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Culture, power, and ideology: the purpose and value of physical education (PE) in alternative provision schools in England

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ABSTRACT

Much has been said and written about the purpose and value of mainstream education generally and physical education (PE) specifically. However, in contrast, little attention has been given to the purpose and value of alternative provision, and none about PE in those education settings. In this article, we draw upon the concepts of culture, power, and ideology to address this shortcoming. To do so, we conducted individual interviews with eight PE practitioners to generate rich qualitative data. With the permission of participants, all interviews were audio recorded, before being transcribed, and then subjected to thematic analysis. We discuss participant perspectives on the purpose and value of PE in alternative provision schools in relation to the following themes: (1) PE to develop life skills; (2) PE to improve mental health; (3) PE as physical activity and healthy lifestyles; and (4) PE to support young people to engage in sport and physical activity outside of school. During this discussion, we cast light on the PE ideologies and cultural practices that saturate alternative provision settings, before ending by suggesting how PE practitioners can increase the likelihood of their beliefs about the purpose and value of PE being achieved through their practice.

Introduction

Much of the available research (and, indeed, theory, policy, and practice) on education falls into three domains of purpose, which are: qualification (knowledge, skills, and dispositions), socialisation (into political, economic, and professional traditions) and subjectification (the "impact" of education on the embodied self) (see Biesta, 2010). Even so, there is little consensus among policy makers, scholars, and practitioners vis-à-vis (1) what knowledge, skills and dispositions should be developed during schooling; (2) what role schools can and should play in facilitating young people's socialisation and assimilation

into cultural traditions outside of schools; and (3) what impact schooling should have on the embodied self (Philippou & Priestley, 2022).

According to the United Nations (2023) – an international organisation encompassing 193 member states (including the United Kingdom) – education can and should contribute to breaking generational cycles of poverty, reducing inequalities, fostering peace and tolerance between people and communities, and empowering people to live more healthy and sustainable lives. Given the strong ideological commitment to concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion by such a powerful and influential organisation, it is perhaps unsurprising that international and national education policy and research entangles discussions about the purpose of education with a drive for "inclusive education" (Moore & Slee, 2020) despite, according to Haegele and Maher (2023a), there being little consensus about what inclusive education does, can and should mean.

While the National Curriculum in England has featured an "Inclusion Statement" since its inception in 1992 (Department for Education [DfE], 2013), there is less than fleeting mention of the curriculum's role in tackling inequalities. Instead, it is discursively aligned with the parochial belief about the curriculum introducing pupils to knowledge they need to be educated citizens (DfE, 2013). Former Schools' Minister Nick Gibb expanded on the State's position about education during a speech to the Education Reform Summit, when he said:

> … The two purposes of education – to grow our economy and nurture our culture – are vital. But I believe there is a third, very practical purpose to education. Adult life today is complicated, and we owe it to young people to ensure that they have the character and sense of moral purpose to succeed. There is now very clear evidence that schools can make a significant contribution to their pupils' achievement by finding opportunities to instil key character traits, including persistence, grit, optimism and curiosity. (Gibb, 2015)

While questions can and should be asked about the ideological alignment and/or coherence between the Former Schools' Ministers' beliefs about the purpose of education and what was articulated in the National Curriculum, a focus on education as preparation for the labour market and as development of young people's "character" for assimilation into the national "culture" of England seems obvious, regardless of whether we agree with that or not.

Interestingly, while there is much rhetoric around the purpose of education broadly, hardly anything has been said about the purpose of alternative provision[1] education specifically, and certainly not in England. Accordingly, we are left to assume that its purpose must align with what has been said about (mainstream) education. In a 2011 speech by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, it was said that pupils outside of mainstream education, including those in alternative provision, constitute an "educational underclass" (Taylor, 2012) because they fail academically (Biesta's, 2010 "qualifications") and grow up without the skills to become successful members of society (Biesta's, 2010 "socialisation"). Gove suggested that work needs to be done in alternative provision to ensure that young people in those settings are getting "high quality" education and "the best value for public money" (Taylor, 2012), a purview repeated by yet another former Secretary of State for Education, Damien Hinds, in the UK's 2018 Vision for Alternative Provision (Hinds, 2019). While Hinds wanted alternative provision to become and be recognised as an integral part of the education system, it was said that a core purpose of alternative provision education was to ensure that

young people in those settings can make a successful transition back into the mainstream schooling system (Hinds, 2019). In this regard, it is noteworthy that research by Cullen and Monroe (2010) illustrated how sport through PE may serve as a catalyst to facilitate the transference of pupils from alternative provision settings back to mainstream school populations because of the positive impact it is said to have on pupil behaviour and learning. As such, it is against this policy, research, and practice backcloth that our study explores, from the perspective of staff in alternative provision, the purpose of PE in that cultural landscape. In doing so, we hope to learn what alternative provision PE is endeavouring to achieve and how it may contribute (or not) towards the learning and development of young people in that education setting. It is here where the novelty of our research lies because, at present, very little is known about PE in alternative provision.

