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Factors influencing the culture of special school physical education: A Gramscian critique

Abstract

Physical education (PE) research has largely been preoccupied with mainstream (regular) schools. This article reports on part of a larger research project that centralises special school PE. In particular, Gramsci's conceptualisations of hegemony, power and ideology are utilised to help shed light on the key factors that shape the culture of special school PE. Several key themes were constructed from twelve interviews with special school senior leaders and PE teachers including, 'economic climate: budgetary constraints', 'access to appropriate facilities and learning spaces' and 'pressures from Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills [Ofsted] and school senior management team [SMT]'. These findings demonstrate how particular historical and contemporary factors contribute to the positioning of PE in special schools. The status and value of PE in these settings is sometimes considered less favourably than other areas of the curriculum or indeed mainstream PE. Despite this, staff tasked with teaching special school PE had the desire and creativity to offer engaging experiences. In concluding we note that issues concerning economic constraints, limited space to deliver PE and pressures associated with Ofsted can be found in many mainstream schools too. However, honing in on the particular circumstances within special schools broadens insight about PE in contemporary schools.

Key words: Cultural Hegemony; Gramsci; Physical Education; Special Schools.

Introduction

There is an ever-growing body of research that centres on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream (regular) school physical education (PE). Specifically, focus has been cast on 'inclusive PE' from the perspective of trainee and in-service teachers (e.g. Coates, 2012), learning support assistants (LSAs) (e.g. Maher, 2016; Vickerman and Blundell, 2012), special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) (e.g. Maher, 2018), and teacher educators (e.g. Maher et al., 2019a). Whilst a large proportion of young people are educated in this context, there are other settings, such as special schools, where PE takes place. In part, it is a lack of research and broader awareness of the need to

enable our prospective and pre-service teachers to better understand special school PE that has motivated us to initiate research that begins to shed light on this setting and area of the curriculum.

It is important to note that attempt has been made to explore views and experiences of special school PE and after-school sport from the perspective of children and young people. In this respect, participants valued the opportunity to move their bodies and be physical active in PE (Fitzgerald, 2005, 2007) but wanted more opportunities to do sport outside of school (Stride and Fitzgerald, 2012). Some attempt has been made to gather data from special school PE teachers to explore how key socialising agents such as parents and former teachers during primary socialisation, and colleagues and pupils as part of organisational socialisation, influence their pedagogies (O’Leary et al., 2014, 2015). Research by Crawford (2011) suggested that special school teachers valued PE because of the ways in which it can promote the personal, social and physical development of young people with SEND. However, concerns were raised about the lack of appropriate training for staff because of limited focus on teaching pupils with SEND during initial teacher education (ITE) (Crawford, 2011). To ensure that prospective PE teachers are adequately prepared for supporting pupils with SEND, Maher et al. (2019b) are among a growing number of academics to explore the usefulness of placement in a special school for professional learning. They found that confidence and competence for teaching pupils with SEND could increase through this situated learning experience if supported by experienced others. To the best of our knowledge, though, none of the research currently available explores the key factors that shape the culture of special school PE. Just like mainstream PE, we expect that any factors influencing the provision of special school PE will be mediated by historical, political and cultural circumstances. These ultimately (re)produce the constitution and nature of PE in special schools. It is worth noting that special school

education has historically been driven by an ideology of separation in order to offer young people with SEND ‘specialist’ provision. This arrangement continues to stimulate much debate about the merits, or otherwise, of special rather than mainstream education (Florian, 2015). Many special schools in the United Kingdom (UK), like mainstream schools, follow the national curriculum and in doing this offer PE. It should be remembered though that the recipients of PE in special schools are likely to experience a range of impairments, sometimes profound, multiple and complex. These differing abilities and needs of pupils bring an interesting dimension to a curriculum area where physicality is so often brought to the fore. With this in mind, it is noteworthy that teachers who deliver PE in special schools may not necessarily be trained nor qualified PE teachers (Maher and Fitzgerald, 2019). Each of these features contributes to the distinctive landscape of special school PE; of course, there is also a broader backdrop within which special and mainstream schools operate. Indeed, within the UK, like many other international contexts, public services are experiencing a sustained period of austerity measures (Ball, 2012). Schools have not been immune to such measures, as ideas driven by neoliberalism have permeated governance, policy, management and practices. As a result, PE departments, like other areas of the curriculum, are increasingly steered by processes of surveillance, systems of accountability, and target setting (Macdonald, 2012; Evans, 2014).

