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Physical education in alternative provision schools: A case of spatial (in)justice?

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Abstract

Physical education has the potential to achieve the desired outcomes of alternative provision schooling by re-engaging young people in learning, supporting their social and emotional development and facilitating their reintegration into mainstream schooling. To do so, however, it requires sufficient and appropriate space because, unlike other subjects, its focus on embodied curriculum, embodied pedagogy and embodied learning requires the mind–body–self of young people to move across, within and between space(s). As such, we embrace what Soja (*Seeking Spatial Justice*, University of Minnesota Press, 2010) termed the 'spatial turn' in research and draw on the concept of spatial (in)justice to explore social, economic and environment inequalities in the education and alternative provision landscapes in England. To do so, we gathered empirical evidence via individual interviews with 13 physical education practitioners working in alternative provision schools in England. With the permission of participants, interviews were audio-recorded and audio transcribed, and the transcripts subjected to reflexive thematic analysis. We discuss spatial injustices in alternative provision physical education through the following themes: (1) accessing space for physical education off-site; (2) low expectations for appropriate space and making the most of the limited space available for physical education; and (3) weather determining usage of outside space and difficulties gaining external funding for on-site spaces. We end this article by calling on

others to join our efforts to lobby government to ensure that alternative provision settings, new and old, are not exempt from the School Premises Regulations so that a clear, legally binding expectation is created so that sufficient space is provided to teach physical education.

KEYWORDS

alternative education, physical education, spatial injustice, time–space nexus in education

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Physical education requires sufficient and appropriate space because of its focus on movement and embodied curriculum, embodied pedagogy and embodied learning. Therefore, our paper draws on Soja's (2010) concept of spatial (in)justice to explore social, economic and environment inequalities in alternative provision physical education.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Spatial constraints impact negatively on curriculum decisions and pedagogical actions and, as a consequence, young people's embodied experiences of alternative provision physical education.

INTRODUCTION

'Alternative education' is used internationally as a catch-all term to describe settings and programmes established to cater for young people who struggle in so-called 'traditional' mainstream schooling (Aron, 2006). While the purpose and value of alternative education are under-theorised and -researched, it is often charged with re-engaging young people with learning, supporting them to develop social and emotional skills and, ultimately, reintegrating them into mainstream schooling (see Owen et al., 2021). In England, a growing number of young people are being educated in what is termed alternative provision schools[1] (Department for Education, 2023). Despite increasing numbers, and a growing commitment by the UK government to alternative provisions schools being a core part of the education landscape in England (Hinds, 2019), very little research has centred them—especially when compared with mainstream and special schools. Of the limited research that has been conducted, the focus has mainly—although not exclusively—been on experiences of and reasons for school exclusion (e.g. Owen et al., 2021), the impact of school exclusion on young people (e.g. Gill et al., 2017), the social and emotional support given to young people in alternative provision (e.g. Levinson & Thompson, 2016) and barriers to and facilitators for reintegration into mainstream school (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019).

To the best of our knowledge, none of the research to date has focused on physical education in alternative provision. The significance of centring physical education in alternative provision becomes clear if we acknowledge that there is reasonable evidence suggesting that it has the potential to support young people to develop physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally (Sandford et al., 2023). More broadly, it has been found that organised sport and physical activity, which are often a core part of physical education, can contribute towards reducing maladaptive/risky behaviour, for example, through lowering incidences of smoking (Audrain-McGovern et al., 2006), illegal drug use (Kulig et al., 2003), engagement in risky sexual behaviours (Miller et al., 2002) and levels of social isolation (Barber et al., 2001). As such, physical education may be a vehicle to achieve the desired outcomes of alternative provision by promoting prosocial behaviours, re-engaging young people in learning, supporting their social and emotional development, and facilitating their reintegration into mainstream schooling. To do so, however, physical education requires sufficient space because, unlike other subjects, its focus on embodied curriculum, embodied pedagogy and embodied learning requires the mind–body–self of young people to move across, within and between space(s) (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022). It is to a discussion about spatiality that we now turn to provide a conceptual bedrock to this article.

