

**Ken Green****PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND YOUTH  
SPORT: IN SEARCH OF THE ‘HOLY  
GRAIL’****ŠPORTNA VZGOJA IN ŠPORT MLADIH:  
V ISKANJU ”SVETEGA GRALA”****ABSTRACT**

As the title suggests, I want in this paper to explore the relationship between PE and youth sport and, in particular, what I will refer to as the ‘PE effect’: that is to say, the supposed effect of PE on young people’s current and future participation in sport. My central claims are four-fold: first, that while we assume a PE effect, for good reason we *know* little or nothing about it; second, despite this, we tend to make exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims for the potential effect of school PE on young people’s future involvement in sport; third, given that we can probably only talk at best of correlation rather than causation when we refer to a ‘PE effect’, what we can do is identify the circumstances in which PE *might* play a part in initiating, enhancing and sustaining young people’s involvement in sport: in other words, identifying propitious or favourable circumstances for a ‘PE effect’; and fourth, despite the first two claims, I think we probably have a good idea what these propitious or favourable circumstances might look like.

*Key words:* physical education, youth sport, sport career

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**IZVLEČEK**

Kot že naslov pove, sem želel v tem prispevku raziskati odnos med športno vzgojo in športom mladih, zlasti pa to, čemur pravim “učinek športne vzgoje”, torej domnevni učinek športne vzgoje na sedanje in prihodnje ukvarjanje mladih s športom. Postavljam štiri glavne trditve: prvič, čeprav predvidevamo, da obstaja učinek športne vzgoje, o njem ne vemo kaj dosti ali pa sploh ničesar; drugič, kljub temu radi podajamo pretirane in neutemeljene trditve o potencialnem učinku šolske športne vzgoje na ukvarjanje mladih s športom v prihodnosti; tretjič, glede na to, da lahko, ko govorimo o “učinku športne vzgoje”, v najboljšem primeru govorimo le o korelaciji in ne o vzročnosti, bi lahko vsaj ugotovili okoliščine, v katerih je športna vzgoja pomembna za začetek ukvarjanja mladih s športom, izboljšanje in vztrajanje v športu: z drugimi besedami, ugotovili bi spodbudne ali ugodne okoliščine za “učinek športne vzgoje”; in četrtič, kljub prvima dvema trditvama menim, da si verjetno kar dobro predstavljamo, katere bi lahko bile te spodbudne ali ugodne okoliščine.

*Ključne besede:* športna vzgoja, sport mladih, športna kariera

## INTRODUCTION

As the title suggests, in this paper I want to explore the relationship between PE and youth sport and, in particular, what I am referring to as the 'PE effect': that is to say, the *supposed* effect of PE on young people's current and future participation in sport. I should just add that when I talk of sport, I am using the term in its broadest sense to include physical recreation as well as conventional competitive, physically vigorous and institutionalized activities. The paper is loosely based on an article entitled *Mission impossible? Reflections on the relationship between PE, youth sport and lifelong participation*, forthcoming in the journal *Sport, Education & Society*.

My central claims are three-fold: first, that while we assume a PE effect (on youth sport) we *know* little or nothing about it – indeed, despite this, we tend to (vastly) over-exaggerate the potential effect of school PE on young people's involvement in sport let alone lifetime participation; second, given that we can probably only talk at best of correlation rather than causation when we refer to a 'PE effect', what we should be trying to do is identify the circumstances in which PE *might* play a part in initiating, enhancing and sustaining young people's involvement in sport: in other words, identifying propitious or favourable circumstances for a 'PE effect'; third, we probably have a reasonable idea of what those favourable circumstances look like – they boil down to a democratization, informalization and popularization of PE!