Set within these historical and contemporary circumstances this article aims to better understand the factors influencing the provision of special school PE. Before doing so, however, we explore the utility of Gramsci’s conceptualisations of hegemony, power and ideology to help shed light on special school PE.

Theoretical framework: The work of Antonio Gramsci

Much continues to be written about the life and works of Antonio Gramsci. Focus is often cast on comparing his key concepts and assumptions to those of other theorists, mostly in an attempt to ‘rethink’ and/or ‘move beyond’ Gramscian ideas (e.g. Davidson, 2016; Kreps, 2015). The impact of neoliberalism on education systems has compelled some scholars to explore ways in which Gramsci’s works can be used to help us to make sense of, and challenge, social oppression through critical pedagogies (e.g. Mayo, 2015). When it comes to PE research specifically, the work of Gramsci has been largely ignored. To the best of our knowledge, only Maher and Macbeth (2013) and Maher (2016) have explored the contested cultural landscape of mainstream PE using a Gramscian lens. Here, we want to build on these foundations by drawing on Gramsci’s conceptualisations of hegemony, power and ideology to explore the factors that influence the culture of special school PE.

Cultural hegemony in special school PE

Gramsci saw hegemony as a series of interconnected processes which are part of a struggle for cultural domination (Jones, 2006). Hence, a Gramscian analysis of education would focus on the ways in which those who have their hands on the levers of power in education, such as law and policy makers in government, and even senior leaders in schools, use the influence they have over the mechanisms of cultural production (e.g. school funding, policies, staffing, facilities and resources) to shape meanings and values in special school PE (Nowell-Smith and Hoare, 1971). Hegemony, from a Gramscian perspective, is fluid, dynamic and in-flux. Thus, the government and senior managers in special schools lead through consent (Barker and Jane, 2016). That is to say, they maintain authority by being sufficiently flexible to respond to new circumstances and to the changing wishes of so-called subordinate groups (Jones, 2006), such as teachers and support staff in special schools.

The status of dominant and subordinate groups in hegemonic educational processes is anchored to the degrees of power they are able to exercise. For us, power refers to the ability of individuals or groups to influence the values, inclinations and actions of others through ideological leadership (Nowell-Smith and Hoare, 1971). Therefore, the power of government, senior leaders, teachers and other key stakeholders is tied to the influence they have over the culture of special schools. Here, culture refers to the established ‘way of life’ of those who are part of special schools. That is, those school and PE ideologies, experiences, traditions and rituals that have become so established they manifest as common sense collective arrangements (Engelstad, 2009). In this respect, it is noteworthy that power is multi-dimensional, dynamic, contextual, situational and constantly in flux. Consequently, the ‘factors’ that influence the culture of special schools will be tied to the power struggles between and within key stakeholders, such as policy makers, senior leaders, teachers, and others, as they contest, negotiate and compromise. Indeed, it is important that we do not detach these ‘factors’ from the ideologies, values and actions of those who are part of special school culture. While this section provides only a snapshot of the theoretical complexity of Gramscian thinking, it will serve as an overview of the key concepts and assumptions underpinning our research. The next section explains and justifies our methodological decisions.

Methodology

Participants and setting

The focus of this study was to better understand special school PE, by qualitatively examining the views and experiences of PE teachers and senior leaders across several schools. Existing

partnerships and already well-established relationships with schools in the North of England made it easier to recruit the participants for interview (Denzin and Lincoln, 2012). Through convenience sampling, six senior leaders and six teachers were selected. All senior leaders held the position of deputy head teacher. Only the head teacher and board of governors can, arguably, exercise more power than deputy head within the cultural formation of the special schools. The special schools in which the participants worked were governed by the same local authority and catered mainly for children with physical, sensory and learning disabilities, as well as social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. In short, the learning and support needs of children in the schools were complex and nuanced. Here, it is crucial to note that all the special schools in our research were part of specialist inclusive learning centres (SILCs), which were built between 2012 and 2014. A SILC is a special school, some of which are spread across multiple sites, and most of which are attached to mainstream schools. SILCs are set up and operationalised with the intention of there being a fluid transfer of pupils within and between special and mainstream schools to, among other things, minimise segregation while allowing for specialist, tailored support in an appropriate educational context to be provided.

