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To cite this article: Gareth Williams, Adam Burrows & Dean Williams (2021): “It’s about portraying that we are organised ...” A case study looking at understanding identity changes within one Free school’s Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) programme, Educational Review, DOI: [10.1080/00131911.2021.1917522](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1917522)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1917522>



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Published online: 20 May 2021.



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“It’s about portraying that we are organised ...” A case study looking at understanding identity changes within one Free school’s Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) programme

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ABSTRACT

This research looked at the management of identity change within Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) at one of the first Free schools in England. Opened as a new institution within an unfamiliar setting, the school had to contend with limited resources for an ambitious programme based upon a full complement of examination courses and an emphasis on prestigious team sports using a traditional public-school model. A single case study methodology revealed that subsequent changes in identity stemmed from staffing issues, alongside a shift in personal philosophies towards a more inclusive ideology. Both senior management and middle management agreed that PESS needed to offer more sports to more pupils while still contributing towards the school’s “knowledge rich” achievement-based ethos. Using Goffman’s concept of “impression management”, changes are explained by the analysis of a team “performance” communication to parents, identified by interviewees as key policy actors in the life of the school. This approach has been successful in justifying change, a finding that will help to understand the extent to which parental expectations are managed at Free schools. However, elements of traditionalism remain within the school’s games-based PESS programme and possibilities for innovation are interpreted by policy actors as necessitating changes in content rather than within pedagogy or curriculum design. Recommendations for future study include the need to fully understand the freedoms associated with Free schools, particularly expectations for curriculum innovation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 August 2020
Accepted 9 April 2021

KEYWORDS

Identity; Free schools; physical education; impression management; curriculum innovation

Introduction

There are currently many different types of schools within England, a “fragmented” landscape (West & Wolfe, 2019) in terms of differences in governance and funding. This can present problems for parents in researching the options that are available for their children and comparisons between types of school become inevitable (Morris, 2014; Morris & Perry, 2019). Schools are promoting themselves (Ball, 2017) in a manner whereby

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“identity” becomes important in order to attract pupils. One such type of school where the discourses of marketisation are of paramount importance is in the Free school context. Established in 2010 as part of Coalition government education policy, these schools are self-governing, autonomous, often brand-new institutions starting out in unfamiliar buildings and settings.

The original government rationale for Free schools was to provide new schools in areas where existing provision is weak, to challenge other local underperforming institutions (Gove, 2011), and cater for an expanding population. However, research by Williams et al. (2018) found that Free schools differ markedly with faith schools, alternative provision and even some former private schools coming together within this new category. Only two schools researched in that study appeared to operate and exist within stated government rhetoric in terms of starting out as a new, autonomous institution aiming to provide for the local community. Moreover, Morris and Perry (2019) have suggested that there are tensions between the original government policy aims for Free schools and parental preferences.

So, what is happening to these schools, especially those who have been in existence the longest? Have identities changed and if so, why? How are the freedoms associated with a Free school implemented? Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) has in many ways had to change identities to gain status and acceptance (Williams et al., 2018). The academicization of the subject with the introduction of examination status coupled with a more inclusive ethos has resulted in a need for the subject to be adaptable, to react positively towards government policy (Lindsey, 2018). As a result, the subject’s identity has come under constant scrutiny. This study then will be useful for consumers (parents), practitioners (teachers) and theorists (academics) as a means of reflecting upon changes in both subject identity and institutional identity. It will look at the current status of PESS and suggest that changes in identity have the potential to create opportunities for educational change, particularly within the Free school context, a setting where new schools don’t have to change existing practices and so innovation is expected (Crinn, 2014).

The relationship between subject identity and institutional identity will be a key factor here. Existing research does focus more on how individual identity is influenced by educational contexts (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Therefore, reflecting upon the possibilities for a relationship between curriculum subject and institution as a means of researching identity formation is worthy of research, particularly with regards to PESS.

Research within and on Free schools is rare (Walford, 2014). Early studies tended to focus upon ideological issues that have arisen from discourses involving community and choice (Higham, 2014; Walford, 2014; West & Bailey, 2013). Now, to steer away from policy concerns is both timely and necessary as the first Free schools are well established, containing pupil cohorts that have worked their way through from the start of a school’s existence. F. Green et al. (2015) suggest that an aggregate picture is required in order to fully understand the varied Free school context, however, following inconclusive findings based on a search for commonalities involving staffing and settings (Williams et al., 2018), it is time to narrow the focus. Consequently, a single case study approach was selected as a means of obtaining rich data that will help to understand how a Free school has evolved, “survived” and even flourished within the competitive English schools’ landscape.

What is identity?

It is important to continually explore and reconstruct identity within an everchanging, uncertain world (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). This section will begin by unpicking constructs of identity whether that be personal, institutional, or subject. It is the relationship between the latter two concepts that is of particular interest although any discussion needs to start with a consideration for the role and place of personal identity.