Research relating to the purpose of PE in mainstream schools in England has noted changes over time and across space. Like other curriculum subjects, PE has a long and complex history as an arena of struggle over its purpose. From roots in the public schools where a games ethic ideology was legitimised as a way of developing the "character" of those boys who would become the future leaders of Britain's colonial empire, to the military drill approach used in state schools wherein the purpose was to discipline the so-called unruly and unhealthy bodies of the masses (Kirk, 1992), the early purpose(s) of PE were characterised by and reinforced militarism, classism and gendered codes of masculinity. While these roots are still entangled in contemporary mainstream PE in England, developing skills to improve sports performance, improving physical health, and developing physically literate young people are now widely considered to be the subject's core purposes in England (see Gray et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2016). It must be said, though, that these purposes relate to mainstream schools in England. At present, very little can be found in the published literature about the purpose of PE in alternative provision settings in England.

The significance of centring PE in alternative provision becomes clear given that there is reasonable evidence suggesting that it has the potential to support young people to develop physically, socially, cognitively, and emotionally (see Green, 2020; Sandford et al., 2024). More broadly, it has been found that organised sport and physical activity, which are often a core part of PE, can contribute towards increasing pro-social behaviours among young people in alternative provision settings (Cullen & Monroe, 2010). Indeed, research evidence continues to highlight the potential of PE, sport, and physical activity in facilitating pro-social behaviour, reducing risky behaviour, and providing opportunities for the development of healthy and supportive peer friendships and adult relationships – culminating in positive youth development (Holt, 2016). As with education generally, though, the purpose of PE is contested, with different opinions about whether physical, social, cognitive and/or affective domains should be prioritised (Sandford et al., 2024). As such, we drew on the concepts of culture, power, and ideology because they enabled us to explore, for the first time in research terms, the dominant beliefs and practices relating to PE in alternative provision schools.

Culture, power and ideology in education

We used Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971) to consider the purpose and value of PE in alternative provision. In our article, cultural hegemony refers to processes in which those in positions of authority in political and

civic society exercise their power to shape the culture of social groupings (Sissel & Sheard, 2001); that is, the dominant ideologies, values, customs, rituals, and behaviours of, for instance, alternative provision schools generally and/or PE in those settings specifically. The status of dominant and subordinate groups within education is anchored to cultural hegemony. People with higher degrees of legitimate power, like policy makers in government and senior leaders in schools, will use the influence they have over the mechanisms of cultural (re)production in schools (e.g. school policy, resourcing, staff professional development, pedagogy and curriculum) to disseminate ideology and shape culture (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971), such as that relating to the purpose and value of alternative provision PE.

From a Gramscian perspective, power relates to an individual or group's ability to shape the values and behaviours of others, typically through ideological leadership, to achieve one's own objectives (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971). Accordingly, power is multi-dimensional and layered, dynamic, contextual, situational, and constantly in flux. Consequently, the meaning and values that influence the culture of alternative provision PE are tied to Ball's (1987) notion of schools (and the departments within them) as arenas of struggle where power relations are played out between key stakeholders, such as policy makers, senior leaders, teachers, and pupils, as they contest, negotiate and compromise. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony therefore offers a framework that allows for meaning to be made through the identification of the specific school and PE ideologies, experiences, traditions, and rituals that have become so established and privileged that they manifest as common-sense collective arrangements (Engelstad, 2009). It is the common-sense collective and individual beliefs about the purpose and value of alternative provision PE that we explored from the perspectives of PE practitioners because they are able, if they have the expressive freedom to do so, to use their agency to develop and teach PE (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022).

Methodology

Philosophical position

Our research was interpretivist in nature in that it aligned with ontological relativism and social constructionism (Bryman, 2016). As such, we concerned ourselves with exploring the ways and extent to which our participants made sense of and constructed meaning about the experiences that they lived and embodied in alternative provision schools. To ensure philosophical coherence (Tracy, 2010), we assumed that there were multiple interpretations of the views and experiences that were expressed – some compatible, others not – that can be explored from multiple perspectives to understand the rich tapestry of knowledge relating to PE in alternative provision schools. Accordingly, we were interested in exploring our participants' "truths" about alternative provision schools, rather than "the truth" because this was in keeping with our epistemological positioning.