Data collection and ethics

Having adopted an interpretive methodology, this study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the participants' views and experiences of the ideologies, values, traditions and rituals that influence the culture of special school PE. The interview, as a method, has been widely used in qualitative research (Tracy, 2019), due to its flexibility to gather rich data. Important to this study was the flexibility of the interview schedule, where questions remained open, to enable the participants to discuss their beliefs freely. It additionally allowed participants to lead the discussions and elaborate on points, when they deemed it necessary to

do so. Designing the interview schedule in this way also offered the interviewer opportunities to probe and clarify points during the interview process, but without forcing a political agenda (Denzin and Lincoln, 2012). Follow up questions aided the generation of what Sparkes and Smith (2014) describe as *thick descriptions*; that is, accounts of experiences salient to the participants' social subjective realities relating to the factors that influence the culture of special school PE. Interview questions included:

- What resources are available for supporting learning and teaching in PE?
- What facilities are available for supporting learning and teaching in PE?
- What are the key challenges you face in your job?
- What are the key challenges to delivering PE in your school?
- What more could be done to support PE as a subject in your school?

The British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines were followed and approval granted by our University Ethics Committee. We initially emailed the head teacher of each special school (n=6), offering an overview of the research and an invitation to participate. On receipt of acceptance from the head teachers, Anthony visited the school to further discuss the research, answer questions and arrange the interviews. Prior to interview, emphasis was placed on ensuring that participants were appropriately informed of the research process through a written information sheet, which gave details on the purpose of the research and data collection process. The information letter also highlighted the participants' right to withdraw and outlined how anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained (BERA, 2018). During this time the research participants were invited to ask questions about the research and clarify any information given in the letter. We were keen to reiterate to each participant that the interview would be treated in the strictest confidence. This

was particularly important given that teachers knew that other participants in more powerful positions, e.g. line-managers, would be interviewed, and we wanted to alleviate any reluctance for participants to say what they really felt. After a full brief of the study's requirements, participants were then free to consent to the interview (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). With the permission of the research participants, all interviews were conducted in the school where the participants worked, and arrangements were made for these to take place in a private room. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure a complete record of data.

Data analysis

The chosen method for analysing the data was a thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016). First, the combined processes of conducting the interviews, listening to the audio files and reading the interview transcripts meant that the researchers became familiar with these data. Next, Anthony manually generated some initial codes by breaking down the data. Once initial codes had been constructed, they were listed and data – that is, 'chunks' of interview text relating to the social realities of participants (Saldana, 2015) – were assigned to codes. The next phase involved searching for patterns and identifying themes (Braun et al., 2016). This comprised of sorting the codes into possible themes based on comparisons and the associated relationships between the codes. Here we were also guided by Sparkes and Smith (2014) who believe this process should bring to the fore the common threads and meaningful essence that runs through these data. Finally, the constructed themes were reviewed at two different levels (Braun et al., 2016). Level one involved the reading of all the collated chunks of interview text that were initially attached to codes, to see if they formed a coherent pattern. Level two required Anthony to again code across the entire dataset in order to identify any extracts relating to the themes

that may have been missed during initial coding. Once themes and interview extracts had been established in this way, they were sent to Hayley for consideration. Given that we, the researchers, have differing lived experiences, academic knowledge and observe the social world through different theoretical lenses, the purpose here was to act as a critical friend, enabling Anthony to reflect on the decisions made during coding and the grouping of codes and interview text. Indeed, Hayley's role was to encourage reflexivity by checking and challenging Anthony's construction of knowledge (Smith and McGannon 2017). Dennis (2009) encourages ongoing reflexivity and so this process of joint analysis provided new and useful insights into the interpretation of the dataset. Subsequently, several key themes were co-constructed including 'economic climate: budgetary constraints', 'access to appropriate facilities and learning spaces', and 'pressures from Ofsted and SMT'. Each of these themes are discussed in turn.