School identity and personal identity are linked (Wardekker & Miedema, 2001). Schools should be places where pupils can develop individual identity through the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Identity then becomes an iterative concept involving a process of reflexive construction where the effects of exposure to different contexts, settings and forms of knowledge during a child's time in school can result in personal change. Whole school identity in turn is manifest within the goals, values and beliefs of the people who work there. It is a fusion of ideas, aims and purpose ultimately held together by the Head teacher who assumes an important role within this process (Morris & Perry, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016) and is expressed through dress codes, disciplinary systems, facilities, curriculum and corporate signs and symbols. These factors are relevant towards the place and status of PESS and they formed the basis for many interview questions in this piece of research. Fitz et al. (1997) highlighted how important the curriculum is for school identity, particularly attitudes towards "minority" subjects. It will be interesting to see the positioning of PESS within this study, a subject which has experienced fluctuations in status and one that may become "marginalised" by the effects of recent education policies such as the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which once again prioritises core subjects (Maguire et al., 2020).

School identities inevitably invoke a series of judgements, often made by prospective parents. Although national performance norms are available for scrutiny it is the local "market" that is of paramount importance and parents in Free schools are particularly aware of this, varying from knowledge of examination results to an appreciation of the symbolic identities created by uniforms (Morris & Perry, 2019). The parental voice has always been an aspect of Free school rhetoric (Gove, 2011) and it will be of importance within this study which looked at a school founded by the local community. What is clear though is that school identity is an eclectic mix of historical, geographical and cultural contexts and so needs to be viewed from more than one vantage point (Thompson et al., 2016). This study did this by focussing on the place and value of Physical Education and School Sport.

PE and changing identities

A brief history of PE will illustrate how changes in subject identity have been influenced by political, social, and cultural factors that have had a similar affect upon school identity. There have been many different subject names and "versions" of Physical Education. From the late nineteenth century through to the millennium titles have included "Games", "Drill" and "Physical Training", often dependent upon the social class of the participants and the types of school attended. After World War II with the advent of state schooling for all, the subject settled upon the term "Physical Education", creating a divide between female teachers who emphasised

poise and grace through aesthetic activities and their male counterparts who were keen to promote the acquisition of skills through sport. It was the latter ideology that eventually prevailed with an identity for PE involving the mastery of skills as a key outcome. However, by the 1980s and with a National Curriculum looming, the subject had to become aware of its potential to address national health concerns by realising that a broader, inclusive outlook was necessary to ensure the subject's survival (Kirk, 1992).

By the end of the twentieth century an opportunity to gain increased funding and status had arisen by working with New Labour government ideals of improving health and education outcomes through physical activity as part of localised community objectives. This led to a more inclusive ethos based upon pupil leadership activities and the targeting of specific groups to improve participation – the subject became known as “Physical Education and School Sport.” “High quality” PESS with holistic outcomes was the rhetoric from both government and the teachers themselves (Jung et al., 2016). School identity at this time would have also been influenced by the formation of subject “specialist colleges”, a real opportunity for PESS to influence institutional identity.

The ending of funding for many of these initiatives coincided with the introduction of Free schools, following a change of government in 2010 which led to a new policy emphasis on primary schools through the introduction of the PE and Sport Premium (PESP). Meanwhile, secondary schools could choose if they wanted to get involved in community PESS programmes as opposed to previous government policy which had compelled them to do so.

In sum, PE is a subject that has undergone many changes, and although research on the relationship between subject and institutional identity is rare (Kaplan & Flum, 2012), now is the time to explore these possibilities, given the many different types of school currently found within the English schools landscape (West & Wolfe, 2019). This study aims to achieve that by focussing on one well established Free school.

The use of social theory

Many theorists have commented upon identity, whether that be applicable at an individual or institutional level, notably within an age where collective identity has been replaced by a celebration of personal diversity. Foucault talks about personal identity as being shaped by prevalent discourses within societies and communities, a process in a state of constant change. These views would connect with Giddens (1990) who writes about the disappearance of ontological security in a world where the sureties of class, occupation and gender are fast disappearing. Similarly, a link can be made with the thoughts of Hall (1997 as cited in Rojek, 2003) who commented upon the dissolution of fixed identities whether they be institutional or not, leading towards the promotion of the self where adaptability is a key factor. Hall (1989) also proposed the notion of the “hybrid character” of identity, an interesting concept to apply towards Free schools where the notion of frequent changes in identity to enable survival could be more important than pursuing a fixed identity.

However, this study predominantly focused upon the thoughts of Goffman (1959) for an applied interpretation of identity, particularly the use of dramaturgical analogies leading towards the concept of “impression management”. Goffman’s work likens the social world to a theatrical performance; human attributes and activities are “managed” to

provide information for others primarily to fulfil the goals of the actor. In this instance social interaction is seen as a means of maintaining social order. In the competitive context within which a Free school is positioned, the metaphors that come with this may help to provide meaning for a setting where any changes in PESS identity need to be communicated. How, why and to whom this information needs to be conveyed will underpin the purpose of this study. Goffman's "front stage" and "backstage" analogy (Goffman, 1959) will also be used to understand why this might happen.