I start from the premise that whatever each of us considers to be the main aims and purposes of PE (e.g. health promotion, sports development, education for leisure, personal and social education and so on) we would all agree on one thing: that some if not quite all of these outcomes depend upon a 'PE effect' – on youngsters' current and future sports participation. More specifically, it is widely believed that participation in sport *during youth* can be a significant factor in lifelong engagement therein (Scheerder *et al.*, 2006; Laakso, Telama, Nupponen, Rimpela & Pere, 2008). School PE is, in turn, often portrayed as a potentially significant, some would say crucial, intermediary or vehicle for enhancing young people's engagement with physically active recreation (typically but not exclusively in the form of sport) in their leisure and, in the longer run, over the life-course. This taken-for-granted assumption – regarding the ostensible impact of PE on participation – finds expression not only among PE teachers (see Green, 2000, 2003) and PE and sport science academics (Dixon, Warner & Bruenig, 2008; Corbin, 2002; Fairclough, Stratton & Baldwin, 2002; Flintoff, Long & Hylton, 2005; Haerens, Kirk, Cardon, de Bourdeaudhuij & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Harris, 2005; MacNamara *et al.*, 2011; Shephard & Trudeau, 2000; Trudeau & Shephard, 2005; Xu, Chepyator-Thomson, Liu & Schmidlein, 2010) but also in government policy internationally (Hardman, 2005). Indeed, growing concern with young people's health over the last 30 or so years has resulted in a plethora of initiatives (Coalter, 1999; Eurobarometer, 2010) and pleas (see, for example, McKenzie, 2009) implicating PE in the promotion of physically active and sporting lifestyles among young and old alike.

## THE ISSUE

Despite this there remains a dearth of evidence demonstrating the supposedly crucial role that PE is assumed to play (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). In fact, the precise nature of the relationship between the processes is seldom explored other than in implicit, often speculative and discursive, ways that simply treat as a truism the positive effects of the former (PE) on the latter (youth and adult participation). While a few, specifically-designed, programmes demonstrating that PE can

have an impact upon levels of physical activity, cardiorespiratory health and even adiposity are to be found (see, for example, Naylor & McKay, 2009; Resaland, Andersen, Mamen, & Anderssen, 2011; Sallis et al, 1997), there appears little or no evidence that what Gard (2009) has referred to as 'normal PE' has had or is likely to have an impact on regular levels of physical activity in the short-term, let alone medium- and long-term sports participation rates.

At one level, it is hardly surprising that those professionally, academically and politically concerned with the relationship between PE and youth sport have been inclined to simply presume a 'PE effect', and then speculate on what it might look like, rather than study it empirically. After all, speculation may be all that is available to us, not least because we do not have a classic open and shut case of causality in the sense that *if* PE is present then participation in sport is not only always present but is only present when young people have experienced PE. Put another way, any exploration of the relationship between PE and youth sport is bound to result in conjecture for one fundamental and inescapable reason: that is, the number of (and complex interrelationships between) variables – that have the potential to impact upon sports participation – precludes the isolation of causal factors and renders the identification of a causal relationship virtually impossible. The upshot is that the only option seemingly available to those of us intent on discovering the holy grail of a 'PE effect' is conjecture on the basis, at best, of correlation: in other words, where PE interventions can be seen to occur alongside increases in sports participation among young people.

Indeed, as intimated earlier, while strong positive correlations between PE and youth sport *may* indicate a causal relationship, they may not. Any relationship, whether strong or weak may be spurious inasmuch as observable patterns in either or both variables (PE and youth sport in the first instance) may, in fact, be 'caused' by one or other additional factors (or confounding variables), such as income, the influence of family and friends, the existence of suitable facilities and so on. Indeed, even if we were able to establish a strong correlation between PE and youth sport it would not be clear which direction 'causation' was working – it is perfectly feasible (not to say, likely) that developments in youth sport in the 1970s and 1980s preceded rather than resulted from developments in PE. Scraton's (1992) and Roberts' (1996) observations that PE teachers had responded to (rather than anticipated) changes in young people's leisure lives in England by adapting the PE curriculum in content and form suggest that this was, indeed, the case. The anticipated outcome of developments in PE aimed at enhancing youth sport – that is, changes in youth leisure sport behaviours – had, it seems, been the original cause of those same developments. In other words, increased participation in PE was a by-product of the true 'cause' rather than the cause itself. In a similar vein, Kjønneksen, Fjørtoft & Wold (2009) concluded from their longitudinal study of youngsters in Norway that the evidence did not provide clear answers to the question of whether young people became involved in sports because they liked PE or whether they liked PE because they were already involved in sports.

