socially constructed, and therefore context-specific and value-laden (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Truths are, therefore, what people believe to be true (Markula & Pringle, 2006), and so 'discourses are not truthful per se' (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2017, p. 481). They operate through techniques of power, such as normalisation and surveillance (Gore, 1995), in order to become established as 'normal' and 'common sense' (Tynan & McEvelly, 2017). It is important to analyse discourses because they are more than just language: they 'produce particular social practices and social relations' (Wright, 2006, p. 61). As such, discourses 'shape and reflect the ideas, beliefs and values of their users and in this way "work" to produce specific effects' (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2017, p. 481).

Following previous studies such as Wright (2004) and Tynan and McEvelly (2017), I engaged in poststructural discourse analysis, which involved identifying patterns in language. Data were generated using two methods: written narratives and semi-structured interviews. The study took place at one university and featured purposeful sampling; participants had to meet the inclusion criterion of being in the BSc PE first year cohort² in the year data generation took place. All students in the cohort (n = 16: 11 female; five male) were invited

to participate during a group meeting on the first day of their university induction week. In this meeting, I informed them about the study, distributed participant information sheets, and answered any questions they had. All 16 students³ agreed to participate, provided written informed consent, and then completed the first phase of data generation, the written narratives.

My employment of written narratives to generate data was based on previous research by Ní Chróinín and Coulter (2012) and Rynne et al. (2017). As noted above, Ní Chróinín and Coulter (2012) asked primary education students to provide written responses to the question ‘What is PE?’ Rynne et al. (2017) asked early career PE and sport pedagogy academics to provide written narrative accounts of their on-going experiences in academia. Both studies provided participants with templates that asked for some biographical details (e.g. age, gender) and provided basic instructions and prompts. I similarly provided the participants with a template that explained that I wanted to learn about their views of PE. The template stated that prompts were included to help them structure their narrative, but that they could write freely and include any examples or stories that would help explain their views. The template included the following prompts:

- Physical education is...
- A physical education teacher is...
- I am studying for a BSc in physical education because...

The aim of this method was to gain an initial, brief insight into the participants’ perceptions of PE when they were at the very start of the programme (September⁴), before they began lectures and potentially started thinking about PE in different ways. The participants each wrote, on average, approximately 200 words on their templates. I then typed them up, verbatim⁵, on a Word document.

The second phase of data generation took place a few months later (November to February) and, similar to many previous studies concerned with the outsourcing of PE, involved interviews (Sperka & Enright, 2018). Ten of the participants (six female; four male) agreed to take part in individual semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews involve asking participants open-ended questions and allowing them to speak widely on topics and issues raised (Denscombe, 2010). While I had a pre-planned interview guide, the interviews were conversational and flexible, with an emphasis on probing (e.g. asking for further explanation or examples) in order to delve more deeply into the participants' views and experiences and thus generate rich qualitative data (Denscombe, 2010). The questions relevant to this paper focused on the participants' views and experiences of PE generally and the outsourcing of PE to external providers. More specifically, I asked them to tell me about: their experiences of PE at school (including content, focus, and who taught it); how they would define PE; their views on the aims and purpose of PE; who they thought should teach PE; and their views on the role of external providers. The average duration of the interviews was approximately 75 minutes. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The intention of the analysis was to identify the discourses the participants drew on when talking about PE, and then to problematise how these discourses operated and 'worked' (Tynan & McEvilly, 2017) in relation to their discussions of who should (or should not) teach it. Following Carabine's (2001) guidelines for Foucaultian discourse analysis, I read and re-read the data to identify the discourses that were present, as well as themes, categories and evidence of inter-relationships between discourses. I searched for discursive strategies and techniques (e.g. how the participants justified their views), and looked for gaps, resistances and counter-discourses, in order to determine the effects of the discourses (Carabine, 2001). Following the approach of McEvilly et al. (2017) and Tynan and McEvilly (2017), I probed around the following analytical questions: what discourses related to PE are circulating?