Although Goffman has also commented upon institutional identity primarily within the concept of "total institutions", contexts where there is separation between subjects (residents) and outsiders (the public), his findings have been used to understand educational contexts (Sadovnik & Coughlan, 2016). His notion of "institutionalisation" is of interest whereby self-image is replaced by one that is more acceptable to the institution. Indeed, Goffman's concerns for individual identity could have relevance to schools today where teachers must conform towards achieving narrow, performative outcomes (Ball, 2003), often at the expense of developing innovative, creative pedagogies. Institutionalisation then becomes an overbearing pressure from both within and without of a school to conform towards external demands. It will be interesting to see within this study whether the concept of being a "Free" school will empower teachers to utilise new teaching approaches of their own volition or whether institutional pressures will lead towards conformity.

In sum, Goffman contends that institutions reflect "the time and interest of its members" (as cited in Harrington, 2005, p. 117) and it will be pertinent to analyse how management and teachers within this context articulate upon the notion of how subject identity can contribute towards school identity.

Models for identity?

Trying to find out how to create a school identity is problematic. In another era of significant educational change, the 1990s, Grant Maintained (GM) schools in England signified the start of increased autonomy by removing the role of the Local Authority, so enabling schools to receive funding directly from central government. This would suggest opportunities for innovation and freedom but Fitz et al. (1997) found that schools merely used the past to consolidate their identity, relevant, because Free schools as new institutions won't have a significant history. However, in contrast, Thompson et al. (2016) found in their study of Alberta's Charter schools that increased self-governance does help a school to develop its own identity through its philosophy, purpose and goals. The level of increased risk taking that came with these new freedoms meant that trust and authenticity within the school's leadership became important. For schools, then, who acquire new forms of autonomy the role of the Head teacher is important in not only assuming sole responsibility for achieving success (E. Green, 2014), but also in securing identity. More recently, and in a similar vein, Morris and Perry (2019) found that prospective Free school parents looked to the presence of a strong Head teacher as an important prerequisite in the selection of a school for their children.

Significantly, the Coalition government in 2011 used the term "Free" to categorise these new schools, schools which are essentially Academy Schools starting afresh within unfamiliar buildings. Devolved budgetary powers and newly acquired curriculum

freedoms would suggest opportunities for “innovative education” leading towards fresh identities. Moreover, innovation has been proposed as a characteristic that would set Free schools apart from other types of school (Gove, 2011; Miller et al., 2014). However, Wiborg et al. (2018) present an argument that this is not the case, analysing factors that collectively can contribute towards a school’s identity. Part of the issue here starts with what is exactly meant by innovation in this context. For educationalists pedagogical change would be important, leading towards opportunities to introduce new teaching strategies and, ultimately, curriculum innovation. This contrasts markedly with the Department for Education (DfE; Crinn, 2014) who, while acknowledging possibilities for changes to the curriculum, generally define innovation in a more procedural manner focussing upon how Free schools could change the length of the school day, employ unqualified teachers, use parental feedback and utilise performance-related pay. In addition, and relevant to the role of PESS, extracurricular and enrichment opportunities for pupils are seen by the DfE to be important. As a result of these differing interpretations Wiborg et al. (2018) conclude that Free schools are not necessarily innovative, in fact they may be regressive in their identities (in the sense that tradition holds sway).

A House of Commons Report in 2015 (<http://www.parliament.uk/>) makes a more judgemental comment by suggesting that the “limited use of freedoms” by academies (which includes Free schools) is an issue that needs to be acted upon. The call here is for Ofsted to look for evidence of “effective innovation”; clearly, there is an expectation for the new types of schools to be different, to pursue the new opportunities available to them.

Within PESS a case can be made regarding the need for innovation within the curriculum which could lead towards a fresh identity for the subject. A dominant games model emphasising teamwork and effort has characterised PE leading towards a narrow range of pedagogies (Kirk, 2010). However, the 2014 National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) provides a minimalist framework for schools to follow with opportunities for adaptation and interpretation. Although PE teachers recognise the possibilities for change that this has created, they perhaps differ regarding urgency and necessity (Herold, 2020). Changes to curriculum design utilising innovative forms of pedagogy are necessary as leisure patterns change (K. Green, 2010) to not only relate towards contemporary culture but also to secure the subject’s survival (Kirk, 2013; in Capel & Whitehead). Free schools are well placed to do this as they are exempt from the statutory requirement to follow the NCPE and, as previously mentioned, there are clear expectations regarding curriculum innovation and design (House of Commons Report, 2015).

Schools in Wiborg et al.’s (2018) study used uniform as a form of “symbolic identity” to distinguish themselves from competitors, a notion that could be extended towards the use of PE kits. Perhaps the most significant finding for Wiborg et al. (2018) has been an acknowledgement that the parental voice is important in Free schools. The authors suggest that this influence can inhibit change although an assertion that full parental impact is unknown is something that this study will remain cognisant of.

This Literature Review has suggested that PESS, after frequent challenges and changes to its identity, needs to introduce new forms of innovative curriculum design which could in turn have an impact upon school identity. These findings are pertinent to the Free school context given the freedoms associated with this new type of school.

Research questions:

1. What is the role of PESS within whole school identity?
2. How are the freedoms associated with a Free school implemented?
3. How is PESS identity managed?