Against this backdrop, the following section provides a brief summary of a number of mostly quantitative but occasionally qualitative and mixed-methods studies of PE and youth and adult sport. It does so in order to draw some conclusions regarding what the extant research might reveal about the likely relationships between the two, as well as the claims made for a 'PE effect'.

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN LEISURE-SPORT AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Despite the fact that, just as with adults, there remain significant minorities of young people in all of these studies doing relatively little or absolutely nothing in participatory terms, it seems that more young people across Europe and the developed world are doing more sport than ever before. Taken together, the findings from an array of quantitative studies suggest that involvement in sport among young people has, over several decades, become sufficiently commonplace to justify talk of the 'sportization' of young people's lives (Brettschneider, 1992; Telama, Nupponen & Pieron, 2005). This is despite the well-charted tendency for youngsters to reduce levels of participation over the course of their secondary school careers, from a peak around the transition from primary to secondary schooling (see, for example, Belanger, Gray-Donald, O'Loughlin, Paradis, & Hanley's [2009] study of American adolescents. Alongside increases in levels and rates of participation over time, there has also been a broadening (in terms of *numbers* of sports) and diversification (*different* sports) of participation. From their *Cross-Cultural Studies on Youth Sport in Europe*, Telama *et al.* (2002, p. 141) concluded that 'there were many more physical activities and sports mentioned both as recreational and competitive sports than those in which young people participated, say, 20 years ago'.

A particular feature of trends in participation in recent decades has been a shift towards active recreation and, in particular, so-called 'lifestyle' or 'alternative' sports – that is to say, activities that are more recreational in nature (or, put another way, non- or, at least, less competitive – than, for example, 'traditional' team sports), flexible, individual or small group activities, that sometimes incorporate a health and fitness or adventurous orientation; in other words, activities that can be undertaken *how* (more-or-less competitively or playfully, for example), *why* (intrinsic pleasure, adventure, health, body sculpting, sociability and so on), *where* (commercial gyms, voluntary clubs, local government sports centre, as well as coastal, countryside and mountainous locations), *when* (in bouts of spare time) and *with whom* (singly or with friends and family) individuals choose.

In northern European countries such as Finland, young people are said to 'participate more in unorganized physical activity than in organized sport' (Telama *et al.*, 2005, p. 128). Across the EU, it seems that far more people get 'informal' physical exercise (in such forms as cycling, walking, dancing or even gardening) than play organised sport. Interestingly, in the Eurobarometer (2010) study, Slovenia (52%) was one of four EU Member States where more than half of those surveyed played sport (at least once a week) and the fourth most physically active (at least once a week) (84%) country. Health considerations (77%), relaxation (65%) and improving physical performance (43%) were described in Eurobarometer (2010) as heavily influencing Slovenians decisions to exercise.

The shift towards more individual and recreational activities is also evident within what might broadly be termed games. In Norway, for example, while participation levels and rates in some games – football and handball – have remained relatively stable, decreases in games such as bandy, ice-hockey, basketball and volleyball have occurred alongside increases in more flexible individual/partner games (such as orienteering) and physically active recreations (such as cross-country skiing, strength training and jogging) (Vaage, 2009).

The growing popularity of lifestyle activities notwithstanding, ‘the traditional style of youth participation in organized sport in formal organizational settings (such as sports clubs) remains very popular ... among young people of school age’ (Scheerder *et al.*, 2005, p. 337) not only, as Scheerder reports, in Flanders but Europe-wide. All-in-all, Telama and colleagues’ (Telama, Laakso & Yang, 1994, p. 68) observation that, in the early 1990s, the most popular types of sports (or, in some cases, active recreations) among adolescents in Finland were, in effect, lifestyle activities (specifically cycling, swimming, walking and running) *alongside* other more competitive, performance-oriented team sports (such as soccer and basketball) remains equally applicable to the contemporary youth sport scene not only in Scandinavia but across Europe, where sport and team games also remain an integral feature of many young people’s participation styles *alongside* lifestyle activities (De Knop & De Martelaer, 2001; Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Scheerder *et al.*, 2005b; Seabra, Mendonca, Thomis, Malina & Maia, 2007; Telama *et al.*, 2002; Telama *et al.*, 2005). Overall, the trends in leisure-time sport and active recreation among youth reflect a broadening and diversification of participation rather than a wholesale rejection of sport *per se*. Instead of replacing traditional sporting styles ‘new styles of physical activities have been added to the sports scene’ (Scheerder *et al.*, 2005, p. 337). While the shift towards more individualistic, recreational and lifestyle activities may not signal the end of sport in its more competitive, institutionalized forms it is, at the very least, signalling a ‘redrawing of the traditional boundaries and meaning of sport’ (Coalter, 1999, p. 37).