What ‘truths’ and meanings about PE do the participants construct and privilege? How are these ‘truths’ and meanings established and defended? The findings are discussed below, with pseudonyms used to protect the participants’ anonymity.

Findings and discussion

What is PE?

Previous literature has noted the longstanding dominance of sport and health discourses in PE (McEvelly et al., 2014), with sport traditionally being a major element of PE in England⁶ (Herold, 2020). It was not surprising, then, that throughout their written narratives, the participants drew heavily on a sport discourse. Jane described PE as ‘learning about and gaining an understanding of sport in general’, while for Aidan, PE was ‘the teaching of individual and team sports as a whole varying from match and training situations to learning and completing set techniques’. Descriptions of the role of a PE teacher included:

someone who inspires, teaches, and directs students through various sports (practical elements) and theory lessons. [...] A PE teacher should aim to help and aid all students in the world of sport no matter what ability or experience they have. (Ruth)

someone who can motivate and challenge students to achieve the best that they can achieve through sport. To teach and encourage participants to know the importance and skill level required. (Dylan)

This 'PE as sport' discourse (Powell, 2015) was also prominent throughout the interview data. For example, when asked what PE meant to them, Kieran responded, 'I'd say it's sport for all. You know, everyone should get an opportunity to try sport', while Jenny stated:

being able to do as much sport as you can. So, like, in your lessons being given the opportunities to do sports that you wouldn't normally try a lot of the time, or being given a new range of sports and practising other ones.

These data excerpts show how, similar to the primary school teachers in Powell's (2015) research and the beginning student PE teachers in Philpot and Smith's (2011) study, the participants often conflated PE and sport. They sometimes used the terms interchangeably. For example, when asked if she felt PE was valued at her secondary school, Danielle responded: 'Very much so. Like I said, it used to be a sports school, a sports college, but yeah, they emphasised sport quite a lot.'

Stephen, the only interviewee to attend private schools, described PE as 'just sport, in essence'. He explained that there was a strong emphasis on competitive sport throughout his schooling (both primary and secondary) and when asked to describe the role of a PE teacher, he stated, 'obviously someone who has past sporting abilities to...a high standard'. For Stephen, the 'PE as sport' discourse was common sense. Similarly, for Danielle, PE teachers needed to:

be knowledgeable of sport. I think they should, so that they can effectively teach it and help children learn about it. [...] I think they should know the key teaching points

of a lot of sports, so they should be able to, like, perform it themselves. I'm not saying to, like, an amazing standard, but they should know about it.

The data presented so far show that the participants strongly associated PE with sport, and regularly made reference to skill development, performance, and trying different activities. The quotes also show that the participants often referred to teaching and learning. As such, they also drew on a pedagogical discourse. As can be seen in some of the excerpts above, the pedagogical discourse frequently operated in conjunction with the sport discourse, such that PE was defined as an educational space in which the subject matter was sport. The data included many references to the importance of learning physical skills; the participants regularly drew on what Powell (2015, p. 77) calls the 'PE is the same as coaching sport skills' discourse. However, they also emphasised that learning in PE should be broader than physical skills:

I think the purpose of PE is to help people develop as a person, whether that be in sport, or whether that be to help them in other lessons because, you know, you've got some people that just aren't gifted with sport and you can't make them be good at something, but if you work with that person to just develop confidence, communication skills, then they can take that into other lessons. (Toni, interview)

you're developing physical skills, which I think's really important. I think you develop a lot of social skills as well, so I think PE, like, physical education is about developing all the key skills that you need in life. (Danielle, interview)

Like the student PE teachers in Philpot and Smith's (2011, p. 40) study, who claimed that PE promotes 'interpersonal skills', numerous other participants referred to PE's ostensible role in the development of 'life skills' (Stephen, written narrative) that would help children 'in all walks of life, not just their sporting endeavours' (Kieran, written narrative). They justified these claims by recounting their own experiences. For example, in his written narrative, Andrew described how he had 'never really enjoyed school', but that PE had 'changed [his] life' and 'made [him] the man [he is] today' by providing a space to channel his 'energy constructively'. He felt supported and included in PE. Other participants also mentioned inclusiveness. Marie, for example, stated that PE was important 'no matter what level of ability someone has' (written narrative), while Samantha wrote that PE teachers should 'encourage and support student[s] of all sporting abilities and of all shapes and sizes'. As such, although the participants drew heavily on a sport discourse, they recognised that PE was different from (elite, competitive) sport.