Participants and recruitment

This article is based on data generated from eight PE practitioners[2] who were working in alternative provision schools in England (see Figure 1). To recruit participants, a freedom of information request was sent to the DfE to source the email addresses of all alternative

Name (Pseudonym)	Role	Responsibility	School type	Age range
Wesley	PE Lead	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE, including multiple staff that deliver PE	SEMH School	5 – 11 years
Darren	Proprietor	Acting Head Teacher for a new school with responsibility for developing projects that support young people in need.	Independent SEMH School	6 – 16 years
Hiten	Head of PE	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE and outdoor education	Independent SEMH School	[Not captured]
Hayley	PE Teacher	Responsible for the delivery of PE to children from year six through to year 11	Alternative Provision School	11 – 16 years
Jack	PE Lead	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE, including multiple staff that deliver PE	Alternative Provision School	7 – 16 years
Jane	Acting Head Teacher	Responsible for day-to-day school operations across four sites (including a PRU, AP and Hospital School)	Pupil Referral Unit, Alternative Provision School and Hospital School	11 – 16 years
Michael	Head PE	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE, including mentoring multiple staff that deliver PE	Alternative Provision School	11 – 16 years
Sarah	Personal Development Coach and Mentor	Responsible for working with the senior leadership team to help consider mental health and wellbeing as a whole school approach	Alternative Provision School	11 – 16 years

Figure 1. Participant information.

Note: SEMH, social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

provision schools in England at the time. As a result, we received an Excel spreadsheet containing contact details for 351 schools. Upon receipt, we sent an email to all the head teachers/principals that were on our spreadsheet to introduce ourselves and the research, explain its aim, key beneficiaries, and to ask for the school's involvement. For those settings that were interested in the research, we included a link to an online survey. All participants had to confirm that they had read the information letter and sign the consent form before they could advance to the survey. Forty-eight alternative provision PE practitioners completed the survey, the data from which are reported elsewhere (Quarmby et al., 2024). At the end of the survey, some participants provided their email addresses to indicate that they wanted to participate in a follow-up interview, while others were recruited from an in-person event organised by the Youth Sport Trust[3] for alternative provision practitioners.

Methods and data generation

Qualitative data for this article were generated via individual online, rather than in-person, interviews because of the geographical spread of participants and to accommodate their busy professional lives. Prior to interviews commencing, the research team met online to construct an interview schedule that aligned with and mapped to the research questions to ensure that they were addressed, were informed by the research literature relating to the purpose and value of alternative provision schools and PE within all school settings, and enabled us to probe in more detail the points of interest identified through the analysis of survey data. Example interview questions were: (1) What is the purpose(s) of PE in alternative provision schools? (2) What or who has influenced your view on the purpose of PE in alternative provision schools? (3) How, if at all, is the purpose of PE in alternative provision schools similar or different to mainstream schools? (4) What should be done to ensure that PE is beneficial to young people in alternative provision? Interviews were semi-structured in nature so that participants and interviewers could explore issues relevant and significant to them as the interview unfolded (Bryman, 2016). Expansion, clarification, example, justification and probe questions were used so that

participants could story their experiences in detail, which enabled us to cultivate a rich tapestry of knowledge by accessing thick descriptions as a hallmark of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). This method and approach have been used and recommended by others who have explored the nature and purpose of PE according to teachers in special schools (e.g. Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022) and mainstream schools (e.g. Morgan & Hansen, 2008) as well as teacher educators (e.g. McEvoy et al., 2017). Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, but the duration of each interview depended on the time that each participant had available and the extent to which they were able and willing to discuss in detail the topics under investigation. Not wanting to perpetuate what Braun and Clarke (2021) call the myth of data saturation as sample size or interview duration, we decided to stop gathering data after the eight interviews because we agreed that we had, by then, generated what Malterud et al. (2016) term "information power" in that data had sufficient richness, depth, density, diversity, and complexity to build themes. With the permission of participants, the audio of all interviews was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and used as a data source.

Data analysis

Anthony analysed the data using a reflexive thematic approach which was inspired by the work of Braun and Clarke (2022). Stage one of data analysis involved listening to the audio recordings of interviews and reading and rereading the verbatim interview transcripts until Anthony felt that he had become intimately familiar and connected with the textual and linguistic representations of participant views and experiences. Next, codes were systematically assigned to chunks of the interview text that were deemed significant in relation to the research questions, published literature relating to the research topic, and embodied experiences of our participants and Anthony's reflexive engagement with his own (prior) experience, knowledge and values. Codes were descriptive (what was said), analytical (significance and implications of what was said in related to published research and policy) and theoretical (how what was said related to culture, power, and ideology). Once codes were assigned, Anthony then moved to considering the meaningful essence that was woven through the dataset so that he could cluster codes around central organising concepts to establish candidate themes (e.g. there being a strong ideological commitment to PE developing life skills that can support transfer back to mainstream schooling). Established theme titles were then given that reflected the meaningful essence permeating each theme, which then prompted some removal of codes, shifting of codes and collapsing of themes to ensure coherence between data and the theme that represented them. This was no easy task because codes and data connected to and were entangled within and across multiple themes, which is, according to Braun and Clarke (2022), in keeping with reflexive thematic analysis because it endeavours to make sense of and construct meaning about complex, nuanced, and relational social phenomena. Once themes had become more established, interview transcripts were trawled for verbatim quotes that were missed, or their significance overlooked, during the initial analysis. Throughout the analytical process, Anthony kept a detailed reflexive diary relating to the ways and extent to which his knowledge, assumptions, emotions, and prior embodied experiences may have shaped his interpretation of data, which enabled him to check and challenge himself during the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