Findings and Discussion

Economic climate: budgetary constraints

While culture is shaped by all of those who are part of educational processes (Sissel and Sheard, 2001), every senior leader (Pat, Glen, Amanda, Paul, Rose and Aled) in our research claimed that it was the actions of those in key decision making positions in government who had the most significant influence over the traditions, rituals and experiences of PE in special schools. More specifically, all of the senior leaders interviewed argued that the 'economic climate' had restricted the budgets available from what Gramsci called the State apparatus (Nowell-Smith and Hoare, 1971). Pat, a deputy head, for instance, suggested:

Being a teacher's not an easy job. Being a teacher in the kind of current educational and economic climate can be very frustrating. I'm sure in any kind of school setting, because you would want to be that little bit committed and devoted to your students ... now our

students very obviously have lots of needs, and you need to realise that, so when provision is limited you wish for so much more, and that's an obvious frustration.

While all schools in the UK have experienced funding cuts, especially vis-à-vis SEND provision in mainstream schools (NEU, 2019), Pat suggests that budgetary shortfalls may be more significant and impactful in special schools given that the children generally have more nuanced and complex educational needs that require more, perhaps costly, support. This point is reiterated by Glen, another deputy head:

We get a child in school funded at, what's termed a 4D, which is an assessment placement. That child can come in with a whole raft of issues in terms of disability impairments but we haven't got enough money to fund what they need. So, what we are saying to the education authority is, the EHC [education, health and care] plans should be an opportunity to directly understand what funding is required. The authority hasn't had the capacity to convert the EHCPs from Statements of SEN. They're still behind. At the moment it's not working the way it should do and I think it could get better, but they need the opportunity for schools to be involved in doing that.

To clarify, an EHC plan is a legal document detailing the additional support a child or young person requires based on their specific education, health and care needs (DfE/ DoH, 2015). Therefore, Glen identified an important cultural mechanism (Nowell-Smith and Hoare, 1971) – something that provides funding that influences the resources teachers have available to support a pupil with SEND, and thus shapes how that pupil experiences PE – as being a contributor to shortfalls in funding for pupils with the most complex learning needs. EHC plans were introduced through the revised SEN Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) to replace Statements, which had received growing criticism because of a lack of consistency in application. In particular, there was found to be considerable variations across local authorities, giving rise to situations whereby a child in one local authority would receive a Statement, while another with similar needs in a different local authority would not (Marsh, 2014; Warnock, 2010; APPGA, 2012). Ironically, there were also issues about funding through Statements.

Pressures on local authority budgets and failure to ring-fence SEND funding meant that money for educational provision was at times used for other local priorities (HCCPA, 2012; Warnock, 2010). This is illustrative of how, according to Gramsci, the economy, political society and a part of civil society, the school system in this instance, are inextricably bound together in a constantly shifting relationship of mutual exchange with one another (Jones, 2006). While the process of constructing an EHC plan has been found to empower parents and pupils by placing them at the centre of decisions that affect their own lives (Sales and Vincent, 2018), it is also apparent from Glen's comments that the power and influence of special schools in this respect is limited in that they have no say over how much money is required to support children with SEND.

Interestingly, it was only the senior leaders who mentioned the economic climate, budgets and resources as impacting on the culture of special school PE. This is perhaps unsurprising given that these people are the ones that have their hands on the levers of power within the cultural formation of special schools, and are therefore directly involved in allocating the resources schools are given. While the monopolisation of school monies by senior leaders means that they are more able to shape PE culture, their actions are clearly constrained by the State apparatus. In this respect, Sara, a PE teacher, was the only teacher who mentioned budgetary issues when she talked about teachers being expected to do more with less. That is, to teach more pupils with less money for specialist provision:

It is tough, because obviously budget cuts and resources are getting tighter, and we're expanding in terms of number of children at the school, so resources are getting even tighter. We're going from about 220-something pupils this year up to 240-something. That number could go up again before September. Because there's a growing need for special education, they're talking about having to open another special school in Bradford. When they opened all the special schools, Bradford got looked at a few years ago, and these all opened in 2011, 2012. And they said that, yeah, that's fine, they'd

seen the numbers of expected SEN children in Bradford for the next 10 years, and we had plenty of space to deal with them, and we've just run out.