Methodology

The fact that Free schools appear to differ so much in terms of character and nature (Williams et al., 2018) supported a study based on the notion of social constructivism. Here, the suggestion that reality is socially constructed was relevant due to a government policy that has been adapted by the policy actors involved in its implementation. Both researcher and participant needed to be reflexive as views are shaped by experiences; this required an interpretivist perspective based upon the need to ascertain the thoughts and feelings of participants in the field.

Research design

To fully understand the research phenomena, “how” and “why” questions are important, applied at several levels principally in the form of interview questions. Using the “how” and “why” approach is a feature of the case study method (Yin, 2014) whereby the researcher has little control over behavioural events and the focus is contemporary rather than historical (Yin, 2014). This was certainly the case with the school selected, geographically located far from our research base and with a short, recent history.

Case studies aim to provide a rich, deep investigation of the social phenomenon selected by the researcher. This can warrant the provision of a full variety of evidence whether that be documents, interviews, artefacts, or observations (Yin, 2014) and, in this study, Ofsted reports and the school’s web site were sources of information in addition to interviews. Collecting data from other organisations was also relevant (Yin, 2014) and here, interviewing a community sports coach provided an external view on the school’s PESS programme.

The analysis of data section shows that aiming to develop theory is important (Smith & McGannon, 2018), again part of the rationale for adopting a case study approach (Yin, 2014). Theories needed to evolve firstly from the literature review and then be reflected within the interview/research questions. This led to what Bassey (1999) refers to as an “Evaluative Case Study” whereby an enquiry was set in place to focus on the “worthwhile-ness” of an educational programme, in this case the place and value of PESS within a well-established Free school. One of the theories established so far is that identities are in a state of “flux” (Hall, 1997 as cited in Rojek, 2003) particularly in a postmodern world where adaptability leading to individualism is key. Therefore, a reflexive approach was adopted on the part of both researcher and interviewee, particularly for the latter who were encouraged to “look back” at how their relatively new school has evolved.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the university’s ethics committee 5 months before the first interview. An initial letter of introduction and request for access to the school was

followed by informed consent forms, risk assessments and a protection of data report. In addition, the award of a small internal grant covered both travel and transcript costs.

The school selected for this single case study is one of the first-ever Free schools in England, a desirable factor for the aim of this research to look at identity within an established institution. The school has attracted a degree of media attention since its opening and understandably is keen to retain anonymity regarding this study. As a result, the use of pseudonyms for the interviewees and referring vaguely to the school as “located in the south east of England” has been key to gaining trust and respect. In order to protect and honour this agreement some of the finer details within the results and findings were deliberately kept vague.

Procedure

The study applied Tracy’s (2010) criteria for qualitative research as a “checklist” in order to achieve excellent research. In particular, “member reflections” rather than “member checking” was applied by the initial return of transcripts for reflection where each participant was, firstly, asked to comment on how their answers match up to the research questions and, secondly, encouraged to reply regarding how to proceed for any further research. Unfortunately, only one respondent replied by proposing amendments to the original interview transcripts.

The research aimed to interview a cross section of those who were responsible for the founding of the school, those currently involved in its management and an external view from a sports coach involved with teaching and learning. We were fortunate then to be able to interview parent governors, the Head teacher, the head of department, subject teachers and as mentioned, a sports coach. Interviews took place over a period of three days mainly on the school site and usually lasted for 40 minutes.

The Free school chosen for this study will be referred to as “Riverside” and the interviewees have been given the following pseudonyms:

Jane – SENCO and PE teacher

Alan – Director of Sport

Helen – PE teacher

Marie – Community Sports Coach

Karen – Chair of Governors

Catherine – Head teacher

Katrina – Vice Chair of Governors with responsibility for PE

Analysis of data

Using an inductive approach, a preliminary interpretation of data began with a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Annotations within the text led towards an initial search for patterns, insights and concepts and the formation of categories from the respondents’ answers; a form of “pattern matching” (Gray, 2018). These patterns emerged from the reappearance of similar responses across the interviews some of which were anticipated in advance from the research questions while others were unexpected (Stake, 1995). Coding was then used to analyse the frequency of responses based upon recurrent words and concepts leading towards a hierarchy of themes.

Research is an iterative process and to achieve this some initial findings relating towards theory and literature were taken from both preliminary and secondary interpretations of data. This then formed the basis for discussions within the research team before re-approaching the interviewees to engage in the member reflection process (Tracy, 2010). Finally, after a process of creative and reflective thinking “analytical statements” (Bassey, 1999) were proposed to summarise this evaluative report.

Findings and discussion

The school is in a culturally mixed urban area. It opened as part of a parental response towards a perceived lack of local educational options, keen to take advantage of the recent government Free schools initiative. The school started as a single academy trust (SAT) operating as a not-for-profit organisation funded by central government, although the subsequent acquisition of two neighbouring primary schools and the development of a separate sixth form centre would suggest categorisation as part of an “umbrella trust” (West & Wolfe, 2019). The school has received “good” Ofsted reports. The on-site facilities for PESS are very limited and as a result both curricular and extra-curricular activities take place in local public parks and privately owned sports grounds, often involving the bussing of pupils back and fore. This can be both costly and time-consuming although these issues are perhaps not too dissimilar from problems faced by other state schools within the locality.