SPATIALITY IN ALTERNATIVE PROVISION (AND) PHYSICAL EDUCATION

While much has been written by philosophers, sociologists, educationalists, and architects about space (and, in turn, place), we theorise it as both material and social in nature. Space, for us, is a canvas upon which lived experience is inscribed, and upon which lived experience is influenced by others. As such, education spaces such as schools, classrooms, corridors, staffrooms, gymnasia and playgrounds are not fixed, nor absolute containers of human activity. Rather, they are dynamic, liquid, fluid and influx because they are shaped by direct and indirect social interactions and thus socially produced. To quote Lupton (2009):

> Space cannot exist independently of human activity, since its meaning is produced by the social relations of people within and outside it, through the ways that they use it and imagine it. Space also produces particular forms of activity and sets of relations by configuring the identities and understandings of people who occupy it. (p. 112)

To follow Lupton's (2009) line of thinking, we contend that education spaces are social, cultural and political in nature in that they are shaped by human interactions, reflect the ideologies, values, logics and intentions of dominant groups and, as such, are sites of struggle where power relations are played out through contestation, negotiation and compromise. Space, therefore, can be transformed by the activities, circumstances and relationships which work through it (Armstrong, 2012). Accordingly, school spaces are shaped mostly, but not entirely, by those with their hands on the levers of power in education. This includes international and national policymakers, senior leaders in schools who make decisions about, for instance, school strategy and resource allocation, teachers because of their curriculum decisions and pedagogical actions, and the interactions and relationships between teachers, pupils, and teaching assistants. In this article, we consider power as a structural characteristic of all human relationships that relates to the ways and extent to which individuals and groups of people can shape the ideologies, values, traditions, rituals, behaviours and practices (Engelstad, 2009) of spaces and the people who occupy them.

Our research responds to calls to action from researchers across disciplines, including Tuck and McKenzie (2015), Morrison et al. (2017) and Butler and Sinclair (2020), to foreground spatiality to advance equity, justice and liberation. By centring alternative provision and embracing what Soja (2010) termed the 'spatial turn' in research, we use theoretical tools that are grounded in spatiality to explore social, economic and environment inequalities in the education and alternative provision landscapes in England. As Gulson and Symes (2007) argue, 'Drawing on theories of space contributes in significant and important ways to subtle and more sophisticated understandings of the competing rationalities underlying educational policy change, social inequity, and cultural practices' (p. 2). In this respect, we draw on Soja's (2010) notion of spatial (in)justice to explore, for the first time in research, the ways and extent to which forces of oppression and privilege operate to determine (1) the location of alternative provision physical education spaces, (2) the material contours of alternative provision physical education spaces, (3) access to alternative provision physical education spaces and (4) intersubjective experiences of those who occupy alternative provision physical education spaces. At the same time, our theoretically informed and empirically driven work is novel because it aims to contribute to the development of concepts to be used by others in broader education-related inquiry because, at present, the role of space and its relationship to power, pedagogy, and the social context of schooling is largely undertheorised (Butler & Sinclair, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Philosophical position

Our research was interpretivist in nature in that it aligned with ontological relativism and social constructionism. As such, we wanted to explore the ways our participants made sense of and constructed meaning about spatiality 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 by our participants that can be explored from multiple perspectives to understand the rich tapestry of knowledge relating to spatiality in alternative provision physical education. Hence, we set out to explore our participants' 'truths' about alternative provision schools, rather than 'the truth', because this was in keeping with our epistemological positioning. Given that researchers' intersubjective ideologies, values, assumptions, knowledge and embodied experiences inevitably spill over into research, it is crucial that we explicate our positionalities so that others can do as we did by considering how they may have shaped methodological decisions and the interpretation and (re)telling of our participants' experiences. At the time of the research Anthony was a 39-year-old non-disabled, white, cis-gender man working as a professor at a university in the north of England. He had extensive experience of working with young people with special educational needs and disabilities. Between the ages of 14 and 16 Anthony was dual registered at a mainstream school and pupil referral unit, meaning that his personal and profession identities were tied to the research setting. Thomas was 38 years old, and also a non-disabled, white, cis-gender man working in the same institution. He has worked with vulnerable children and young people, including care-experienced youth, for over 10 years—many of whom attended alternative provision settings. Oliver was a 30-year-old non-disabled, white, cis-gender, gay man working at the same institution. He had extensive experience of working with marginalised young people, including those with special educational needs and disabilities and those who are care-experienced, with many of these young people having experienced alternative provision. Victoria was a 41-year-old non-disabled, white, cis-gender female working at a children's charity [Youth Sport Trust].

TABLE 1 Participant information.