Despite the relative wealth of data on leisure-sport among young people and adults there is a good deal less data on PE, especially of the kind that allows for an exploration of the relationship between PE and youth sport, let alone PE and lifelong participation. Nevertheless, those relatively few studies across Europe that have begun to chart developments in PE provision in recent decades suggest that the re-drawing of boundaries evident in youth sport has been equally apparent, albeit to a lesser extent, in school PE. In England, survey data imply a similar process of broadening PE curricula has been occurring over several decades (Roberts, 1996; Smith, 2006; Sport England, 2003). Indeed, more recently, PE curricula in England have begun to embrace such varied activities as BMX, indoor climbing, orienteering, skateboarding, blading of various kinds, rock-it-ball (a variation on pop-lacrosse), Ultimate Frisbee (Frisbee played to American football rules) and tag-rugby. Further afield, Kjønneksen *et al.* (2009) attribute the popularity of PE in Norwegian schools to the more recreational nature (compared to normal academic lessons) and broader content (including recreational outdoor activities and dance alongside sport) of PE lessons. It is worth reiterating at this point, nevertheless, that there have been very few studies (see, for example, Green, Smith & Thurston, 2009) of the ways in which PE teachers have, as a matter of policy and practice, responded to any apparent mismatch between youngsters’ leisure sport lifestyles and the curriculum content of PE by broadening what they offer beyond ‘traditional’ activities.

The fact that similar patterns to those evident in youth sport are to be found (albeit in muted form) in PE, reveals little or nothing, however, about the relationship between PE and youth sport let alone lifelong participation. The question remains, therefore: what, if anything, have developments in youth sport (and, for that matter, lifelong participation) to do with PE?

## PHYSICAL EDUCATION, YOUTH SPORT AND LIFELONG PARTICIPATION

Among the relatively small but growing number of studies of participation not only in PE and youth sport (see, for example, Smith, 2006; Fairclough *et al.*, 2002), but also youth sport and sports participation in adulthood (Roberts & Brodie, 1992) and PE, youth sport and adult sports participation (Scheerder *et al.*, 2006), few have been in a position to explore the interrelationships between them. One study that sought to place broader socio-ecological factors (such as peer influences and competing leisure alternatives) alongside psycho-social factors (such as competence, enjoyment and motivation) was Smith's study of 15-16 year olds in north-east Wales and north-west England which supplemented quantitative data with a qualitative study – albeit among a particular cohort at one point in time. Smith's findings indicated that those 15-16 year-olds who participated in most of the curricular PE activities on offer were far more likely to report having participated in a high number of sports in their leisure time, as well as extra-curricular PE sessions, in the previous 12 months (Smith, Thurston & Green, 2007). More specifically, Smith (2006) found (statistically significant) correlations between the numbers of sports in which both male and female 15-16 year-olds participated in National Curriculum PE and their participation in leisure-sport and physical activity. Those who had experienced between 13 and 25 different activities in curricular PE during the school year were three times more likely to have been involved in a high number (10-30) of leisure-sports than those who had engaged with the fewest curricular PE activities (five or less). Smith found the same strong correlations between the numbers of sports in which both male and female 15-16 year olds participated in PE and in extra-curricular PE – the higher number of curriculum PE activities (13-25) group were, once again, three times more likely to participate in three or more extra-curricular PE activities than those involved in the fewest curricular PE activities.

Such findings still beg questions, nevertheless, regarding the directionality of any association or effect. As previously indicated, one of the ways in which some studies have indirectly explored the question of whether these findings are expressions of cause or effect (and even both in different ways and to varying degrees) – or, for that matter, a consequence of confounding variables – is by supplementing quantitative with qualitative data. Two prominent examples of multi-method approaches incorporate in-depth interviews that explore either young people's perceptions of PE in relation to their leisure lives or their prior sporting biographies.