Another way the participants characterised the educational value of PE was by discussing its supposed role in relation to health. They drew, in particular, on a 'healthy lifestyles' discourse. For example, Marie – the only participant not to use the word 'sport' in her written narrative – wrote that PE was about 'Helping young people understand the social, physical and mental benefits to participating in any type of physical activity'. Overall, however, the participants drew on the 'healthy lifestyles' discourse to a lesser extent than sport and pedagogical discourses. The 'healthy lifestyles' discourse often operated in conjunction with these other discourses. For example, when asked what PE meant to her, Danielle stated, 'education in movement. It's learning about sport and how it's about, like, healthy living' (interview). For Sarah, the purpose of PE was 'to get people active so then they go on to participate in sport or physical activity throughout their life and to keep them healthy' (interview). Similar claims about sport and health were present in the written

narratives. Laura, for example, described PE as a range of ‘activities/sports to promote a healthy lifestyle’. Like the student PE teachers in Mordal-Moen and Green’s (2014, p. 809) research, the participants characterised health as ‘an extrinsic justification for PE’. They indicated that learning about sport and physical activity in PE would inspire and enable students to lead healthy lifestyles; as such, they made simplistic connections between, and assumptions about, PE, sport and health. While scholars have long argued that such assumptions and generalisations cannot ‘adequately encapsulate the complexity of the relationships between physical education, sport and health’ (Waddington et al., 1997, p. 165), the participants appeared to take them for granted.

This section has shown that, similar to the student PE teachers in Mordal-Moen and Green’s (2014, p. 819) study, the participants perceived ‘PE as synonymous with sport in schools’. They also characterised PE as an educational space, highlighting a range of alleged benefits and assumed outcomes, from life skills to good health. They were ‘true believers’ rather ‘than sceptics in the value of PE and sport’ (Green, 2008, p. 1). This, of course, is not surprising; having chosen to study PE at university, they were likely to have had positive experiences of PE and sport themselves. I now draw on these initial findings to analyse how the way the participants conceptualised PE related to their views on who should (or should not) teach it.

Who should teach PE?

After exploring the interviewees’ experiences of PE at primary and secondary school, including who had taught them, I asked them who they felt *should* teach it, in order to start delving into their views of the role of external providers. The discussions began by focusing on primary PE, and most of the data related to this context. This was because the participants

reported that, for the most part, their secondary PE was taught by PE teachers. At primary school, however, the interviewees had more varied experiences in terms of who taught their PE, and most of the experiences of outsourced PE they discussed related to primary contexts.

When asked who they felt should teach primary PE, the consensus was that, ideally, it should be taught by specialist PE teachers and, if that was not possible (e.g. because of funding), then external providers, particularly sports coaches, should be involved (either instead of, or alongside, generalist classroom teachers). While, as noted, scholars have expressed concern about increased outsourcing, previous research has shown that specialist PE teachers and external providers can enhance children's experiences in primary PE, when compared with generalist teachers (Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019).

The participants' preference for specialist PE teachers at primary schools reflected the views of the primary PE subject leaders in Jones and Green's (2017) research, who similarly considered this the ideal approach. When asked why they felt PE specialists should teach primary PE, the interviewees drew on the sport and pedagogical discourses discussed earlier. Their responses included:

They are the most knowledgeable...they're the experts of PE [...] So in an ideal world you want a specialist, you want someone who's an expert on teaching physical education because they can give the highest quality of teaching and developing the skills of a primary school child, like social, cognitive, physical. They're the ones that will improve their performance. (Danielle)

from my personal experiences, because you have that progression, you learn more, than just an average classroom teacher who doesn't know a lot about PE. (Dylan)