The SEND and educational inclusion landscape in the UK is complex, nuanced and ever-changing. There have been changes to SEND legislation and policy generally, and SEND classifications, assessments and support more specially (see DfE/DoH, 2015), all of which influence the proportion of children educated in special schools. Nonetheless, it is important to note, as Glen (deputy head) did, that the percentage of pupils with an EHC plan attending State-funded special schools has seen a year-on-year increase since January 2010, from 38.2% to 44.2% in January 2018 (DfE, 2018). What we are perhaps seeing here is a challenge to a ubiquitous hegemonic ideology which has, ever since the 1978 Warnock Report (DES, 1978), positioned mainstream schools as the preferred cultural context in which to educate pupils with SEND. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Baroness Mary Warnock¹, the person who perhaps has contributed more than any other individual to constructing and propagating an ideology that posits mainstream schools as the most desirable context for teaching children with SEND, has called for the education system to be radically reconsidered, particularly in relation to the appropriateness of mainstream schools for some of the children who are being educated in that context (Warnock, 2010).

Access to appropriate facilities and learning spaces

Another key issue that came through participant interviews related to the impact of access to appropriate facilities and learning spaces on the culture of PE; that is, traditions, rituals, expectations and experiences in the subject. Rose (deputy head), for one, suggested: ‘We

¹ Baroness Mary Warnock was appointed in 1974 to chair a UK inquiry into special education. This resulted in the publication of a report in 1978, known as the ‘Warnock Report’, which among other things established the concept of special educational needs and advocated for the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

definitely haven't got enough space, especially for PE. We need extra room, both inside and outside'. In the same vein, Ingrid (PE teacher) said 'space for PE is a concern', whereas Aled (deputy head) claimed: 'we don't have the space for proper PE'. Here, it must be remembered that the schools in question are SILCs. While the ideologies underpinning the establishment of SILCs may seem 'inclusive', even progressive, because of the focus on minimising segregation while ensuring those with and without SEND can interact and develop social bonds, the power dynamic between staff in special and mainstream school appeared significantly skewed towards the latter. This influenced what special school PE entailed. Kelly (PE teacher), for instance, claimed:

With us being part of a partnership with the high school, I have to discuss with the teachers in the high school, the mainstream site, at the beginning of the year... and they can let me know when I can go into the sports hall, when I can go into the fitness suite, and when I can go into the dance hall.

Similarly, Lois (PE teacher) argued:

We are supposed to share the facilities with the secondary school next door. The way I see it is, they probably disagree, it's like it's theirs, and we have to go and ask if we can use it, if they've got something on, it's theirs, and I'm like, hmm, we're supposed to be sharing. They've got rule over everything. Even if we have a lesson timetabled they can use it. You're like, you can't just do that.

Firstly, it appears that the construction of these SILCs is a prime example of modern education infrastructure being 'created and managed through facility management/property or real estate departments' rather than 'under the auspices of academic departments' (Nordquist et al., 2016: 755). Thus, limited consideration was given to how these 'shared' facilities would be managed and used by schools. According to Nordquist et al. (2016: 756), 'the design of space has a specific role in expressing the mission, goals, and purposes of the educational institution; suggesting how it offers a unique kind of experience'. Therefore, the design and use of physical learning spaces say a lot about the nature, purpose and value of PE within special schools. What

space is available and what it is used for helps to signal the extent to which PE is an important part of local government and school priorities, and the type of pedagogies, activities and learning that have cultural legitimacy. This purview is articulated clearly by Engelstad (2009: 214), who argues: ‘In architecture power is delineated abstractly. 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. Who is represented in those spaces. Who is privileged in those spaces’. One consequence, seemingly unintended, of the monopolisation of facilities and learning spaces by mainstream schools in our research was the restriction of opportunities for pupils with SEND to engage in PE. In this regard, it is now widely known that pupils with SEND in mainstream schools participate less often and in fewer physical activities than their age peers in PE (Maher, 2017). From what we have found it appears that the pupils with SEND in our research fared no better. Nonetheless, it seemed evident that the ownership of facilities and learning spaces by the mainstream schools was based on a hegemonic ideology that positioned special school PE specifically, and even special schools more generally, as being subordinate vis-à-vis mainstream schools. Moreover, there appeared to be little resistance from special school staff to what Barker and Jane (2016) call a common sense cultural arrangement, which perhaps increased its legitimacy.