Studies of young people's perceptions of the relationship between PE and youth sport (and, for that matter, adult sporting lifestyles) hold out some promise not least because adding qualitative data to quantitative measures has enabled a degree of triangulation alongside exploration of processes. In Smith's (2006) study, young people compared PE unfavourably with leisure-sport in what they viewed as several crucial aspects of provision and pointed to ways in which they believed PE could make an impact on their leisure-sport lives. Greater degrees of choice, more flexibility, greater emphasis on participation for intrinsic reasons (specifically fun/enjoyment), less formality, less emphasis upon performance and physicality were all prominent features of the style of PE that the young people in Smith's (2006) study claimed to prefer; not least because it allowed them to imitate (young) adult lifestyles. The 15-16-year-olds wanted to experience activities within PE that they enjoyed in their leisure-time and anticipated participating in when they were older. It was unsurprising, therefore, to find that many of them (and girls, in particular) appeared keen to avoid highly-structured, teacher-organized, competitive team sport activities,

favouring adult-like sports (for example, 'going to the gym'), undertaken in contexts where teachers were more likely to treat them as young adults.

## ADHERENCE TO SPORT

Before turning to the role of PE in promoting lifelong participation in sport, it is necessary to say a little more about adherence to sport and the implications for PE. You are all probably aware that the major points of drop-out from sport (where people simply cease participating) and drop-off (where participation diminishes, usually markedly) occur around ages 16, 45 and 70. These points of drop-out or drop-off coincide with significant life-stages (involving key transitions, for example, from home to school to work through to forming a family and eventually retiring). They are partly explainable in terms of the characteristics of those life-stages. As Coakley and White (1999) demonstrated, people's "sports participation patterns shift(ed) over time, depending on their access to opportunities, changes in their lives and changes in their identities" (Coakley & Pike, 2009, p. 107). In this regard, youth represents a significant life-stage (from childhood to youth to adulthood) for sports participation; a so-called 'zone of transition'.

Against the backdrop of decline in participation from youth onwards it is important to remember that trends in sports participation over the life-course begin artificially high, not least because of school PE! Nevertheless, while the biggest drop-out and drop-off from sport occurs around age 16 (i.e. or whenever the end of compulsory schooling occurs), in many youngsters' PE and leisure lives steady decline in participation begins around the transition from primary to secondary schooling.

All that said, the key to increasing participation in sport appears to be to boost involvement early on in youngsters' lives and then shepherd them, as best we can, through the two initial early life-stage transitions – from primary to secondary schooling and then, most significantly, from secondary schooling to work, partial or un-employment or further/higher education – when their young lives 'unfreeze' and reform (Roberts, Pollock, Tholen and Tarkhnishvili, 2009), as it were, and their participation becomes vulnerable. During such transitions, when their lifestyles tend to unfreeze, some leisure-time (and PE) activities are dropped or undertaken less frequently and replaced by other pastimes (including sedentary, screen[ICT]-based activities). Transitions such as those from education-to-employment and family and housing transitions 'are pivotal youth life stage transitions in that young people's experiences during and progress through these transitions have implications for all other aspects of their lives' (Roberts, 2009, p. 197). Leaving full-time education, for example, often means leaving behind the kinds of subsidised, convenient and readily available sports facilities, as well as groups of like-minded peers, that may well sustain engagement with sport among marginal players and embellish that of committed players.

Shepherding youngsters' through to their 20s involved in sport is potentially crucial because of the likelihood of those involved in sport by the time they approach age 30 becoming 'locked in' to sport and, conversely, those who are 'locked out' by that age remaining locked out for good (Roberts & Brodie, 1992). Roberts and Brodie's study of *Inner-city Sport* revealed that those aged 25-plus who possessed the necessary combinations of skills and money, and who were currently playing regularly, were effectively locked into sport through sheer routine, social commitments, and the benefits (immediate enjoyment and anticipated health and fitness gains) that they were experiencing.