The outcome of the data analysis was the construction of the following themes: (1) PE to develop life skills; (2) PE to improve mental health; (3) PE as physical activity and healthy lifestyles; and (4) PE to support young people to engage in sport and physical activity outside of school, which are used to structure the Findings below and Discussion thereafter. We (re)present findings as rich, thick, descriptions of participant views and experiences to capture the complexity and nuance of beliefs about the purpose and value of physical education in alternative provision, and invite our reader to consider the ways and extent to which what participants said connects and resonates with them as a way of facilitating empirical generalisability (Smith, 2018). For the Discussion, we move from the "show" to the analytical "tell" by drawing on Gramsci's concepts of culture, power, and ideology to facilitate theoretical generalisability (Chenail, 2010).

Physical education to develop life skills

According to all participants a key purpose of PE in alternative provision is to develop the life skills of young people in that setting:

> PE can help with communication, leadership, teamwork, and our pupils sometimes struggle with teamwork but the activities we do encourage them to work as a team. Even just speaking to new people outside their comfort zone doesn't always happen in school because they stick to certain bubbles, but PE can help with that. (Michael)

> PE definitely helps with their social skills. It's all based around just getting them involved and then they can get the benefits from it, getting them involved in things they like within reason to develop those core life skills. (Wesley)

Interestingly, it was suggested that some young people demonstrate and develop life skills in PE that they do not in other areas of the curriculum:

> Some pupils [in PE] show leadership, which is of course important in PE, which they don't show in English or maths. (Michael)

> It [PE] is such an important subject because you can develop those life skills, like leadership, teamwork, responsibility, that you cannot develop in other subjects. (Hayley)

One of the main reasons articulated for focusing on life skill development, through PE, was to support young people to transition back into mainstream school:

> You've obviously got the personal development curriculum, which is about identifying all their needs that aren't being met in whatever way that might be so that they are mainstream ready. (Jane)

> For those (young people) that won't be with us for all their education we need to help with that transition back to mainstream school. We need to help them to develop those core skills and PE can do that. (Jack)

It was suggested by participants that the life skills developed through PE could be transferred to other life domains beyond the school context, such as further education, employment, and in the local community:

One thing that we've had quite a lot of success with is leadership in sport. So, giving young people that opportunity and responsibility to lead because you've got all those employment skills that you learn through that. Then you can link that into exit routes like college or employment. (Wesley)

Activities must be relevant and meaningful and a lot of the time when you introduce those personal skills, that character development, then they start seeing it as being more relevant because it's actually going to support them out in the community. (Hayley)

There was often an expectation that life skills would develop simply through participation in PE and sport. In this respect, Jack was the only participant who talked about the explicit teaching of life skills:

I'm using the My Personal Best[4] project. I've gone, especially with the team sport element, to quite a values-based approach. So rather than saying, we're doing basketball, it might be a lesson around communication. What I've ended up doing is, to make it more relevant to the wider school as well, attach it to our school values. For example, we've got values like respect, responsibility, and perseverance so I focus around these as well.

Physical education to improve mental health

It was suggested by all participants that a core purpose of PE in alternative provision schools was to improve the mental health of young people in that setting:

Most of ours [PE] is around the mental health side of it and helping them [young people] to regulate their emotions. You [young person] didn't enjoy mainstream PE? Maybe because you couldn't regulate during it. (Wesley)

We look at our PE in relation to mental health and wellbeing. Trying to increase those for our students. That's key. (Sarah)

PE was said to be (or have the potential to be) therapeutic for young people. In this respect, attempt was made to embed occupational therapy, something that was offered in only some alternative provision settings, into PE:

What I try and do is get all our therapeutic staff integrated; I really don't like a child going out [of PE] for an OT [occupational therapy] session, I'd much rather the OT is working in PE with them. PE is ideal for that type of therapy. (Darren)

It was said that PE can improve mental health if it involves spending time outdoors:

With the lockdown for two years, mental health, obviously, is now a big thing and PE can help that. Just being outside for two hours playing a cricket game can … they don't have to worry about anything else for those two hours and that can increase their mental health. (Michael)

I've started to use golf. When you look at what is involved in golf, you're outside for a long time, in the natural green environment, which is great for mental health, and it's only you you've got to beat because it doesn't really matter what one of the other guys (*sic*) shoots in. (Darren)

Sarah said that her school was sourcing professional development courses relating to how to improve mental health through PE:

We've been looking at mental health training for all our staff, but especially PE, so that we know how to embed mental health in PE and how we can help to improve it [mental health].