The findings have been analysed into five different thematic headings based upon patterns and frequencies of answers across all seven respondents.

1. *PESS is valued as a means of constructing whole school identity*

All the research participants at Riverside agreed that PESS is important, a major contributor in reflecting the original principles which underpinned the founding of the school. It was this aspect of the discussions which respondents referred towards more frequently than any other issue within the interview questions:

It’s absolutely essential, really, and it is at the heart of the school and the identity of the school, that the sport is strong, and the sport is good. (Catherine)

The founders were very interested in that we wanted to have sport which was open to everybody, that was competitive (Karen)

Catherine, as a relatively new Head teacher, was keen to advocate sport as a means of personal challenge. She has introduced “lunchtime clubs for PE” and promoted extra-curricular sport heavily within the school’s “co-curricular” programme, a term designed to emphasise that learning can take place away from, and therefore coexist with, scheduled teaching hours. The teachers interviewed also valued the importance of PESS, unsurprisingly, with Jane noting that any contribution made by the subject towards whole school identity is taken from its extracurricular programme.

The desires and wishes of parents are a constant feature within these findings and from the outset in a school founded upon such expectations, sport was an important feature. Catherine stated that there are parents in the school who could opt for private education

but choose otherwise in sending their children to Riverside “but they really want the sport.” Katrina reflected upon what these parental expectations might be in her declaration that “achievements . . . are important to the school’s identity.” However, one teacher while acknowledging that Riverside does value PESS, did question its place within the school’s knowledge-rich ethos, stating that “PE is PE” (Jane). The two governors interviewed believed that PE could contribute towards this expectation and one teacher acknowledged that such an ethos could be used to good effect particularly in GCSE lessons where she found the pupils to be “inquisitive” when researching new topics.

Any tensions between how importantly PE teachers regard their subject and the value placed upon it by management are perhaps no different to those found in other schools (Williams et al., 2018). In Riverside any disparities are relatively minor; what is clear is that PESS is perceived to be held in high regard by all. Management have even changed the timetable so that PE takes place in the morning, so allowing the children to arrive at school already changed in their kits before using transport to get to offsite facilities. Coupled with the positive responses from interview participants these changes show that at Riverside, PESS is an important part of whole school identity, very pleasing for a subject often perceived as having a “marginalised” status (Maguire et al., 2020).

However, in a school which places such a strong emphasis upon its knowledge-rich ethos perhaps more could be done to promote the value of PESS for those who won’t achieve academically, a point made by Jane in her role as SENCO. A setting where this claim could be emphasised was perceived to be at Open days where Jane revealed a sense of discomfort in promoting support for SEND pupils within a school which promotes a high degree of academic achievement.

The marketisation and promotion of schools is a fascinating context for revealing the character of an institution and its subsequent role within identity formation. Finding the true value and worth of a subject within the curriculum and beyond is a subtle process perhaps best surmised by Goffman’s concept of a “front” (1959). In most schools this can be achieved initially in several settings, principally through a web site and an “Open Day”. At Riverside there is a perception that the web site (out of date at the time of asking according to the interviewees) conveys the strong message that sport is important and that certain activities traditionally associated with private schools feature more prominently than others. As a result, there are powerful images of happy, smiling pupils in very smart PE kits. Goffman (1959) would suggest that a “front” such as this has been “selected according to rank”, possibly in this case by management who are happy to continue with this message. This “front stage” analogy is contrasted by a “backstage” perception given by teachers that on an Open day PESS is not presented as strongly as other aspects of the school in terms of room allocation and opportunities for promotion. However, a counter argument to this, acknowledged by all respondents, is that it is very difficult to advertise a practical subject in a setting where the on-site facilities for sport are so limited.

2. Differing interpretations regarding the extent and impact of Free school autonomy

The notion that increased autonomy and a greater sense of self-governance would lead towards more independence was the second most prevalent topic to emerge from the interviews. While it is apparent that such freedoms are valued by all and that the Head

teacher is keen to develop a sense of trust with teachers, there are “checks and measures” in place to ensure accountability:

... but it has to chime with what the governors and the trustees want. (Catherine referring to changes in the school curriculum).

The much-vaunted removal of local authority influence within the Free school context still necessitates a level of control and scrutiny. The management team at Riverside would probably argue, however, that overall, the process enables change to be enacted quickly and efficiently. Perhaps the best example of change within the PESS programme at Riverside is the initiative to introduce the teaching of First Aid within PE lessons, one finding that would counter the conclusions of Wiborg et al. (2018) who doubt whether Free schools do offer curriculum innovation.