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 who 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 who 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

She has extensive experience of working in and with schools, vulnerable children and young people, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those who have experienced exclusion from either school or society. Lucy was a 30-year-old non-disabled, cis-gender female working at a children's charity [Youth Sport Trust] who was also a part time doctoral student at a university in the Midlands, UK. She has extensive experience of research with young people in education and schools after initially training as a mainstream primary school teacher.

Participants and recruitment

This article is based on data generated from 13 physical education practitioners[2] who were working in alternative provision schools in England. Table 1 provides additional biographical information about the participants. Prior to data being gathered, ethical approval was sought and gained from Anthony's university research ethics committee. To recruit participants, a freedom of information request was sent to the Department for Education to source the email addresses of all alternative provision schools in England. As a result, we received an Excel spreadsheet containing 351 schools. Upon receipt, we sent an email to the head teachers/principals of all alternative provision schools that were on our spreadsheet to introduce ourselves and the research, explain its aim and 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 physical education 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 address 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 for alternative provision practitioners.

Methods and data generation

Qualitative data for this article were generated via individual, online interviews with 13 alternative provision physical education practitioners. Online, rather than in-person, interviews were used 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 research questions and enabled us to probe in more detail the points of interest identified through the analysis of survey data. Interviews were semi-structured in nature so that participant and interviewer 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 views and experiences of the physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools, which enabled us to cultivate a rich tapestry of knowledge by accessing thick descriptions (Tracy 2010). Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 min, with a total of 589.28 min of audio data generated, 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. 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). This section of the article is punctuated by accounts from Anthony's reflexive diary, which he kept in order to draw to the surface 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 as a hallmark of quality in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Hopefully, this enables the reader to get a sense of what Trainor and Bundon (2020) term reflexivity in action.

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 participant views and experiences.

> Anthony's diary entry: I was surprised how difficult I found it listening to the audio-recordings. Emotionally, it was difficult to navigate. Listening to the practitioners transported me back to my time in alternative provision. Alternative provision wasn't a particularly happy time for me. Being excluded from school was difficult to make sense of. My experiences of exclusion and alternative provision were negative, but I need to be careful not to bring that negative lens to the analysis of data.

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. Codes were descriptive (what was said), analytical (significance and implications of what was said) and theoretical (how what was said related to space, time, (in)justice, power, identity, pedagogy, and curriculum).

> Anthony's diary entry: I have used RTA quite a lot, with varying degrees of 'success'. I do feel like I am getting better at it. And, by better, I am getting better at drawing my values and assumptions to the surface. While I feel that my knowledge of RTA is well developed, I did reread Braun and Clarke's work, as I always do prior to analysing data, to give my confidence a boost. The descriptive and analytical codes were developed quite quickly. I feel that I have good knowledge and useful experiences of PE and alternative provision. Theroretical codes took more time; they needed to be more carefully considered, especially those relating to spatial injustice because I have only started exploring these ideas over the past couple of years. I had to dip back into the notes I have and the literature to support this. I also had to take more time with data relating to hospital schools. Before the project, I had to spend more time learning about this setting because it is a space which I have very limited experience in.

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. 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.

> Anthony's diary entry: I found the clustering quite difficult. Probably more difficult than usual. Codes could have fit within and across several themes. They

> seemed entangled. I have used RTA and its prior iteration TA many times but, more recently, I am beginning to question it as an approach. I am questioning whether it is the 'best' approach for this type of project. I seem to be finding it more difficult than I have in the past trying to 'fit' the views but especially the experiences of participants into these 'categories' (the themes) of convenience. Experience seems too complex to compartmentalise thematically. I am happy with the candidate themes that were eventually established because I do think that they (clearly? … powerfully?) tell an important story about spatial (in)justice in AP PE but I am worried that I am 'losing my touch'!

Once themes had become more established, interview transcripts were harvested for verbatim quotes that were missed, or their significance overlooked, during the initial analysis.

> Anthony's diary entry: Reading back over the interview transcripts is so useful. It always amazes me how much I miss in that initial analysis. Some direct quotes, that end up being nuggets of gold, are often missed during that first read and initial analysis because it is difficult appreciating their significance at that time. When pressed for time, this is the part of the analysis that can be ignore or done quickly, but I find it is so important. I need to ensure that my own knowledge, experiences, values and assumptions do not result in some voices being ignored or silenced, or others given too much attention. I need to check for that.