For our participants, there was a clear link between improving mental and physical health, tied to the notion of "healthy minds, healthy bodies", as articulated by Sarah when discussing substance abuse:

> We're investing in staff to look at how they can bring PE and sport into it, in whatever guise they want to, should it be Zumba classes, breakout classes where we're doing stuff and being physically active. One of the biggest things is that a lot of our young people are unfortunately involved in alcohol and drugs so, again, it's that thing of healthy mind, healthy body and how they can use those and actually create good habits for the future.

In a similar vein, Jack connected mental and physical health when he discussed how he participated in physical activity for its health benefits and therefore wanted the same for his students:

> I play sport and that's the sort of things that I do for my own wellbeing as well, like walking and I play sport for the physical and mental health benefits. So, for me, PE is a massive thing and I've seen the benefits, and I do see a real positive impact with students with PE as well. I want them to have those benefits.

Physical education as physical activity and healthy lifestyles

A focus on leading healthy lifestyles was said to be so important for Wesley that his PE curriculum was built on it:

> Our whole PE curriculum is built around the lead healthy lifestyle part of the curriculum. They [students] can do that if they're passionate for sport and passionate for moving and activities and finding things they like and then doing it.

According to Sarah, greater focus was being placed on physical activity for health in her school. So much so, that the school had changed the timetable to enable young people to engage in physical activity:

> We're dedicating time in young people's timetables where that physical activity is taking place for them. At least once a week, usually more, they're involved in some form of physical activity to help them get healthy. That is new for us as a school, but it is so important.

Some participants mentioned that they had changed their view on the purpose of PE after working in alternative provision, especially from PE being about sport and competition towards a focus on healthy lifestyles, as illustrated by Jack:

> I think it's [Jack's view of the purpose of PE] shifted over the last few years for me. When I first came into PE it was about ensuring that pupils learnt skills within sport, competitive sport. But, for me now, it's shifted to encouraging healthy lifestyles and making healthy choices.

It was mentioned that pupils need to be as physically active as possible (to improve their physical and mental health) because most do not engage in physical activity outside of school:

> A lot of our children don't have the home lives that support an active life. They don't have people taking them to football clubs at the weekend, so we've really got to make the most of them moving in school. Skill-wise they won't improve as much as we would like but all of our children take part in their PE lessons and they're all quite active at break times and lunch times too. We try and encourage as much out of school sport as we can, so it's just about getting them moving and having a healthier life. (Wesley)

In this respect, it was mentioned that PE could support young people to make healthy lifestyle choices outside of and once they leave school:

> It's [PE] a chance for us to educate them about healthy lifestyle choices and the impact that decisions can have on their health. Being active, enjoying sport and, at the same time, they're learning the skills that we're teaching them. But then moving forward our main purpose is to make sure these children are being educated about healthy lifestyles and when they leave school they're able to carry that forward with them. (Michael)

Physical education to support young people to engage in sport and physical activity outside of school

According to participants, PE's purpose included supporting young people in alternative provision to engage in lifelong sport and physical activity:

> For me, it's the big idea of that lifelong participation or encouraging physical activity and just promoting physical activity as well so that they [pupils] continue doing it with friends outside school and when they leave us. (Jack)

To achieve this goal, Jack advocated for exposing young people to as many different activities as possible in PE:

> I'm keen in terms of providing as many different and alternative experiences as possible. I've been part of quite a few external projects but I'm keen to try different sports. For example, we've been paddleboarding, we've done a bit of crazy golf, we've done rock climbing, a whole host of different things to try and encourage that wider participation. If we include as many things as we can inside of school, there might be an activity that they take up outside of school. For example, we went paddleboarding and a lad now has been several times since with his mum.

It was also said that a key focus of PE was to ensure that young people can organise and play activities independently so that they can do those activities with friends outside of and when they leave school:

> Our year tens [aged 14–15 years] and elevens [aged 15–16 years] will go and play basketball for the full amount of time now and they've become independent with it. Sometimes I just have to stand there now because they go in, split themselves into teams, they lead their own warmups and then they play. That's my ultimate goal that they can go in and do that because then, when they leave us, they can go with friends and play a five-a-side game and they know they can set themselves up because they've learnt how to do it with us. (Michael)

Two schools said that they go to a local gym so that the pupils can learn about gym etiquette and how to sign up to the gym in case they want to do that when they leave school:

> Key stage four [pupils aged 14–16 years] is a lot more focused on just developing sports they can sustain when they leave us. We also go to the gym with them just so that they've been to a gym, they know what's the etiquette in a gym, how they sign up when they leave school. (Michael)