The participants considered specialist PE teachers to be experts, as they were assumed to ‘possess sophisticated content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge’ (Enright et al., 2020, p. 219). As such, although expertise is a complex concept, informed by a wide network of actors and knowledges (Enright et al., 2020), the participants positioned it, somewhat simplistically, as an individual attribute. They drew on both the ‘PE as sport’ and the pedagogical discourse to conceptualise the expertise required to teach primary PE, emphasising in particular the importance of having specialist (sports) content knowledge. Their investment in the ‘PE as sport’ discourse – with its focus on children’s skill development, performance, and opportunities to try various sports – meant they considered knowledge and experience of sport to be crucial. The normalisation of this discourse – along with the characterisation of expertise as an individual attribute, which someone either has or does not have – meant they engaged in classification (Gore, 1995), by differentiating specialist PE teachers from generalist classroom teachers. This ‘expert/inexpert binary’ (Powell, 2015, p. 77) was evident in the unanimous view that most generalist teachers were unlikely to have the expertise required to teach PE. Comments included:

the classroom teacher might not be, you know, like, knowledgeable about a sport so she might or he might not be very qualified to teach it. (Jane)

people that do primary teaching degrees, they all have to look at PE, like an overview, but they won’t get the in-depth knowledge that a specialist teacher would have. So then they can’t give the students in-depth knowledge because they don’t have it themselves. (Toni)

Reflecting what Jess et al. (2017) call the ‘broken’ narrative, which characterises primary PE as hindered by a range of individual and institutional factors, there was a strong assumption that many generalist teachers were unlikely to be interested in or knowledgeable about PE. This assumption was similar to the views of the primary PE subject leaders in Jones and Green’s (2017, p. 765) study, who considered a ‘dearth of subject expertise...to be the key weakness of many generalist teachers’. The participants drew on their own experiences to justify their views. They mentioned generalist teachers who they felt ‘didn’t enjoy PE’ (Toni), were ‘disinterested’ (Kieran), were not ‘really bothered’ (Dylan) or ‘just didn’t like PE’ (Sarah). This assumed lack of interest was deemed to underpin a related lack of expertise, although, as the quote above from Toni shows, there was also recognition of inadequate focus on PE during primary initial teacher education. Dylan described how one of his classroom teachers ‘didn’t have a clue’. He went on: ‘the lessons were a lot less knowledgeable, I’d say, about the subject area itself. It was just like, “Oh let’s just play a game”’. Aidan, who considered himself ‘quite lucky with the primary school that [he] went to because [they] had a specialised PE teacher’, explained that, on the occasions he had his classroom teacher for PE:

it was more of a doss...you could see that she – this classroom teacher in particular – she was just reading off a piece of paper, just reading off a lesson plan or something that she had been left, that she’d probably picked up that morning.

The interviewees argued that generalist teachers could probably teach PE in the early years of primary school. They considered PE at this stage to be ‘basic’ (Samantha) and so if ‘the teaching standard isn’t as good...it’s not as important’ (Stephen). Toni elaborated:

I think general teachers possibly could do the younger years because it’s not really focused on team games. In my experience, it wasn’t focused on team games, it was more on coordination and just like general movement, and so generalist teachers would be able to facilitate that easier than they would team games.

These excerpts illustrate how the ‘PE as sport’ discourse operated to characterise generalist teachers as likely to lack the expertise required to teach older children, whose PE would be sport-based. The interviewees’ discussions of primary PE beyond the early years aligned with Ward’s (2013, p. 563) description of primary PE as ‘centred upon a “sporting model”, where the focus is on the acquisition of skills within a traditional curriculum’. While there was recognition that some generalist teachers might be ‘sporty’ and therefore ‘knowledgeable of sport’ and ‘comfortable with teaching sport’ (Danielle), the prevailing assumption was that such teachers were in the minority. Therefore, drawing on the sport and pedagogical discourses discussed previously, the participants felt that specialist PE teachers would be more appropriate; there was an assumption that as qualified ‘experts of PE’ (Danielle), these teachers would have specialist knowledge of both sports content and pedagogy. As noted above, the participants also argued that if it was not possible for schools to have specialist PE teachers, then external providers – more specifically sports coaches – should be recruited.