It was because of the limited access to appropriate learning spaces that some teachers, including Kelly, tried to use other spaces that were available to ‘do PE’. Here, she described a lesson that she observed, taken by Chris, a trainee teacher, in a classroom:

Yes, because, say like Chris, he's been to do rugby, and he came the other week and it was absolutely chucking it down with rain, there was no way we could go out. So we just moved all the desks, and he adapted [the tag] rugby. He was really good.

While this example did not seem established practice, there was a common sense cultural arrangement in all the special schools to use the dining hall for PE. Glen (deputy head), for instance, said:

One of the biggest challenges is not so much that, it's we've got one hall, which is a dining hall and the assembly hall, and if there's PE after lunch in the afternoon, it's making sure the hall's clean and dry. Also, it's the risk assessment element. We ask the classes to risk assess the PE session. Well, it's done generically, but they have to look at their own class and make sure that the hall is ready and fit for purpose. So, those are the bigger challenges that, logistically, you've got to work with.

Similarly, Vicki (PE teacher) revealed:

My challenge is, really, getting them from the classroom upstairs to the dining hall downstairs. For me, it's timings as well, because I have the dining hall before dinner. So, I have to stick to my time. They've got to be down from the class as quickly as possible. On my planning, I've got it rigid. I'm always clock-watching and I keep it strict and then I know what time we have to go back upstairs. Because I've had a year at it, I've got it down to a tee.

While it seemed that teachers are using their, albeit limited, power to create learning spaces for PE, there appeared to be logistical and health and safety issues associated with learning in these spaces, both of which are limiting the amount of time available for PE. In this respect, it is worth noting that each special school dedicated 90 minutes to lunch, which is longer than the typical mainstream school, because of the logistics involved in transitioning children from classes to the dining hall, the time taken for children to feed or be fed, and the time required to transition the children back to classes. Again, this restricted the time the dining hall was available for PE set-up and PE lessons. Of equal, if not greater, importance, is that these spaces were not designed for pedagogical purposes. 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 Merriënboer et al., 2017). Given that a key focus of PE is embodied learning, which requires pedagogies that connect mind and body in knowledge construction, access to

suitable physical spaces that enable bodies to move in relation to each other is crucial (Nguyen and Larson, 2015). Therefore, we have concerns that the use of classrooms and dining halls is not symbolically representative of a PE environment and may also impact on the quality of what can be taught.

For some schools, one solution to lack of access to appropriate facilities and physical learning spaces on site was to travel elsewhere. Often, though, they would walk to access the facilities at clubs, leisure centres or other schools:

The sports day that they do at our SILC, they use the grounds at City of Leeds. So everybody walks there. Now, logistically, it's not always right for our pupils, and this year we didn't take the Key Stage I pupils, because it would have been too difficult for them to walk there and back and spend a whole afternoon doing sports. But the older ones, they did it, you know, and they entered every race that everybody else entered in, and they sat with their peers (Rose, deputy head).

Kelly, a teacher, had taken her pupils on public transport to access appropriate learning spaces:

So if we went anywhere, we'd go ... even to go across to [name of another school], we go by public bus. So we don't have a minibus to take them. That limits where we can take the children. That reduces our opportunities because say, like, there was an opportunity for them to go and do golf, but we couldn't do it. We couldn't get there.

Even those who did have their own minibuses to travel off-site identified issues with time and logistics. Lois (PE teacher), for example, said:

Some pupils would have to be hygiene before we all get them clamped on the bus, then actually get there, and by the time you've got there, you're having to set off to come back to school and do the whole thing again. So that is quite hard in terms of PE, actually, getting pupils' different opportunities off-site.

As Lois highlights, the time consumed preparing and getting to and from off-site facilities limits the time available to engage in PE-related activities.