> Alice [pseudonym], and Lisa [pseudonym], members of staff, are looking at fitness in its widest form. We've looked at personal development through boxing, and we do that as well with a local gym. Going to the gym, bringing health into it from that point of view, as lots of our young people have quite sedentary lives, so at least they can join a gym. (Sarah)

Discussion

From our research it was evident that there was a strong ideological commitment among participants to PE being a mode of cultural (re)production (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971) that could and should develop the life skills of young people in alternative provision schools. While this may at first seem unsurprising given that life skills such as interpersonal communication, leadership, problem-solving, teamwork and time management are said to impact positively on young people's education and physical and mental health (Steptoe & Wardle, 2017), this finding is significant if we remember that life skills are not part of the common-sense cultural arrangements of PE in the mainstream schools that these young people transitioned from (Cronin et al., 2023). Instead, PE "as" physical activity, physical literacy and competitive sport and team games continue to dominate the cultural landscape in schools in England (Gray et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2016; Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022). In this regard, it is noteworthy that PE has been identified as a fertile cultural terrain in which life skills can be developed because the social, emotional, and interactive nature of many of the activities provide developmental opportunities for young people (Cronin et al., 2023; Hooper et al., 2021). This, to some degree, may help explain why our research found a strong ideological commitment to PE as a cultural practice in alternative provision schools that enabled young people to develop and demonstrate life skills more than any other subject area. Interestingly, this belief was found in research by Maher and Fitzgerald (2022) to be part of a complex web of ideas in special school PE too, which is another cultural setting in which life skills occupy a more privileged position when it comes to the purpose of PE than they do in mainstream schools.

For the participants in our research, a key rationale for focusing on life skill development was that they believed that it supported young people in alternative provision to transition back to – and assimilate into the established cultural arrangements of – mainstream schools. Here, it seems that practitioners in alternative provision schools, knowingly or not, are ideologically aligned with the UK government, as *the* ideological state apparatus (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971), which insists that a core aim of alternative provision schools is the prompt and successful reintegration of young people into mainstream settings (DfE, 2018). While it seems reasonable to suggest that life skills will facilitate transition across such cultural terrains in education, research is needed to more adequately determine whether this purview is a common-sense cultural assumption in alternative provision schools that is supported or not by empirical evidence. Indeed, while a systematic review of literature exploring the facilitators and barriers of reintegration to secondary mainstream schools discussed what Gramsci would term mechanisms of cultural assimilation (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971), such as the social, emotional, and educational support provided by peers, families, and schools (see, Owen et al., 2021), none of the extant research considers how, if at all, the life skills developed in alternative provision settings could facilitate transition to mainstream schooling.

There was also mention, by the participants in our research, about life skills being important for gaining employment. Being concerned with employability is perhaps understandable given that young people excluded from school are more likely to be excluded from the labour market, as well as further education and training (Madia et al., 2022). As such, it seems that exclusion from one mode of cultural (re)production

(i.e. schooling) hampers assimilation into a different but clearly connected mode of cultural (re)production (i.e. the labour market), the consequences of which are an increased likelihood of poor physical and mental health, welfare dependency and wider social exclusion, and reduced productivity and economic growth (Madia et al., 2022). Ideologies of education that position it as employability and economic productivity permeate government discourse (DfE, 2018), and PE in alternative provision is clearly not immune. This is a unique feature of our research because none of the research relating to the purpose of PE in mainstream schools considers it a vehicle to the labour market (see Sandford et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, participants also suggested that life skills could be used by young people in further education as well as their local communities. Accordingly, discussions about life skills highlighted that culture, politics, and the economy are organised in a relationship of mutual exchange with one another (Jones, 2006). As with the discussion about employability, participants emphasised the transferability of skills to other life domains. Interestingly, this ideological belief was also held by mainstream (see Cronin et al., 2023) and special school (see Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022) PE teachers in research conducted by others about life skill development. Of course, neither we, nor our participants, can state conclusively whether the life skills developed through PE were used by young people in other cultural settings, but there was certainly a taken-for-granted assumption among our participants that they could be. What we can say is that there is some evidence suggesting that the life skills learned in sport are transferable to five other cultural arenas: school/education, home/family life, social settings, the community, and employment (e.g. Mossman et al., 2021). To increase the likelihood of life skills transferring, Bean et al. (2018) suggested that transfer needs to be explicitly discussed, modelled, and practiced. In this regard, our research found that only one PE practitioner, Jack, explicitly taught life skills. The other participants assumed that young people would develop life skills simply because of engaging in PE – what we might call "implicit life skill development" – which, according to Cronin et al. (2023), is a commonly held assumption that pervades the (mainstream) cultural spaces of PE, youth sport, and sport coaching.