The interviewees were overwhelmingly in favour of external providers having some part to play in primary PE. They highlighted numerous perceived benefits of such provision:

it opens a wider range of sports. So there's only a certain standard of sport that a generalist teacher can teach. (Stephen)

I think a coach can breathe another element into physical education, and really improve students' performance and develop their skills. (Danielle)

they might be able to teach more and give more of an understanding in certain areas or whatever, than a generalist PE teacher would sometimes. (Jane)

The use of coaches to teach PE has been particularly commonplace in primary schools in England (Smith, 2015), as a consequence of significant government funding being provided for primary PE and school sport (Griggs, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2020; Ward, 2013). It was not surprising, then, that the participants had a range of experiences of such external provision. They shared their experiences to support their views of outsourcing. Drawing on the 'PE as sport' discourse, and strongly emphasising the development and performance of sport techniques (Kirk, 2013), Samantha explained how, from Year Four onwards, sports coaches taught her PE:

It was much better, a lot more organised and more advanced, which was good if you wanted to play and participate in it. [...] Because they were more specialised, so they could move you on with, like, different techniques and different sports, and they knew it much better than, like, the generalist teachers.

The 'expert/inexpert binary' (Powell, 2015, p. 77) was again evident, as coaches were perceived to have superior knowledge and experience of sport than 'inexpert' generalist teachers (Dyson et al., 2016; Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019; Powell, 2015). As such, the participants valued coaches' perceived 'personal experiential knowledge' (Enright et al., 2020, p. 211) of sport. External providers were, therefore, considered particularly important in cases where children might otherwise miss out on such expertise:

sometimes the teachers in primary don't have the knowledge [...] I think it works better if you have someone come in if you're unsure on a sport that needs, like, a lot of thought to go into and a lot of, like, knowledge and it works better compared to, like, putting the teacher in for PE. (Jenny)

I think they can be good if a teacher does not feel, doesn't feel confident enough to teach a lesson in that subject. [...] it's going to help the students themselves because they're going to get a better level of teaching. (Aidan)

As well as highlighting that external providers' perceived expertise would be beneficial for pupils, the participants indicated that there would be benefits for teachers too. A common assumption was that generalist teachers could gain sports content knowledge by watching external providers' lessons:

if they, like, observe sometimes they could learn from them and then sort of put those skills that they've learnt into practice, like, another time. (Jane)

It can give the teachers more knowledge. Like, if they sit in the lessons and watch, they're learning more. (Jenny)

Similar to the generalist teachers in Dyson et al.'s (2016, p. 9) study, the participants 'identified a double benefit' of external provision: expert instruction for pupils and professional development for teachers. Teacher professional development, however, is a complex, long-term process (Jess et al., 2017), likely to require more 'collaborative partnership between classroom teachers and external providers' (Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019, p. 337) than simply observing from the sidelines.

This scenario of external providers and generalist teachers both being present in lessons was considered important for another reason too. While, in line with previous research, the participants often characterised expertise in a way that seemed to prioritise sports content over pedagogical knowledge (Sperka & Enright, 2018), a reservation they expressed about external providers related to them not knowing the children the way generalist teachers would. Danielle, for example, recognised that some children might feel less 'comfortable with the coach because obviously they're an outside source'. Aidan felt that some coaches' expertise might be limited to 'one sport' and so numerous coaches might be required to cover the curriculum, which could be disruptive for children who needed consistency to build relationships. Echoing points raised by the teachers in Smith's (2015) study and the primary PE subject leaders in Jones and Green's (2017) research, related

concerns were highlighted regarding coaches' potential inability to deal with children's behaviour:

they may not know how to control a class. [...] Like, they may not be able to control the class how they do normally because some kids are more sensitive and they don't know. (Jenny)

they don't know the class so well. So I remember things like, they'd give us, like, a name badge so that they knew our names, but everyone would switch name badges and thought it was funny. (Sarah)