But can PE make any contribution to boosting early involvement and then shepherding youngsters into secondary schooling, and subsequently their post-school lives, with what sociologists would call sporting habituses or predispositions intact? And, if it can make a contribution, what would that contribution look like? After all, trends in sports participation – and the substantial growth since the 1970s in particular – may well be secular trends; that is to say, they may occur quite independently of any PE influence. That said, even if sporting trends *are* secular trends, PE might still be able to reinforce, perhaps even boost these trends.

To get an idea of whether there is any chance of a ‘PE effect’ on young people’s sports participation now and in the future we need to identify (a) the key features of increases in participation among young people, and (b) how youngsters become ‘locked in’ to sport. In brief, the answer to (a) seems to be that a substantial growth in participation among females alongside the increased popularity of so-called lifestyle sports among younger generations have been the two key drivers for increases in participation. The answer to how people become ‘locked-in’ to sport seems, unsurprisingly, to revolve around lengthening the time-frame of youngsters’ involvement in sport while broadening their sporting repertoires. Lengthening the time-frame of youngsters’ involvement appears to be related to the establishment of wide sporting repertoires. And the longer time an individual is participating in sport ‘the less likely s/he is to drop out from sports in later life’ (Scheerder et al, 2006, p. 426). The point about wide sporting repertoires is that whatever their reasons for dropping out of particular sports, where individuals play several games their entire sports careers appear less vulnerable (Roberts & Brodie, 1992). Findings such as these led Roberts (1996) to conclude that the rise in sports participation in the UK over the course of the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was primarily explainable in terms of the introduction of ‘higher proportions of young people to a wide range of sports’ (Roberts & Brodie, 1992, p. 81) which brought with it higher degrees of ‘sports literacy’ among young people (young women in particular) and concomitant generational shifts in attitudes towards sport and physical recreation more generally (Coalter, 1999).

## THE ROLE OF PE

All told, studies of adherence to sport through the life-course send one pretty clear message: it is much easier to keep people in sport – to stop them dropping out in the first place – than to bring them back. In many kinds of leisure ‘the people who continue to take part throughout adulthood were usually introduced and became committed when they were children. Sport is no different from many other leisure activities in this respect’ (Birchwood et al, 2008, p. 284). The policy implication of all this is that ‘the best strategy for boosting adult participation in sport is not to try to reclaim the lapsed but to maximise participation among children and then minimise drop-out during the next life stage’ (p. 284).

There are, nevertheless, grounds for optimism if policy-makers and physical educationalists take on board the lessons to be learned about the centrality of enjoyment, competence and sporting repertoires in encouraging adherence, as well as the significance of lifestyle activities and more ‘recreational’ versions of ‘traditional’ sports. After all, later-life involvement in any leisure activity depends largely on the ‘skills and interests that individuals carry with them from earlier life stages’ (Roberts, 1999, p. 140); hence, the significance for lifelong participation of childhood and youth in building up sporting capital.

Sport and team games continue to hold a place in both the preferences and participatory repertoires of young people. While necessary, breadth of sporting content does not, however, appear sufficient on its own. Nor, for that matter, is a pedagogical approach that prioritizes either enjoyment of the task at hand or the development of a basic level of competence sufficient. As significant as these things may be, young people also benefit from a degree of self-determination or choice in moulding their own sporting repertoires (Wallhead & Buckworth, 2004). In short, motivation is enhanced when students are given a choice in the content and style of, for example, sporting opportunities and PE lessons. Roberts (1996) suggests that increases in participation in recent decades are a consequence of the fact that the mode of delivery of school sport has, to a greater extent than hitherto, coincided with the age group's preferred leisure styles and the process of individualization more generally.