The outcome of these analytical stages was the construction of the following themes: (1) accessing space for physical education off-site; (2) low expectations for appropriate space and making the most of the limited space available for physical education; and (3) weather determining usage of outside space and difficulties gaining external funding for on-site spaces, which are used to structure the Findings below and Discussion thereafter.

FINDINGS

Findings are represented through thick textual descriptions that engender honesty and transparency as hallmarks of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Here, we 'show' the data and invite readers to construct their own knowledge and explore the ways and extent to which these findings resonate with them and transfer to their own spaces—which is in keeping with what Tracy (2010) calls naturalistic generalisation—before we move onto the analytical and theoretical 'tell' in the Discussion. To help with the selection of the specific quotes that are presented below, Anthony read all thematic quotes aloud several times, choosing those that he connected with emotionally (as we hope our readers do), which is a process advocated for by Saldana (2020) as a performative ontology and/or an embodiment of the experiences of research participants.

ACCESSING SPACES FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION OFF-SITE

Some alternative provision schools have no indoor or outdoor spaces for physical education, which means that they must use 'local' facilities such as sports centres, sports clubs, leisure centres, and/or gyms:

> Our site is in [name removed for anonymity]. It's in the city centre and on a third floor up the most horrendous stairs. I need oxygen at the end of them, so there

> is nowhere there to do PE. One of our other sites has a yard, but that's just like a postage stamp. And then in [different city] we've got like a space out the back, again, you could spit on it. So, we have to go the local gym. (Stacey)

> PE is important. Therefore, I think it's our job to make sure they [our students] have the best access to what they can. Our grounds don't really facilitate that. We haven't really got a playground, it's a paddock that we've got chippings down on. We don't have a sports hall, so we need to try and engage as much as possible with the centres and clubs. (David)

> I take this young man we've got to the local special needs cycling club called [name removed], which I think is national, it's a charity. I take him there and he cycles, you know, five kilometres each session. We take him off hiking, sometimes we'll do things like ten pin bowling or pitch and putt, and that's slightly more exciting for them and it gives us a greater range of what we can do. (Jaime)

However, for participants, the cost of local facilities could limit access to and opportunities in those spaces:

> Leisure centres and facilities are expensive. We simply do not have the money in the coffers to pay for that kind of thing. I do think that it's [facilities and money to pay for access to external facilities] a problem across the AP sector. (Stacey)

> I haven't gone external yet, but I have contacted [name removed], which is a local sports facility, like a recreational centre. I phoned them up and asked how much it would cost for me to bring … because we've got a minibus and I can drive it, and I think I'd only have to do the risk assessment once just to ferry our students there and use a badminton and use a basketball court. And they've said, yes, yes, absolutely no problem. I think it was going to be £5 for a badminton court and £17 for a basketball court, which isn't too bad but then you're thinking about that every single week, and it starts to add up. (Lucy)

> We used to use local facilities but that has stopped now because they cost too much. Our budget is tight. (Carla)

Some participants were also concerned about the time lost from physical education lessons and the logistics of travelling to and from local facilities:

> We have some space onsite. I could use the local park, sports clubs, and gyms, and I sometimes do, but it takes time to get there and back. That is time taken away from their PE lesson. Also, it is an extra transition for them [students]. It is logistically difficult and takes time to plan for, so most times I don't bother because it's an added complexity. (Joseph)

While other external spaces were used for physical education, such as church or community halls, these were not always appropriate:

> Quite rightly, many [mainstream] secondary schools are linked to leisure centres and so they have the sports hall during the day. We can't get bookings. And our first year was an absolute nightmare. We had PE going on in a town hall, and it was rubbish. We had to use a sponge ball in case one of the windows got broken

> and the vicar's wife wasn't happy about some of the language, it was just painful. (David)

There was also mention of the difficulties involved in trying to develop relationships with local organisations, such as sports clubs, because of the stigma associated with alternative provision schools and the students who attend them:

> I've recently been having some conversations with NGBs [National Governing Bodies] about what they can provide for alternative provision, and as soon as I mention alternative provision to them there's this like, 'Oh, you mean all the really naughty kids?' Because actually the things that they're providing would be perfect and provide lots of opportunity, but it's busting some of those myths. (Harriet)

> The biggest thing for my students is that they feel welcome. That they feel welcome in settings outside of school. As soon as you say hospital they [external facility providers] immediately assume they're really seriously ill and they're not, you know, a lot of them have their challenges with mental health but they're not ill, if you like. (Claire)