Pressures from Ofsted and SMT

According to participants, pressures from Ofsted significantly shaped the ideologies, values, traditions and expectations in special schools generally and, in relation to our research, PE especially. To clarify, Ofsted is a non-ministerial government department that inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages (Ofsted, 2019). For the participants in our research, PE had become entangled with numeracy and literacy because of hegemonic Ofsted inspection expectations. For instance, Glen (deputy head) claimed: ‘From a school point of view [because of Ofsted], we’ve got to ensure that we have better than expected progress in the core subjects of English, maths and science. So, there’s a priority’. Pat (deputy head) echoed this view: ‘There is a kind of national agenda and push towards numeracy and literacy so they always come first [in our school priorities] and the work the SLT [senior leadership team] have been doing recently with the peer challenge review and the Ofsted report is because of that. It’s very much focused on numeracy and literacy first’. The power and influence of Ofsted is perhaps even more obvious in Paul’s (deputy head) comments when he talks about using Ofsted to validate their cross-curricular provision:

If children are doing PE, that's just a vehicle to teach maths, English, and everything else. We had this approach checked out by Ofsted, because I was a bit worried that we're out on a limb, we're doing something that other schools aren't doing ... we had an Ofsted inspector work with us, and she came and checked it out, said, it's fine. And then when we got an inspection, they said, you know, what you are doing is beyond outstanding.

While being careful not to dismiss attempts to meld and blur lines between subject areas, the above example is perhaps indicative of the subordinate status of PE in the special school hierarchy in that there was much evidence of other subject areas spilling into PE, but none of PE being taught through, for example, English or maths. This cultural expectation, which appears to have become a part of the taken-for-granted educational assumptions of these senior

leaders has, in turn, resulted in Paul (deputy head) placing pressure on George (PE teacher) to ensure that maths and numeracy were part of the common sense cultural arrangements of PE:

we have our observations [by SMT] and they talk about having the English [in PE], how to use read-writing which is a new development in English, how can you put a bit of science in [PE], how can you put a bit of maths in [PE]. When I get observed, I will throw everything into that. By the time you've done that lesson, you've had about 15 or 20 minutes practical (George, PE teacher).

Here, Ofsted are operating as a cultural mechanism disseminating established expectations that are shaping what is happening in special schools. Senior leaders, too, are actively involved in propagating an ideology that situates English and maths especially at the top of a hierarchy of priority when it comes to subject areas in special schools. The internalisation and normalisation of hegemonic ideologies of control in this way is, according to Perryman et al, (2018), indicative of the power and authority of dominant groups, such as government. Social norms in education are created and maintained once discourses of power are internalised, accepted and promoted by those who are part of cultural formations in schools, particularly when it is by those who have their hands on the levers of power (Foucault, 1973, 1977). There was some evidence of resistance from one senior leader to the hegemonic ideology that posits rapid progress in core subjects, particularly because of the perceived impact it has on teachers. Pat (deputy head), for one, argued:

Children need a balanced curriculum, not just core subjects. Also, I think the key challenge is the drive for standards in education, which is something of a conflict, in that, you know, you can't argue against the need to promote the highest possible standards in education, but the modern way of doing it, which can be very harsh in terms of Ofsted, in terms of teacher appraisal, in terms of teacher standards, is very difficult to deliver those in a kind of supportive and humanistic kind of way. You know, sometimes.

That said, those interviewed were acutely aware of the potential consequences of a 'bad' Ofsted report, some of whom had experienced it first hand: 'our Deputy Head now is the Head of

School because our previous head had to step down. [Name of another school] have also just had a very critical Ofsted, so the head teacher's handed his resignation and the school is in turmoil' (Alistair, PE teacher). While Alistair's school received a 'bad' Ofsted report, the PE provision was identified as being a stronger part of its offering:

We have had a lot of specialist PE staff that have done a really good job. We've had Ofsted inspections in the last couple of years, and we had quite a lot to overcome as a school. But now we're kind of over the worst of all that, which is really good. Ofsted looked at the vocational areas of catering, horticulture and sport and leisure. So we are very focused on it, because it's one of our vocational areas, so PE got some great feedback from that, and they observed one lesson, through the two days they observed the best swimming lesson that I'd delivered, and they were happy with the swimming curriculum, which is why now we're pressing on with the PE curriculum (Alistair, PE teacher).