But how to do this? Should *we*, as teachers, simply change the content of the PE curriculum to include more “cool” activities? Should we give the pupils what it is fashionable to call ‘a voice’ (i.e. listen to what they have to say about what they want from PE)? What *should* we do in order to increase the likelihood of a PE effect? With regard to student voice and choice, Gard, Hickey-Moodey, and Enright (2013) examine “the idea that physical education should draw from youth culture in order to be more ‘relevant’ to students”. Gard et al. (2013) question what is meant by a *relevant* PE curriculum: efforts “to listen and respond to student voice”, they say, have been “tokenistic, knee-jerk reactions to student disengagement and alienation and resulted in only a surface level engagement with students and youth culture”. Gard et al. (2013) suggest that “the logic of co-construction” – that is to say trying to adapt the PE curriculum towards contemporary youth sporting cultures while giving pupils an element of choice and teaching the subject at the same time – “will be a difficult trick” to pull off. “Perhaps”, they add, “part of the challenge of doing it will be understanding when and where it cannot or should not be tried.” Part of the problem of democratizing and popularizing PE is, as Gard et al. (2013) observe, that ‘new’ sporting practices (in dance, for example) are not new for very long. In addition, they are practices that require skills and expertise that few teachers or students possess. “Moreover”, they add, “youth culture is not very much like school; it regularly celebrates the marginality of certain practices because of the way they create niches that reject the mainstream”. In short they conclude that “trying to be new may not necessarily be the best way to reach contemporary youth”.

Despite Michael Gard's warning about the dangers of listening to young people while trying to develop a more ‘new’ and appealing (if not quite ‘cool’!) PE curriculum, I think that engaging with young people – in a process of democratizing and popularizing PE – is likely to be part of the solution to establishing favourable circumstances for a PE effect for several reasons. First, we should not underestimate the significance to young people of “the availability of opportunities to play sports in ways that are personally satisfying” (Coakley & Pike, 2009, p. 103) and motivational. Second, it may not matter exactly what activities PE consists of as long as they are sufficiently enticing to get youngsters doing them. Because, thirdly, what matters most is the development of sporting repertoires. Put another way, in terms of the contribution of school PE to facilitating wide sporting repertoires, it seems that what matters is not so much what PE teachers might anticipate young people doing as adults, or even what they are currently doing. Whether youngsters experience precisely the same activities at school as those they appear likely to engage in as adults, or whether they are ‘on trend’, does not appear crucial. What seems to matter more is providing young people with a repertoire or portfolio of sports and physical activities. Some of these will endure while others will be replaced, supplemented or even dropped as their lives

unfold; not least because the particular forms of activity in which young people find pleasurable excitement often develop and/or change as they grow older (Roberts & Brodie, 1992). Gard *et al.*'s recognition that "Maybe what some young people want is what adults do" harks back to Coakley and White's (1999, p. 80) finding that, in the process of asserting their independence, young people increasingly engage in activities that 'prepare them for adulthood or enable them to do adult things'. This is why it is important to recognize that, when it comes to the content of PE, it is noteworthy that age 16 is not simply a significant point for drop-out or drop-off, it also marks a shift towards individualized, more recreational activities among those young people who remain engaged with sport.

## CONCLUSION

The central concern of this paper has been the issue of whether we can talk meaningfully of a PE effect on young people's current and future sports participation. Along the way I have noted that it is impossible to identify, in any (statistically?) meaningful sense, a 'causal' link between school PE, youth sport and even lifelong participation that might implicate PE in promoting increased engagement with sport – not least, as a step towards enhancing adherence to sport and active recreation over the life course. Early participation in sport may well be a necessary condition for becoming 'locked in' to sport. But when, where, and how? Because, while necessary, early involvement with sport is clearly insufficient to prevent very many youngsters dropping out: as Coakley and Pike (2009) might put it, while PE might be a *site* for socialisation into sport, mere involvement in PE is evidently insufficient to *cause* socialisation outcomes (although it may cause unintended outcomes through socialization because of the way in which experiences are 'interpreted'). Nonetheless, that does not prevent us trying to identify favourable circumstances for adhering young people to sport and establishing the implications for PE.

At first glance, the portents appear favourable. Notwithstanding the inevitability of drop-out and drop-off among youth in the post-school years and over the life-course, there is a body of research – exploring, among other things, the so-called 'determinants' and 'correlates' of participation in sport – which purports to show that active participation in sport during childhood and youth is an important prerequisite for involvement in later life; in other words, the foundations for sports careers appear to be laid in childhood and youth (see, for example, Birchwood *et al.*, 2008; Roberts & Brodie, 1992; Scheerder *et al.*, 2006). Nonetheless, such research still leaves open the question 'What can or does PE *actually* contribute to those foundations?'