Despite the difficulties associated with accessing external spaces, it was said that the use of local facilities, sports clubs and gyms provided opportunities that enhanced students' experiences of physical education and alternative provision:

> I reached out to the sailing club who let us have access to their changing rooms, and what that does is it starts having a massive knock-on effect, so we've now got members of the sailing club volunteering at the school because they've now heard of the school [and] they want to get involved. So our young people are now having access to sailing because they've now got an in so they're not relying on mum or dad taking them sailing because June who is 65 who has been the chair person for 20 odd years can let them in and give them access to a boat. Kids like ours would have never got that opportunity without that partnership. (David)

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR APPROPRIATE SPACE AND MAKING THE MOST OF THE LIMITED SPACE AVAILABLE FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Some alternative provision schools have indoor facilities and/or outdoor facilities for physical education. While acknowledging that these facilities are small and often ill-equipped, participants felt lucky to have them because many of their physical education colleagues across the alternative provision landscape have none:

> We are blessed at the PRU [pupil referral unit] because we have got our own sports hall so being able to say [to a student] 'you've done really, really well in your English lesson, I'll take you downstairs and we'll have a kick about in the sports hall for the last ten minutes of the lesson then you will go onto your next lesson' is a blessing. The sports hall isn't great but it's better than most others [PRUs] have. (Jennifer)

> Facilities are our biggest problem. I mean, we are lucky with what we've got but I still see it as not enough but visiting other APs I can see we are lucky with what we've got. We've got one hall where we've got a badminton court in there, so we are lucky in that sense that we've got one court and we can do some bits in there. We've got an on-site gym that was funded, oh, about eight years ago now, but we use that a lot because it's the best facility we have, and the pupils really enjoy it. (Lenny)

While Benjamin was able to cope with the limited space available for physical education because group sizes were small: 'It's not great [the space for physical education] but it's good for what we do in the sense of we have seven or eight kids doing a PE lesson at a time so we're not pressed for space'; other participants had to make do with the spaces that they had available, regardless of whether they were appropriate or not:

> The hall [used for physical education] in the other site is the dining hall. So, I've got to take down the tables and put them back. This takes time away from PE. And there might be a bit of flapjack on the floor and without telling me they've changed the tables that they use. I used to be able to put them away [the tables] but now they're actually in the hall [and can't be removed]. It's already small but now it's using more space due to tables and things. Then that potentially brings other elements of a risk assessment into play as well but, again, it's just managing that and being aware of those things, I guess. If somebody said to me I could have what I wanted as a PE facility then we're quite some way off that. (Joseph)

> I had a basketball team and didn't have a basketball hoop. We took the inside out of a bin. We had to use that as a basket. I'll be honest with you, inside the hall that we do have we didn't have lines down, they wanted me to do GCSE PE and I had to put masking tape down for badminton lines because they didn't want lines on the floor and didn't want to pay for them. (Harriet)

Harriet talked about the (in)appropriateness of where the physical education space was situated geographically in the school:

> It is really difficult. I had to fight and get funding to have lines down in the hall, the argument now is obviously PE in the hall is loud because we're an old school so the hall is in the middle and all the classes are off the side of it. 'Can't you do PE outside?' 'Can't you do badminton outside?' [say other teachers]. No, I can't … You also get teachers walking in an out of it [the hall], leaving the doors open because you can access other parts of the school [through the hall]. I talk to them [the teachers] but they don't seem to listen. What can you do? I do my best to make do.

With respect to hospital schools specifically, there were times when physical education had to be taught at the bedside, in small bays on wards:

> You've got the physical challenge of the environment. Sometimes I'm working in beds where I've got such little room to move and that has a massive bearing on what I can deliver too. So, again, going back to what you plan and what you do has to very, very quickly adapt and change on the basis of the actual the dynamics of the bay or the room. (Donald)

Lucy, a practitioner in a hospital school, expressed concern about the impact of teaching physical education at the bedside on other young people and their parents on the ward:

> The other thing you're mindful of as well is the fact that when you go onto a ward or you go into a bay there are other children, there are other families and you're very conscious of—it might sound a daft thing to say—but your level of noise, your level of what you're doing. Because the children in other bays, you know, there are all sorts going on there so you have to be very, very mindful and conscious that there might be curtains drawn around the bay while I'm outside that bay doing a basketball lesson. So it's being very, very mindful and being respectful to what's going on on the ward.