While the extant literature connects life skill development and physical and mental health (e.g. Steptoe & Wardle, 2017), such connections were not made by our participants despite improved physical and mental health being discussed as core purposes of PE. Moreover, despite social and emotional learning now being discussed as a key outcome of mainstream school PE (see Wright et al., 2021), our research is perhaps the first to highlight improving mental health as a core purpose of PE, rather than youth sport or physical activity (see Biddle et al., 2019). The significance of teachers focusing on improved mental health in alternative provision schools is clear when considering that poor mental health has been found to contribute to, and be a result of, school exclusion (see Tejerina-Arreal et al., 2020). According to our participants, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people had increased the need for it to be a core purpose of PE. While there is little research that focuses specifically on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people in alternative provision or those at risk of school exclusion, we do know that it has had a disproportionate negative impact on those from low-income families, with special educational needs, and neurodevelopmental disorders (Creswell et al., 2021), many of whom are more likely to find themselves in alternative provision schools than their same-aged

peers (Graham et al., 2019). Interestingly, despite our participants advocating for it, evidence suggesting that PE can and does improve mental health is scant. While research situated in mainstream schools does suggest that PE may be used as a cultural mechanism to increase pupil knowledge and awareness of mental health (Haycock et al., 2020), it is not clear if that impacts positively on mental health outcomes. Most of the research relating to improving mental health among young people advocates for increased physical activity (e.g. Biddle et al., 2019). However, it is, at present, a taken-for-granted assumption, propagated by the participants in our research, that physical activity through PE will impact positively on mental health. In fact, there is a growing body of knowledge suggesting that PE may impact negatively on the mental health of some young people, especially those whose bodies and abilities are incompatible with neoliberal, normative and ableist ideologies about physical performance and competence in PE (see Haegele & Maher, 2023b).

It was perhaps unsurprising that PE practitioners in alternative provision schools appeared ideologically committed to improving the mental and physical health of young people given that, according to Smith et al. (2018), all schools and teachers (especially PE teachers) are now simultaneously encouraged by government, as the ideological state apparatus (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971), to address, and be accountable for, the physical health (e.g. overweight and obesity), mental well-being (e.g. psychosocial health), and mental illness (e.g. depression, anxiety, and self-harm) of their pupils, including through PE and other forms of school-based physical activity. While mental health is rarely mentioned, improved physical health is widely discussed – and has been since its inception – in mainstream school research that centres on the purpose of PE (e.g. Cale et al., 2020). This is perhaps indicative of the way, whether teachers realise it or not, national ideologies that are promoted by those with their hands on the levers of power are transmitted to and permeate through schools and PE (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971).

There can be a tendency to be unaware, or even forget, that some of the current, hegemonic, taken-for-granted ideologies that permeate cultural institutions such as schools have developed over time and space. Indeed, the links between PE as physical health, which was advocated by the participants in our research, has a long history in England that can be traced back to the public schools of the nineteenth century, and more explicitly to the physical training for boys in the early twentieth century (Kirk, 1992). More recently, PE as physical fitness and a vehicle that can contribute to tackling the so-called obesity crisis has resulted in the purpose of the subject being about leading a healthy lifestyle through lifelong participation in physical activity (Cale et al., 2020; Gray et al., 2022). Indeed, health and lifelong participation were identified by Jung et al. (2016) as two of the five policy discourses in their analysis of PE and school sport from 2003 to 2010, the other three being sports competition, Olympic legacy, and citizenship. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that participants in our research, like in that conducted in mainstream schools, considered PE in alternative provision schools to play an important role in ensuring that young people from that setting engage in sport and physical activity outside of school and throughout the life course. To achieve this, it was suggested that young people should be exposed to a wide repertoire of activities so that they can make informed decisions about their own physical activity engagement in the future. While there is good evidence that the sporting and physical activity

habits developed by young people during their childhood and youth are important pre-requisites for engagement later in life (e.g. Engstrom, 2008), the precise nature of the relationship between PE and lifelong participation is seldom explored other than in implicit, often speculative, and discursive ways that simply take-for-granted the positive effects of the former on the latter. Accordingly, Green (2014) has said that it is difficult to know the "PE effects" when it comes to lifelong participation in sport and physical activity.

Concluding thoughts

There was a strong ideological commitment to PE developing life skills, improving physical and mental health, and contributing to lifelong participation in physical activity, which pervaded the common-sense cultural practices of alternative provision schools in our sample. While participation in physical activity connects and underpins beliefs and established research (albeit not through the PE curriculum) relating to improved physical and mental health throughout the life course, that is not the case for life skill development. Of course, we are not saying that life skills are not or cannot be developed and transferred through physical activity; more, it did not come through our data nor the extant published research. This is perhaps indicative of the complexity and nuance of ideologies and attempts to construct meaning about them, in that they are not always logically or coherently packaged together. Below, we take each of our themes in turn to say something about what can be done to ensure that the purpose and value of alternative provision PE in England are being realised.