Interestingly, one consequence of the inspection was that the senior leaders have used their influence over the curriculum as a mechanism of cultural (re)production in Alistair's school to expand PE provision and, as a consequence, increase the subject's legitimacy.

Concluding thoughts

Our research sought to utilise the key concepts and assumptions of Antonio Gramsci's work by drawing on hegemony, power and culture to make sense of some factors that influence what can and does happen in special school PE. In this respect, the power and authority of government was evident in that special school PE culture was shaped by the economic resources available to schools. While SEND resourcing has been cut across all schools in the UK, which is indicative of its standing vis-à-vis government educational priorities, senior leaders in our research suggested that this was especially problematic for them because they are expected to provide meaningful (physical) education experiences to children with complex support needs. This issue was of greater concerns to senior leaders, than teachers, because they

are the ones with their hands on the levers of power in schools and are, ultimately, accountable for how economic resources are used. The financial pressures on special schools is compounded by the fact that there have been increasing numbers of children educated in that cultural context, which is perhaps reflective of an ideological shift among policy makers, parents and educators when it comes to the most appropriate educational context for some children.

Another key issues that came through the research was the influence of a lack of appropriate facilities and access to physical learning spaces on what could be done in PE. All the schools that were part of our research were SILCs. While the intention of these SILCs was, among other things, to ensure that pupils with SEND could interact with their age-peers while receiving specialist support, it was apparent that the power to decide where or even if children with SEND did PE was largely determined by the actions of those working in the mainstream schools. One consequence of the mainstream schools' monopolisation of learning spaces such as sports halls and gymnasiums was that the PE experiences of children with SEND were restricted when compared to their age-peers. For us, this sent a clear message about the subordinate status of special, when compared to mainstream, school PE. While there may have been some internal resistance to this hierarchal relationship, none came through the interviews we conducted. In fact, it appeared as a common-sense cultural arrangement. This left special school PE teachers to use the power they did have to think in creative and innovative ways about how best to use the spaces they did have available, which was usually the dining hall. While PE teachers appeared to be making the best of a difficult situation, it should be noted that the spaces they did use were not designed for pedagogical purposes. Inevitably, this influenced the scope and quality of what was taught and, consequently, the traditions, rituals and experiences of special school PE.

Ofsted, as an arm of the State apparatus, was identified by participants in our research as having a significant influence over the culture of special schools generally, and PE specifically. Hegemonic Ofsted inspection expectations had resulted in literacy and numeracy bleeding into the aim and purpose of special school PE. Indeed, we found evidence of a hierarchy of subject priorities in special schools which posited English and maths at the top. While we generally support attempts to blur and meld the boundaries between subject areas, we found no evidence of PE seeping into other subject areas. This was again indicative of PE's subordinate status in relation to Ofsted inspection preparation priorities. There was some evidence of resistance to these priorities from one senior leader, but in all other instances it was clear that other senior leaders were acting as part of a school regulatory mechanism that pressured PE teachers to include learning objectives relating to numeracy and literacy in their lessons. Here, all participants were acutely aware of the (potential) consequences of a 'bad' Ofsted report given that some knew others that had lost their jobs as a result. The power and authority of Ofsted was so obvious that one school had used Ofsted judgements to validate and thus legitimise the cross-curricular approaches they were planning for PE. Interestingly, one teacher claimed that a positive Ofsted inspection for PE had increased the legitimacy of the subject in his school, especially given that the school overall was deemed to 'need improvement'.

Undertaking this research has reiterated our belief that more undergraduate students, researchers and pre- and in-service teachers need to better understand, appreciate and be able to navigate the cultural landscape in special schools. That is to appreciate the particular economic constraints pertinent to special schools, to be sensitised to the challenges of delivering PE with limited space, and to recognise the pressures from senior leaders to embody

Ofsted inspection expectations. Of course, some of these issues are not dissimilar to mainstream schools but it is reflecting on the particular circumstances within special schools that will go some way to broadening perspectives, including among those who aspire to teach, about PE in contemporary schools.

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