It could be that the notion of “freedom” within this context is a personal and subjective interpretation although the school as a stand-alone academy under an umbrella trust should have the ability to make local-based decisions (West & Wolfe, 2019). Catherine as Head teacher is adamant that the school has “autonomy” while Katrina in her role as an experienced school governor at both Riverside and in other state schools stated: “So I don’t feel we do have a lot more freedoms.” A similar lack of detail emerged from a question focussing on one of the key differences between Academies, Free schools and local authority schools concerning attitudes towards the national curriculum. At Riverside both the Head teacher and the Chair of Governors openly admitted that they lacked knowledge in this area while Katrina was able to declare that in PESS the intention was, “... building on the national curriculum and taking the best of it”, a similar expectation found in many other Free schools (Crinn, 2014). These rather vague statements allude to an uncertainty as to how to proceed with curriculum and pedagogical innovation and collectively perhaps support the contention that Free schools do not make the most of their freedoms (House of Commons Report, 2015; Wiborg et al., 2018).

Interviewees tended to refer towards subject freedoms based on what to teach rather than how. Indeed, Marie in her role as an established sports coach employed by the school referred to limited innovative change within the PESS curriculum as returning to the “fear of the unknown again.”

3. *Symbolic identities leading towards “Impression Management”*

Symbolic identities in the form of both pupil and staff PE kits assume great importance at Riverside school. Pupil PE kits are undeniably smart, the school web site uses this in a prominent manner to portray images of happy, active children. The PE teachers acknowledge this as part of the school identity and believe that it can transfer to other aspects of the school as well; “... then that’s going to have an impact on uniform around the school” (Helen). Again, meeting parental expectations was cited as being one of the reasons for this; smart uniforms are a prerequisite for many prospective Free school parents, “embedding an impression of quality” (Morris, 2016, p. 141). Enforcing high standards of appearance and full participation within PESS was given high priority through a “fit for school, fit for PE” policy whereby any notes handed in claiming a reason to be excused were often discarded – a spare set of kit was always available.

Alan as a recently appointed Director of Sport was keen to promote what was happening in both curricular and co-curricular activities. Keeping parents informed was seen to be key; "It's about portraying that we are organised and we're taking it seriously" (Alan). This is manifest in newly constructed television monitors located around the school which the Director of Sport has control over, providing updates on club activities and inter-school sports results. Regular e-mails in the form of news bulletins are sent to parents, a positive move acknowledged by both the latter and management.

The use of such symbolic identities as PE uniforms and television monitors around the school is crucial in understanding the impression that is trying to be made. The concept of "impression management" is relevant and is explained by Bolino et al. (2008) as how an actor tries to create, maintain, or otherwise alter an image held by a target audience. It is applicable in this instance in that the "target audience" could be interpreted as the parents, prominent actors within the life of the school. Alan in his Director of Sport role feels the need to convey the impression that his department uses external sporting facilities:

... showing potential and current parents that we're taking sport seriously, and we are going offsite and using all these facilities that are available locally.

When asked why and how creating this impression is so important Alan stated that the recent reputation of the department had not been good and part of his role was to show parents how PESS was changing, often through events such as Sports Day and Sports Presentation Evenings. One of the reasons for engaging in this form of impression management was due to a poor set of GCSE PE results, which had in Alan's words, created "quite a backlash." Here, an analogy could be made with Goffman's (1963) concept of "stigma" whereby the social identity of the department has been discredited.

... [the] image of the department suffered badly ... I'm really trying to push the image of the department. My first thing is communication with parents.

Goffman's notion of an "idealised impression" has some relevance here. A "front" has been created in the form of web site images, smart kits and news updates that could conceal what was really happening, certain facts are accentuated while others are concealed. The "stigma" of poor GCSE results has led to the control of information as a form of impression management.

4. *The importance of the market in creating identity*

Helen encapsulated the importance of this responsibility for teachers by describing it as an "expected expectation". All interviewees perceived the "market" to be defined as firstly, attracting parents to send their children to the school and secondly, satisfying them while their children are at the school. In a context where the school was founded by the local community the role of the parents is key, causing Catherine (Head teacher) to declare, "... so the parental influence is really strong and hugely positive ..." while Helen stated that, "they quite like knowing what's going on."

The perceived need to inform the parents regarding PESS activities at Riverside has already been documented. Perhaps the best example of a parental "desire" (Karen felt that using the term "influence" was inappropriate) is the request made to offer swimming as

part of the PESS programme. This has been acted upon by approaching a local private school who have graciously allowed Riverside to use their pool for free once a week within a designated lunchtime slot. Some teachers were a little wary of both parental expectations and parental involvement:

This school is run by parents. If the parents want something they'll make it known and it will happen . . . who are very well connected . . . (Alan)

However, Helen was keen to emphasise the role played by the Parent Teacher Association in supporting PESS, particularly key events such as Sports Day and Presentation Evenings.