The participants considered it important for generalist teachers to be present in lessons in order to engage in surveillance (Gore, 1995) of coaches' practices and children's behaviour. For Kieran, this requirement stemmed from the limitations of coaches' 'personal experiential knowledge' (Enright et al., 2020, p. 211) of sport, and thus their (assumed) lack of teaching expertise and qualifications. Reflecting what Smith (2015, p. 880) calls the 'professional tensions' between teachers and coaches, Kieran felt it was not appropriate for coaches to teach PE 'on their own because...they're not qualified in the teaching profession'. Dylan suggested that some external providers might be less focused on 'measuring learning outcomes' and 'progression' than teachers would be. These comments reflect the pedagogical discourse discussed earlier and echo concerns that have been raised in previous studies (Sperka & Enright, 2018), indicating that, while generalist teachers were deemed to lack expertise regarding PE content, their knowledge of pedagogy was considered valuable. Therefore, the combination of an external provider with a generalist teacher (in a supervisory,

rather than necessarily co-teaching, role) was deemed an appropriate scenario, if having a PE specialist was not possible. This latter option was considered ideal because, in Kieran's words, 'you get the best of both worlds then, don't you? You get that sporting context and at the same time you get the qualified teacher.'

The interviewees also, unsurprisingly, considered specialist PE teachers to be the people best placed to teach secondary PE. As noted earlier, most discussions of external provision throughout the interviews focused on primary schools, as the participants' experiences of outsourced PE largely related to these contexts. However, they also shared examples of external provision they had experienced at secondary school, and they felt that there was a role for external providers in this context too. They argued that external providers could 'extend...internal capabilities' (Sperka, 2020, p. 275) of secondary PE departments:

if a teaching staff or teachers believe that they could bring in somebody who could do and deliver a better quality of lesson in a certain area, then I can't see any negatives with that because you're just offering even better teaching. (Aidan)

If you've got a small department, because if you've only got a couple of teachers then you need that extra coach. (Dylan)

These comments show how, as with primary PE, external provision was considered a means of addressing gaps in teachers' content knowledge. Drawing on the 'PE as sport' discourse, some participants talked about having experienced external provision for sports such as cricket (Aidan) and badminton (Sarah) in PE. Arguing that PE teachers are 'not going to be specialists in every sport', Sarah explained that her experiences with a former 'elite

performer' were 'really inspiring' because, while her PE teachers only 'knew...so much about badminton', this external provider 'knew everything' about it. At Samantha's school, external providers were not used for curricular PE, but played a role in extracurricular sport, a practice that has been commonplace in England for over 30 years (Smith, 2015). Samantha mentioned a netball coach who 'would come and teach...drills that she'd do in her club'. Similar to how the students in Sperka and Enright's (2019) study talked about the tennis coach who taught their PE, Samantha described these sessions as 'more advanced' and 'at a higher standard' than what students would experience with their PE teacher.

Another way the participants talked about external providers extending secondary PE provision was by broadening the range of activities students could experience. Their comments aligned with those of the principals and teachers in Williams and Macdonald's (2015) research, who cited issues related to human resources as a key justification for outsourcing. For example, Sarah explained:

if teachers don't have certain qualifications – so like I said with, like, rock climbing and stuff like that – it's stuff that we wouldn't necessarily get to do.

Other participants also highlighted outdoor and adventure and 'lifestyle' activities as areas in which their secondary PE had been enriched by external providers. Jenny talked about a ten-week Pilates course taught by an external instructor, which she experienced in upper secondary school and found enjoyable. When asked if she felt there was a role for external providers in secondary PE, Jenny responded:

I do, especially, like, with newer sports coming through like Pilates and, like, street dance sort of thing and parkour – like, a lot of teachers don't know how to do that.