To increase the likelihood of life skills being developed among young people in alternative provision, PE practitioners need to exercise their power to ensure that life skills are explicitly discussed and taught, particularly in relation to their transference to other life domains. In this respect, teacher professional development may be required to disrupt the ideological assumption that these skills can be learned simply through participation in PE and to ensure that PE teachers have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to teach life skills given the required departure from hegemonic ways of thinking about and doing PE. Concomitantly, there is a need for future research to explore how life skill development can be best done in practice, with a specific focus on life skills to support transition across cultural terrains, such as back into mainstream school, given that this is a key aim of alternative provision settings.

Despite there being credible evidence of the positive impact that physical activity can have on physical and mental health, we encourage those who read this to consider that the evidence supporting the view that PE as a subject can and does achieve the same outcomes is underdeveloped. As such, much more research is required to explore how, if at all, the cultural practices that are or can be a part of the PE cultural landscape in alternative provision may impact positively on mental health. In this regard, it is crucial to situate such research in the wider cultural terrain of the lives of young people in alternative provision given that the structural inequality and modes of oppression, subordination, and marginalisation that they experience during the life course act as powerful forces in shaping their physical and mental health. If that is forgotten or ignored, we are at risk of reducing structural inequality to individual school or personal responsibility, which

will limit our ability to develop policies and practices that can and do impact positively on the physical and mental health of young people.

The same, to some degree, can be said about the relationship between PE and lifelong participation in physical activity. Despite ideological commitments among participants in our study, the "PE effects" on participation in sport and physical activity in later life are, at present, difficult to evidence, especially when it comes to alternative provision schools. As such, theoretically informed, empirically driven biographical and longitudinal research is required to enable PE teachers to determine if their ideological commitment to PE as a vehicle to participation in lifelong physical activity is justifiable. That said, there is good evidence suggesting that the physical activity habits formed in childhood and youth do influence participation in physical activity in later life and these can, to some extent, be fostered within the PE context. Therefore, it is crucial that those early experiences of physical activity, whether they are school-based or not, are considered meaningful to young people. To increase the likelihood of this happening, it is important that PE practitioners ensure that school-based physical activity is inclusive. While the concept of inclusion is contested, we agree with Haegele and Maher (2023a) who argue that inclusive (physical) education engenders meaningful access, opportunities, participation, representation and fosters intersubjective feelings of belonging, acceptance and value for the young people that experience it. There is also good evidence suggesting that young people who are exposed to a wide repertoire of physical activities – as part of a broad and balanced PE curriculum – are more likely to develop physical activity and sporting habits, or even habitus, which means they will continue engaging in physical activity outside of school, especially if they experience self-paced, self-regulated, physical activities that they can do alone or in small groups if needed (Morley et al., 2021). As such, there is a need for PE practitioners to carefully consider the curricula that they develop and how they are taught, perhaps using these ideas as a basis.

While our contribution to knowledge relating to the purpose and value of PE was mostly empirical, this research did enable us to cast the concepts of culture, power, and ideology in new lights by situating them, for the first time in research terms, in alternative provision landscapes to learn more about them. In doing so, it became clear that ideologies of PE are complex, nuanced and overlap, but do not always coherently connect, thus making it difficult to place them in thematic categories of convenience relating to the purpose and value of PE. Moreover, it seemed evident that ideologies relating to PE in alternative provision were influenced, to varying degrees, by wider social and political discourses relating to them, regardless of whether those discourses are supported by empirical evidence or not. Lastly, there was evidence that ideologies relating to the purpose of PE had seeped into cultural practices in PE, such as curriculum and pedagogy, which is indicative of the power and influence of teachers in alternative provision, but more research is needed in this area because it was not a core feature of our work.

We end by saying that, while we do not consider what we offer here as the final word on the purpose and value of PE in alternative provision schools, we do hope that we have shed a bright light on the ideologies and cultural practices that permeate those settings, and offered valuable suggestions about how the agents entangled in such settings can increase the likelihood of their ideologies becoming achievable. We leave our readers to decide if our arguments are compelling or not.

Notes

1. According to the DfE (2013), alternative provision refers to

   education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour. (p. 3)

2. We use the term PE "practitioners" rather than "teachers" because not all participants were qualified teachers.
3. The Youth Sport Trust is a registered charity that aims to equip educators and empower young people with the vision of creating a future where every child in England enjoys the life-changing benefits of play and sport. The Youth Sport Trust are our research partners and funded this research.
4. Designed by the Youth Sport Trust, My Personal Best is a training package that supports teachers to explicitly plan for and teach a life skills curriculum.

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