WEATHER DETERMINING USAGE OF OUTSIDE SPACE AND DIFFICULTIES GAINING EXTERNAL FUNDING FOR ON-SITE SPACES

While some alternative provision schools did have on-site outdoor spaces available for physical education, the weather was said to influence the usage of those spaces:

> I suppose the facilities is the main thing for me. It's very hard to plan and to manage how we do some things. So not having a hall I've got to be very careful, especially with the type of learner we have as well, as to what we're doing outside because the last thing I want to do is introduce another barrier of weather on top of potentially all the barriers already. (Joseph)

> I can have all good intentions. I might have spoken to them [the students] the night before and asked what they want to do for PE and then I walk into work that morning, it's chucking down with rain, well that kyboshes so much. I'm stuck on the ward, I'm playing in corridors, depending on the ward depends on what I can even do on a corridor which is a nightmare. (Graham)

Of course, one solution would be to build indoor spaces, but it was said to be extremely difficult to gain funding for physical education facilities:

> At the minute it's on a shoestring, I'll be dead honest with you. I do a little bit around funding bids—no, I don't do a little bit, I do a lot around funding bids—for items that aren't curriculum based because that's already paid for, but to try and bring additionality in. And it's not always easy, it's not always easy, you know, I was going to say we beg, borrow and steal, but we don't because that sounds all wrong. We try to do it often on the cheap, which is really hard, because I think if we don't value it, young people don't value it. So that's my worry with it all, when we're trying to do it on the cheap … I've put in funding bids and been knocked back because immediately they see independent school they go, no, simple as. (Stacey)

However, where funding had been sourced—in this instance, to develop outdoor spaces—Graham suggested this had actually restricted the space he had available to teach physical education:

> They've just redone the gardens and one of the gardens is lovely now, it looks amazing, but it's absolutely useless for a sports area. They did have a small open square area and then they were building a conservatory so they would have a thin channel down the outside of that and then another little bit that opened out. But the way they've done it they've put lots of planters in, they've put plants in different places and they've put a swing fixed in the middle of the open area so where you could have had a kick around and played a bit of basketball there's now a swing in the way. Where they had the long thin strip which you could have used as a cricket wicket they've put big bushes in the way of it and the other end where it opened out again a little bit they've put benches and other planters there. So it works as a garden now and I'm like, brilliant, but as a multi-space area there was no thinking at all when they developed it.

It was also said that appropriate on-site facilities would increase participation in after-school sporting activities because students are often not able or willing to travel to local facilities after school:

> Yes, that's always been my ultimate, sort of, target and goal to get a 9-a-side 3G pitch for the school but, as I say, at the moment, it's eluded me. But it's frustrating because I've had so many people to measure up and give me quotes and I just can't get that final stage of funding. Because we'd get so much use out of it, it would be used, like I said, day in and day out and then it would open up after school clubs because pupils would want to stay because they've only got to stay at school and go to the 3G, rather than getting the bus going here then making their way, like, it just becomes a whole struggle to get them to stay for extra-curricular and this would solve that. (Lenny)

DISCUSSION

A key finding from our research was that all alternative provision schools in our sample, like some special schools (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022), had no or limited space to teach physical education, which is a clear example of spatial injustice (Soja, 2010). Incidentally, most mainstream schools in England do not experience such injustice because of their legal entitlement to space. Indeed, the School Premises (England) Regulations (2012) state that 'Suitable outdoor space must be provided in order to enable: (1) physical education to be provided to pupils in accordance with the school curriculum; and (2) pupils to play outside'. The same regulations explicitly state 'This regulation does not apply to pupil referral units', which is one form of alternative provision (The National Archives, 2012). Similarly, the Department for Education (2014) suggests that all mainstream primary and secondary schools should have a hall that is, among other things, suitable for physical education. No such expectation is placed on alternative provision schools. What this finding illustrates is that spaces are shaped by wider social processes and broader political forces such as, in this instance, policy decisions about who is (and who is not) entitled to space for physical education. Some schools, such as Stacey's, occupied buildings such as office blocks which were designed and built for purposes other than learning, schooling, and physical education. These office blocks were situated in busy urban areas which constrained the extent to which appropriate outdoor space would be available for physical education, which is another example of spatial injustice as theorised by Soja (2010). In architecture and town planning, power is delineated abstractly. Hence, the space bears witness to the power of the State. The struggle for space, how it is used, by whom, when and for how long is indicative of

power (Engelstad, 2009). As such, it seems that political power, for whatever reason, is not being exercised to the same extent in alternative provision schools, as it is in mainstream schools, in order to ensure physical education opportunities for all young people.