The Head teacher and governors interviewed in this study revealed the pressures they felt when looking at what parents wanted from the school's PESS programme:

. . . I don't think we've fulfilled parents' expectations . . . parental expectations are quite, very unrealistic, based on how much money it costs to run a PE department. (Karen)

. . . I wonder if there's a kind of a mild aura of disappointment that we would love to be providing what the independent schools are providing for their kids, facilities wise . . . and I think that we haven't won very much which sounds awful. (Catherine)

Perhaps the basis of these parental expectations goes back to when the school was founded and promoted, using Karen's descriptor, as a "pseudo-independent school", a key determinant in the early development of an identity for the school. In those early days the school's PESS programme focused heavily on one sport, an activity associated with private schools leading to the employment of specialists in that area of expertise. The Riverside teams were very successful, often competing with and beating independent schools but to the detriment of other sports. After the key staff responsible had left it was apparent that a more inclusive approach was necessary, evidenced by Catherine's statement that all interviewees for the recent Head of PE post had agreed with the school's aim to develop a programme based on more sports rather than a select few.

One of the concerns with the early emphasis on one sport which had private school connotations, was the fact that it may exclude based on social class. The middle-class children, according to the Director of Sport, were already felt to be catered for by their out of school involvement in this sport and that playing the same at school was replicating what they were getting elsewhere. These findings reinforce in part similar suggestions put forward by other Free schools' research which purports a "middle class curriculum", sometimes in the form of teaching Latin (F. Green et al., 2015). However, it is important to emphasise how the PESS programme at Riverside has changed from a narrow focus on prestigious team sports to a broader range of activities that endeavour to appeal to all children.

Changes in PESS identity at Riverside have happened over a short period of time and tended to coincide with the appointment of a new Director of Sport, often reflecting not only the sporting interest of the new incumbent but also personal philosophies. However, parental expectations constantly appear as an underlying issue. Using evidence provided by Karen in the form of a parental survey, and highlighting "improvements in communication" in particular, it is possible to suggest that parents have changed their views by supporting the move towards a more inclusive PESS programme.

Remembering that the school was founded by parents, the whole notion of parental expectations is an interesting influence at Riverside. Previous comments from interviewees

would suggest that management really value parental support (parents contribute financially to the co-curricular programme) and in return they perhaps recognise that expectations then become an accepted part of the provider – consumer relationship. Understanding how parents have accepted PESS changes from an early emphasis on a narrow, elite based programme to a more inclusive approach could be explained by Goffman’s dramaturgical analogies. The “performance” by the school in terms of web sites, open evenings, bulletins, and events has led to an interaction with the “audience” (parents). Following parental feedback PESS identity has changed albeit after the appointment of a new Director of Sport. The influence of the “props” (newsletters and so on) to change the “performance” has been successful.

5. *Other drivers for change*

This theme was the least prevalent within interviewee discussions. All respondents perceived that any changes to Riverside’s identity were often a product of the time factors involved in opening a new school. Starting a school with a PESS programme based on a prestigious team sport alongside the introduction of both GCSE and A level exam courses was described by Karen as, “ . . . too much too soon. Absolutely. Not a shadow of doubt.” Goffman refers to a “service” being judged by its “speed and quality” and how through impression management, the latter can be concealed but not the former. The parallels here are that the initial PESS programme had perhaps been implemented too hastily leading to concerns over quality, eventually revealed (and judged) by some disappointing exam results.

Another driver for change identified by interviewees was the notion of “seeking help” from appropriate sources, again a time resource implication. Examples included waiting for an opportune moment to ask a local private school if Riverside could use their swimming pool, a move which Catherine felt was justified due to the latter’s charitable status. Approaching the Rugby Football Union’s Community Programme to become involved with extra-curricular activities was also seen by all to be a successful move. Katrina in her role as Governor responsible for PESS was keen to direct the newly appointed Director of Sport towards the Youth Sport Trust (YST) for help although the early experiences of the school had left her wary of, “ . . . not trying to do too much.” These findings confirm research undertaken by Wiborg et al. (2018) who found that Free schools were not only dependent upon seeking help but believed that it was almost their right to receive it.

Conclusions

A return to the topics covered in the research questions is best surmised by quotes from three different research participants:

1. ***“It’s changed a lot [at Riverside] and I think they’re trying to find the best way of doing it”***

This observation made by Marie in her role as a community sports coach employed by the school captures not only the rate of change within the PESS programme at Riverside but also the reasons for it. Offering both GCSE and A level PE alongside an

emphasis upon prestigious team sports led to both success and failure (some of the exam courses were eventually curtailed), leaving an overall feeling that a more inclusive programme was the answer. A high turnover of PE staff did not help. However, this has been replaced with a programme offering more activities at both curriculum and co-curricular level, overseen by a relatively new Director of Sport whose sporting philosophy resonates with management and parents. In terms of identity, PESS has changed from a “pseudo-independent school” (Karen) approach based upon elite competition to one more akin with the aims and values of a typical state school.

These changes concur with the notion that in a post-modern society identities change due to a fast changing world (Giddens, 1990; Hall, 1989) particularly in education where the performative demands placed upon schools need to be met in order to ensure survival. However, it is possible to suggest that at Riverside there are still elements of “traditionalism” (Fitz et al., 1997) in terms of uniforms (PE kits) and the emphasis upon a “knowledge rich” curriculum which would support Hall’s notion of the “hybrid” character of identity. It’s as though the reflexive approach adopted by the school has worked in terms of taking the best from past and present coupled with good practice from all types of schools. The evidence for this could lie within some outstanding GCSE results achieved later in the year that the research was undertaken. To what extent the ideology of Free school governance has contributed towards these successes remains unknown although it is apparent that respondents are appreciative of the freedoms granted within this status.