[...] It means that the teachers can still help out more, they're learning, and it means that you're getting a change from your teachers, especially in high school because sometimes you get bored of certain teachers, especially when you see them every week and you'd be like, 'Oh we've got someone new, this is going to be fun, I'll try this out'.

Jenny's comment shows how the participants again assumed a 'double benefit' (Dyson et al., 2016, p. 9) of external provision, in that they perceived positive outcomes for both students and teachers. There was again an assumption that teachers could enhance their knowledge by getting 'ideas' (Jane) from external providers, or 'learning different drills' (Samantha).

Jenny's point about external providers adding an element of novelty was highlighted by other interviewees too:

It was nice to have an alternative, kind of, a fun new activity. Because obviously we'd have blocks, so we'd have double swimming for a term and, do you know, it can get a bit monotonous. (Danielle)

External providers were seen to add something new and fun to the secondary PE experience, by providing activities that were different from what the participants usually experienced with their PE teachers. As Toni, who had experienced kickboxing taught by external providers, put it: 'the people that came in that did other sports benefitted us because we got to see other sports other than just the typical ones. [...] And so it was new and exciting for us.' This comment echoes the words of a PE teacher in Williams and Macdonald's (2015, p. 60)

study, who similarly claimed that external provision ‘creates more excitement for the students’.

While the participants’ comments about external provision were mostly positive, they drew on the pedagogical discourse discussed earlier to highlight a small number of potential concerns. These were similar to the points they raised regarding external provision in primary contexts. Kieran again expressed the view that coaches should not teach PE ‘on their own’, but ‘alongside the PE teachers’ because otherwise it could be ‘pandemonium...in terms of behaviour management’. Jenny and Sarah made similar points, with Sarah suggesting that external providers might find it hard to ‘control the class’ because ‘people from outside, they don’t know the students’. The participants in Sperka and Enright’s (2019) study similarly saw their coach as having less authority than their PE teacher.

Kieran questioned if, while ‘in some areas they might see it as helpful’, it was possible that PE teachers might find outsourcing ‘quite alienating’ if they felt external providers were being brought in to teach content they had expertise in. Similarly, Toni wondered if external provision might lead PE teachers to ‘feel like they’re not valued and they feel like the work that they’ve done previously is kind of a waste because they see that they’re bringing new teachers in’. These comments indicate the participants’ concern that if external providers were used to replace existing PE provision, particularly if PE teachers were not involved in such decisions, then they could feel devalued (Powell, 2014). It was clear, however, that when external provision was about extending, rather than substituting or replacing, internal PE provision (Sperka, 2020), then they were in favour of it. As Stephen simply stated, ‘If you can get them, use them’.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the meaning of PE to beginning BSc PE students, and explored their views and experiences of the outsourcing of PE in the UK. My intention was to explore if and how the way they conceptualised the subject could help explain their views on who should (or should not) teach it. Of course, this may have worked the other way around too, with their experiences of outsourced PE contributing to their views and meanings of the subject. The participants drew on sport, pedagogical and, to a lesser extent, health discourses when discussing PE. These discourses often interlinked and overlapped, as was evident in the way the participants characterised PE as an educational space in which the subject matter was sport, with the pursuit of ‘healthy lifestyles’ assumed to be an outcome of the subject. The strong linking of PE and sport meant that expertise in terms of sports content was considered essential for teaching PE. The participants therefore argued that both primary and secondary PE should ideally be taught by specialist PE teachers – who they assumed would have both sports content and pedagogical expertise – but that in both contexts, external providers should also be involved. Recognising that it might not be possible for primary schools to have specialist PE teachers, the participants proposed that, in that case, sports coaches should teach primary PE. There was little or no support for generalist teachers teaching PE on their own, with a strong assumption throughout the data that the majority would not have the expertise required. There was support for external providers and generalist teachers both being present in PE lessons, but the participants generally talked about teachers playing a supervisory, rather than co-teaching, role. As such, while classroom teachers’ knowledge of the children and pedagogy was recognised as valuable, the participants seemed to prioritise coaches’ perceived superior sports content knowledge.