Despite the prevalence of—and challenges associated with—spatial injustice, our participants considered a suitable physical education offering to be important to the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of young people, of which there is reasonable supporting evidence (see Sandford et al., 2023). As such, there was evidence of our participants exercising their agency to disrupt spatial injustices by seeking spaces external to alternative provision schools, such as 'local' sport centres, sport clubs, leisure centres or gyms, to teach physical education. While we have admiration for these teachers' efforts to resist spatial injustices, especially because of the time and energy required to seek out alternative spaces, this finding is concerning given that no other subject area would have to go to such lengths, in any education setting, to deliver its curriculum. This is perhaps the first of many indicators of the subordinate status of physical education when compared with other curriculum subjects that comprise the cultural terrain of alternative provision schools.

While spaces external to alternative provision schools did enable some teachers to offer the wider repertoire of activities necessary for increasing youth interest, motivation and engagement in sport and physical activity outside of school (Green, 2014), other teachers, such as Carla, were unable to access spaces situated in paid-for facilities because of budgetary constraints. This is a prime example of how economic forces continue to restrict access to material spaces and is perhaps not surprising given that school budgets generally—and alternative provision budgets especially—have been significantly squeezed because of real-term cuts, staff pay and pension increases, and inflationary pressures such as increased pricing of energy and food (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022). As noted by Maher and Macbeth (2013), the consequences of such budgetary pressures are often felt most sharply by lower status subjects such as physical education. Despite some alternative provision schools being able to pay for external spaces, we argue that this is not a sustainable solution in the long-term given that budgets can (and do) change. If they were to be reduced in future years, this option may no longer be viable and could result in dedicated physical education curriculum time being lost.

The temporal—as well as spatial—dimension of physical education was emphasised when some participants, Joseph included, expressed concerns about the 'time loss' associated with transitioning across and between spaces (i.e. to and from external facilities). Time and space are inextricably bound (Derrida, 1962; Sartre, 1996). Time elapses as we travel across and through space, and spaces can change over time especially because of, among other things, the activities of human and non-human organisms. However, this finding is an interesting addition to knowledge about the spatiality and temporality of physical education because it is a notable departure from dominant discussions about, for instance, the minimum number of minutes and days that young people should move their bodies through space, typically for health purposes (e.g. Aadland et al., 2018; Chesham et al., 2018). Saying that, it does in some ways mirror discussions about the 'time loss' associated with activities that occur in fixed spaces in physical education, such as changing into school uniform (Haegele & Maher, 2023). Together with time loss, concern was also expressed about the logistics of managing the transition of young people, some of whom struggled with spatial transitions in the confines of their own school architecture (i.e. from classroom to classroom, or classroom to dining hall), to external spaces for physical education.

It is noteworthy that, despite their best efforts, some teachers found it difficult to book external spaces, such as those in sport and leisure facilities, because (1) mainstream schools had monopolised booking systems and (2) alternative provision schools and the young people who inhabit them were stigmatised. Both constraints point towards the lower status and subordination of alternative provision schools *vis-à-vis* their mainstream counterparts.

Spatial structures and the associated governance of spatial landscapes, such as sport and leisure facilities in this instance, seem to be working to determine who is welcome and who is not; who would be considered, to borrow Cresswell's (1996) work: 'out of place in a space'. Stigmatisation, according to Goffman (1963), is social, relational and contextual. It disqualifies individuals from full social acceptance and compromises feelings of belonging, acceptance and value (Haegele & Maher, 2023) because their identity is considered flawed, faulty and deviant. According to our participants, the identities of young people in pupil referral units were spoilt because they were perceived as 'naughty' and those in hospital schools thought of as 'sick'. Despite much being written about social exclusion and stigma, our research is novel because, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first to gather empirical data relating to school exclusion, alternative provision and stigma, albeit unintentionally.