2. *“It’s about portraying that we are organised and we’re taking it seriously.” (Alan)*

Goffman’s concept of impression management is applicable to the development of the PESS programme at Riverside. Any shortcomings in the relatively recent past (disappointing exam results in particular) have had to be managed by a process of improved communication and the staging of events. Sending regularly updated e-mails to parents, placing TV monitors around the school and highlighting sports days and presentation evenings, are part of a product designed to create an impression that PESS at Riverside is improving. This would appear to be a process that is more design than default and new appointments at middle management and senior management level have worked well together to achieve this. Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphors emphasise the notion of a “performance” and in this instance working together as a team comes to the fore. The performance has been “idealised” and is compatible with the norms and values of the school’s culture (Manning, 1992); a “knowledge rich” setting enhanced by the “symbolic identity” of a smart PE kit, upheld by a robust uniform policy.

3. *“They quite like knowing what’s going on.” (Helen)*

Using another of Goffman’s dramaturgical analogies, the “audience” in the form of the parents are regularly informed regarding co-curricular activities, inter-school sports results and upcoming events. Riverside could well be unique in that it is a new school founded by parents who are asked to make a regular financial contribution towards extra-

curricular activities, therefore there is an expectation that they should be told what's going on.

Forging new identities for the PESS programme at Riverside is important. In the Free school context, many new schools opening in unfamiliar surroundings rely upon impressions created by smart kits and uniforms to compensate for limited facilities and limited reputations (Morris, 2016). At Riverside there appears to be a recognition that parents would like more, particularly in the form of new onsite sports facilities. Consequently, the school manage this by listening carefully, as shown by the introduction of swimming to the PESS programme. This finding is an answer to Wiborg et al.'s (2018) contention that the full extent and impact of parental expectations in Free schools may be unknown; at Riverside parental requests are acted upon, with positive outcomes when realistically possible.

Final thoughts

Conducting a single case study within a Free school such as Riverside has revealed the struggles and difficulties in starting a PESS programme with limited resources in a new school. All the research participants were able to identify that providing a full complement of exam courses alongside an ambitious extra-curricular programme was attempting too much. Any disappointments, particularly in the former context, led to periods of instability not helped by changes in staffing.

However, PESS emerges as an important contributor towards constructing a whole school identity based upon competition and achievement. The desire to create an impact has been achieved by a form of impression management through pupils wearing smart PE kits and by engaging with inter-school sports competitions. A "knowledge rich" ethos has underpinned a return to subject based examinations in the quest for the school to achieve success both within and without of the curriculum. Furthermore, an initial desire to exclusively promote elite competitive sport has changed towards a more inclusive programme for all pupils although elements of the former still exist.

However, expectations of curriculum innovation (House of Commons Report, 2015; Wiborg et al., 2018) reveal little change from programmes found in other maintained schools. Evidence of changes to traditional games-based PE programmes based upon expectations of "freedoms" for Free schools are not apparent within this study; the subject is still timetabled as "PE and Games", a distinction now abandoned by many state schools (Kirk, 1992). The desire for a "knowledge rich" curriculum may well have contributed towards an "institutionalisation" of knowledge (MacDonald & Tinning, 2003) whereby constraints are placed upon innovations for both teachers and students. The rigidity of such an approach can cause limitations in exploring new forms of pedagogies and curriculum design. This was evidenced by the introduction of First Aid to the PE curriculum at Riverside, the only example of curriculum innovation revealed in the study. However, this was not necessarily a move towards pedagogical change as it is a topic based upon the acquisition of traditional forms of facts-based propositional knowledge and therefore conforms to a whole school policy of creating a "knowledge rich" curriculum. It is an example of how teachers at Riverside feel constrained by internal pedagogical pressures: a realisation of Goffman's notion of "institutionalisation", in this case where whole school identity overrides the potential for subject innovation.

Furthermore, understanding limited institutional and subject change could be explained by the difficulties of enacting “freedoms” within a performative, managerialist culture, a context pertinent to all schools but particularly those starting afresh within the marketised setting that Riverside finds itself in. Indeed, a limitation of this research could be the need to ask further questions as to how this could happen given the freedoms associated with Free schools (Crinn, 2017; West & Wolfe, 2019). The need to understand and explain this expectation for curriculum and pedagogical change within Academies and Free schools remains an area for further research.

Identities, although hardly innovative (Wiborg et al., 2018), have been managed at Riverside Free school through a process of regular communications with parents, key policy actors within the school, and by reacting positively towards any requests made where possible. Working towards a more inclusive PESS programme alongside the gradual reintroduction of exam courses, has been addressed to create the impression that the department is organised and efficient. In sum, both institutional identity and subject identity has changed (and progressed) as the school has moved away from its initial promotion as a “pseudo independent school”. As Goffman would state, an “idealised performance” has led to a successful management of the “audience” namely in terms of the schools’ parents, although challenges remain within a performative educational landscape.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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