Most previous research on outsourcing in PE has focused on primary schools (Sperka & Enright, 2018), so it was important to explore the participants’ views and experiences of external provision in secondary contexts too. Again, they spoke positively about it, but while

outsourcing was considered necessary at primary schools, to provide expertise that was likely to be lacking, the participants talked about external provision at secondary schools as a means to extend PE departments' capabilities. There were no suggestions that external providers should replace secondary PE teachers. Rather, external provision was considered a means of allowing students to experience either more advanced sports coaching, or activities they may not otherwise be exposed to (such as rock climbing, Pilates or kickboxing), because PE teachers may not have the expertise or qualifications required to teach them. Therefore, while expertise was again central to arguments in favour of such outsourcing, these activities were deemed an 'extra', rather than key content considered vital for coaches to provide in primary schools.

Learning about the participants' views and experiences of the external provision of PE has been valuable, as students' voices have often been missing from previous research in this area (Sperka & Enright, 2018). 'Sporty' students who have chosen to study PE at university, however, are not representative of the wider student body. While the participants reported positive experiences of outsourcing, it is important to consider if their 'non-sporty' peers would have had similar views. Would they define PE in the same way? Who do they think should teach PE? Investigating these questions is perhaps even more important than exploring the views of 'true believers...in the value of PE and sport' (Green, 2008, p. 1), who are likely to appreciate lessons based on a 'PE as sport' discourse. Others, however, may feel that outsourcing PE to sports coaches reinforces a form of PE they find limited, limiting and unappealing.

Thinking critically about the 'PE as sport' discourse also encourages us to rethink how we define PE expertise, and thus 'inexpertise'. While external providers may indeed have a role to play in PE, perhaps their value lies in extending, rather than substituting or replacing, internal provision (Sperka, 2020). While the participants' comments about primary

PE may reinforce concerns about increased outsourcing accentuating the idea that ‘PE equals sport’, their comments about external provision in the secondary context indicate that outsourcing may be a means to expand the range of experiences on offer. Furthermore, broadening the definition of PE beyond a narrow focus on ‘PE-as-sport techniques’ (Kirk, 2013) may encourage us to think beyond the ‘broken’ narrative of primary PE (Jess et al., 2017), and not assume that generalist teachers are necessarily ‘inexpert’. This is not to deny that many generalist teachers may well feel unprepared to teach PE (Jess et al., 2017), but recognising the value of their general pedagogical knowledge may help them overcome feelings of ‘fear and trepidation’ and ‘see alternative ways of teaching PE’ (Petrie, 2010, p. 60). Recognising both external providers’ and teachers’ expertise encourages us to consider the importance of forging genuine partnerships between the two, with communication, collaboration and planning at the heart of the process, in order to benefit both the adults and children involved in the PE experience (Ní Chróinín & O’Brien, 2019). It also prompts us to think beyond simplistic conceptualisations of expertise as an individual possession, and to consider how it is informed by a network of actors and knowledges (Enright et al., 2020).

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¹ The BSc PE is a three-year programme aimed at students wishing to pursue careers teaching PE. It does not grant qualified teacher status; students need to complete initial teacher education afterwards to qualify as teachers. The programme content focuses on a variety of ages and activities, so is relevant for careers in both primary and secondary contexts. The ten interview participants indicated that they intended to become secondary PE teachers.

² I was a lecturer in the department, but did not teach the participants during the first year of their programme (when data generation took place).

³ The students were aged 18-20. Broadly speaking, they attended primary school in the 2000s and secondary school in the 2010s.

⁴ Stating the year would potentially reveal the cohort and breach the participants’ anonymity.

⁵ Excerpts from the written narratives are presented exactly as written by the participants (i.e. including any spelling, grammar and punctuation errors).

⁶ All but one of the interviewees attended school in England. Jane went to school in Wales. While there have been different curricula in England and Wales since 1999, Jane’s views and experiences of PE did not appear to differ markedly from the other participants’.