Even when indoor space was available in the spatial landscapes of alternative provision schools, it was often too small, not designed for physical education and thus not suitable. Physical education, at its best, is a relational, dynamic and interactive experience. To revisit the time–space nexus, it often involves the mind–body–self of young people (and teachers and learning support assistants) moving through space, in different directions, at different speeds and for different durations. To borrow ideas from Lefebvre (1974), it is through these spatial and temporal embodied experiences that young people make sense of and construct meaning about the body–self and space–world that they occupy. Therefore, (sufficient) space is crucial. When sufficient space is not available, which we have found is mostly the case in alternative provision schools, it constrains curriculum, pedagogy and learning and thus the quality of embodied experiences (Nguyen & Larson, 2015) within physical education. Teachers in our research therefore had to be creative and engage in curriculum and pedagogical experimentation as part of their endeavours to teach physical education. For instance, our research found that physical education was happening in some guise, perhaps not in a traditional mainstream school sense, in corridors, on hospital wards and by the bedside of those who had been admitted, and in classrooms and dining halls of pupil referral units. Physical education in these spaces and guises, to some degree, disrupts hegemonic and normative ideas about what physical education can and should entail and the spaces in which it can and should be taught. Nonetheless, while these spaces enabled physical education to be experienced, they posed several challenges that our teachers had to navigate. For instance, in the dining hall: (1) there was time loss because of set up; (2) it had to be cleaned (after lunch) and risk assessed; (3) there were no floor markings (for activities such as badminton) or specialist equipment (such as hoops for basketball); (4) no equipment could be stored nearby; (5) some teachers complained about the noise because the dining hall was too close to classrooms; and (6) teachers would often walk through the physical education space (i.e. dining hall) during lessons because it provided (quick) access to other spaces around the school. The significance of this is clear if we remember that the quality of education can suffer if physical learning spaces are not aligned with pedagogy (van Merrienboer et al., 2017).

Some of our participating schools did have outdoor space available. However, the weather determined when these spaces could be used for physical education because most of them were poorly maintained. In this respect, teachers talked about their numerous failed attempts to bid for and receive external funding to develop their outdoor (and indoor) spaces to make them more suitable for physical education. For some, such as Stacey, failure was again attributed to, funders in this instance, stigmatising alternative provision schools and the young people who attend them. Interestingly, even when funding was available to develop outdoor spaces, it was used, according to Graham, without consultation to develop the gardens to make them more aesthetically pleasing, which—perhaps unintentionally—reduced the outdoor space available for physical education. This is a clear example of how spaces, such as alternative provision schools, are political entities in which systems of power operate to

perpetuate processes of domination and subordination (Butler & Sinclair, 2020) whereby those with their hands on the levers of power such as senior leaders can shape material and social spaces in ways that they deem appropriate. According to Nordquist et al. (2016, p. 756), 'the design of space has a specific role in expressing the mission, goals, and purposes of the educational institution'. As such, it could be argued that physical education, in this instance at least, is not considered an integral part of the mission, goals and purposes of this alternative provision school or others that were part of our research.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It was clear from our findings that spatial constraints impacted negatively on curriculum decisions and pedagogical actions and, as a consequence, young people's embodied experiences of physical education. As such, we considered such constraints as a form of spatial injustice and thus use this space as a call to action. First, it is vital that all of those with an interest in and commitment to alternative provision schooling and physical education lobby government to ensure that alternative provision settings, new and old, are not exempt from the School Premises Regulations so that a clear, legally binding expectation is created that sufficient space is provided to teach physical education. Our plan is to use the findings of this research to work with our key partners the Youth Sport Trust and PRUsAP (the national representative of alternative provision) to lobby government through our contacts with the Department for Education in England and via the All-Party Parliamentary Group for School Exclusion and Alternative Provision.

When it comes to future research, we have identified a need for more work relating to identity, embodiment and stigma given that it came through strongly in our research relating to spatial injustice but was not explored in the ways and extent to which it needs to be if we want to get a better sense of young people's intersubjective feelings of belonging, acceptance and value in alternative provision spaces. In that respect, our research is limited in that we have not sought the lived, embodied experiences and knowledge of young people vis-à-vis alternative provision physical education. Accordingly, we charge ourselves and encourage others to centre the experiences and amplify the voices of young people in alternative provision because they are expert knowers (Fricker, 2007) given their lived, embodied experiences. Additionally, while it was clear from our research that spatial injustices influence curriculum and pedagogy, our research provides only a wide-angle perspective on this issue. Hence, future research is needed to explore the complexity and nuance of curriculum and pedagogical decisions—and, for that matter, assessing learning—in relation to the constraining and enabling influences in alternative provision physical education, which move beyond our narrow-angle focus on spatiality.

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ENDNOTES

[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] From this point we use the term physical education 'practitioners' rather than 'teachers' because not all participants were qualified teachers.

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