It is highly likely that, for some young people at least, the effects of PE on their leisure-sport participation are causal in a necessary sense; that is, without the impact of PE they simply would not take part in any sport in their spare time. Indeed, a wealth of anecdotal evidence from PE teachers, elite athletes and youngsters themselves reinforces this impression. PE may have the potential, therefore, to be significant for some youngsters for whom it provides the only opportunity to engage with sport or with specific activities. It is equally feasible that without the intervention of PE, some youngsters would not take part in particular sports in their leisure to which they are introduced by their PE teachers via curricular or extra-curricular PE. In such cases, PE may be sufficient in itself to have the desired effect. It is unlikely, nevertheless, that there will be one process within PE that explains how school sport might influence youngsters' sporting and physical recreation behaviours outside school, let alone later in life – whether that

process be the broadening of PE curricula, greater degrees of so-called 'activity choice', alternative approaches to teaching games, or even charismatic and motivational teaching. Indeed, either individually or in configuration, these PE processes may impact to a greater or lesser extent upon different groups, at different times and in different places: for example, the impact of daily outdoor activities on primary school children in Scandinavian schools; the dramatic growth of indoor sports facilities, often attached to secondary schools, in the UK in the 1970s; or the broadening of PE curricula across Europe in recent decades.

Such an optimistic view of the potential of PE notwithstanding, studies of sporting careers or biographies suggest that school interventions (via PE) are, in reality, more likely to impact upon youth sport around the margins. Developments in young people's leisure-sport participatory profiles are more likely among those already engaging with sport and, possibly, those 'biddable' youngsters on the margins of commitment who dip into sport (irregularly) and experiment. PE is most likely to be effective within what Birchwood *et al.* (2008) refer to as the minimum-maximum range to which young people are already predisposed by virtue of their socialization into or away from sport in the family. In other words, where PE might make a difference seems likely to be restricted, for the most part, to those youngsters already predisposed towards sport. Indeed, any assumed relationship may, in fact, be spurious. If the findings of Birchwood *et al.* (2008) are anything to go by, family socialization into sports participation appears a far better bet than PE as a major 'cause' of an enduring propensity to engage in sport among young people. In short, we may simply have to accept that there are strong, relatively determinant influences on involvement in sport generally (beyond, as well as including school PE) that simply lie outside the scope of formal PE interventions (Evans & Davies, 2010).

Because sports participation is a complex social phenomena – involving differing activities, a multiplicity of sometimes overlapping sometimes markedly different skills, differing levels of commitment and intensity, different forms of participation (for example, leisure and top-level) and differing motivations – it is rarely the product of a single cause. Thus, knowing which social processes to study in order to make sense of lifelong adherence to sport is far from straightforward. It is, perhaps, inevitable therefore that a focus on a 'PE effect' is likely to over-simplify the reality of sports participation. Interventions such as PE may work for some but not for others and may work in some circumstances but not in others. It may work with those biddable youngsters on the margins who while not having been deeply socialized into sport by their families may have some experience and physical and social capital to draw on but is unlikely to work with those 'locked out' by virtue of class, ethnic, gender and/or family socialization.

I want to base my concluding comments on Coakley and Pike's succinct summary of the socialization process. It is my contention that if PE is to have any effect (whether measurable or not) on young people's predispositions towards sports participation – if, in other words, PE seeks to develop favourable conditions – then it needs to recognize that the sporting cultures of the people we are trying to socialize into sport (youngsters) has changed – there has been a shift away from what Coakley and Pike (2009, p. 108) have described as 'rigidly organized, win-orientated' sports. The people doing the socializing (PE teachers) may need, therefore, to be more aware of the significance of lifestyle or alternative sports and, for that matter, the individualization process, to youngsters' sporting cultures as well as the negative consequences of 'autocratic, command-style' (Coakley & Pike, 2009, p. 108) teaching. And they may need, as far as they are able, to change the context in which youngsters are socialized (the PE lessons themselves if not the school environment). The democratization, informalization and popularization of PE may

make PE more in tune with youngsters' preferred leisure lifestyles and, in the process, point the way to the holy grail of a 'PE effect'!

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