

Adolescent perspectives on gendered ideologies in physical activity within schools: Reflections on a female-focused intervention

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Abstract

There has been growing concern about rising physical inactivity levels in female adolescents, with schools taking some responsibility to address this. Programmes designed for and by girls are increasingly being used by developing or delivering a programme of change and consultation to improve physical activity, physical education, and sport in school. However, to build an understanding of the nuances of such interventions, and better appreciate any gendered benefits and challenges, girls' voices need to be heard. Based on data from 16 focus groups from 8 schools participating in a female-focused intervention trial ("Girls Active"), we explored adolescent girls' views of this type of intervention. We used reflexive organic thematic analysis to understand key issues. Four themes were developed: stereotypes; choice; empowerment and voice; and equality. Our feminist approach centralised adolescent girls' voices, thereby recognising that physical activity is rooted in patriarchal constructions that position girls as naturally uninterested in sport and activity. We suggest gender-focused interventions can actively address stereotypes by listening to girls.

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Physical education (PE) research has benefitted from feminism. Historically, PE largely ignored feminism and feminism ignored PE, seeing this subject as a “male preserve” implicit within gender inequality (Scraton, 2018). However, developments in feminist theory, which continue to be dynamic and influential in the 21st century (Watson & Scraton, 2017), led to major changes as girls more frequently access traditionally male sports (Scraton, 2018). Scraton (2018) cautioned that this does not signal the end of gender discrimination in PE, and neither does it represent equality. Indeed, claims of gender equality in physical activity, sport, and PE are viewed as inadequate, with calls for feminist-informed work exploring girls’ (dis)engagement from PE to illustrate how this is accomplished within a set of gendered constraints (Clark, 2021). This feminist focus is important as girls remain at the centre of many public health narratives (Francombe-Webb et al., 2020).

We recognise the importance of feminism in researching adolescent girls and PE, and present an argument informed by Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST). FST positions girls’ voices as necessary to understand how gendered processes inform the systemic influence of engagement in PE. FST recognises that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalised groups should be the focus of research to challenge power relations (Bowell, 2011), because marginalised groups occupy a unique social positioning that is less partial than those who have power (Gurung, 2020). In adopting FST we acknowledge the feminist advances in breaking down barriers that prevented female engagement in PE (Francombe-Webb et al., 2020). We share the commitment of FST to acknowledge, analyse and draw on power relationships to bring about social change (Bowell, 2011). We also recognise the need for further investigation to showcase female voices and build a stronger feminist-informed evidence base, particularly where adolescent girls narrate ideas and challenges that are underpinned by feminist principles.

Physical activity of UK adolescents

Physical activity is decreasing in British adolescents. Quantitative studies reveal low physical activity levels and inequalities based on key demographics. Sport England (2019) showed that one third of 5-to-16-year-olds are not sufficiently active, with differences based on sex, family affluence, and ethnicity. A UK Youth Sport Trust and Women in Sport Group (2017) survey of 25,000 adolescents suggested only 8% of females and 16% of males engaged in the public health target of at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day. This limited engagement is despite myriad physical activity opportunities available in schools. This includes timetabled PE, active transport to/from school, active classrooms, and extra-curricular sport offered outside class (Bassett et al., 2013).

PE in Local Authority maintained schools is mandatory and should offer varied competitive and non-competitive activity, skill development as well as encouraging physical activity outside specified lessons (Department for Education, 2013). However, participation in PE is theorised as being inscribed with dominant heteronormative gendered dispositions that protect and reproduce ideologies of “what it means to be a man”, contrasting with what it means to be a woman (Griffin & Griffin, 1998, p. 16). This means girls are actively being taught to view sport as a “man’s game”, defying supposed feminine qualities of being soft, gentle, and kind. Girls who counter these social norms are arguably marginalised and risk being labelled as unwomanly or having the personality and body of men/boys (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). This positions girls as “naturally” passive, more likely to be influenced by peers, and less interested in PE than boys (Murphy et al., 2014). However, evidence indicates many adolescent girls express the opposite, that they are interested in participating in PE and have higher levels of enjoyment than boys (Clark, 2012). This poses the question: if adolescent girls appreciate PE and desire to be more physically active than adolescent boys, why does this not translate into higher levels of participation?

Drop in participation and drivers for intervention

A range of barriers may explain the decline in girls’ decline in physical activity. These include feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness, bodily anxiety, and low self-esteem (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Contemporary ideas about feminine beauty and body standards have also influenced public conceptions of health and wellbeing (Ferguson et al., 2021). Collectively, these are influential as the sporting environment exposes girls to evaluation, public displays of the body, and body commentary which contributes to body-consciousness and drop-out (Vani et al., 2020). Thus, girls must negotiate the transgression of traditional gender norms to participate in physical activity (Messner, 2010). What is needed is attention to girls’ voices to explore ways in which these challenges might be overcome, and if this might be achieved through gender-focused school-based interventions.

Public health concerns and government action (e.g., childhood obesity, mental health) underpin this increasing drive for physical activity interventions in schools. The 2017 UK Government “Childhood Obesity Plan”, for example, urged schools to improve physical activity and tackle nutrition (UK Government, 2017). A fundamental action to improve public health is to reduce health inequalities through attending to certain demographics. Many interventions are largely reductionist in that they do not consider the gendered, cultural, or heteronormative dimensions of physical inactivity in adolescence, or how weight and health-related behaviours are rooted in patriarchal constructions of women’s roles and bodies (O’Hara & Taylor, 2018).

Female-focused school-based physical activity and sports programmes

Clearly, it is necessary to attend to critiques of reductionist masculine interventions if we are to improve female engagement in physical activity and in so doing account for the wider societal framework in which those interventions operate. Yet public health

measures have identified the under-participating individual as the central problem, in need of intervention in order to change, while ignoring the inequitable social arrangements driving the social and environmental health risk factors for the public health issues (Harrison, 2012). In essence, girls are compelled to assume responsibility to find innovative solutions to gender inequality, and by visibly demonstrating any achievements, girls subsume the neoliberal imperative by beginning to recast themselves as selling their own empowerment and confidence (Banet-Weiser, 2015). One way in which this is arguably perpetuated is through female-focused interventions. Thus, despite being well-intentioned, gender-focused interventions could inadvertently create a culture of individualising responsibility on adolescent girls while failing to account for wider systemic challenges and gendered discourses (Clark, 2021). Yet, if conceived of and constructed in co-design with female adolescents, with opportunity to showcase voice and empower girls, such interventions *potentially* could promote health, gender equality, and increase physical activity.

To manage the delicate balance between empowerment and positioning of responsibility with girls, it is important to design interventions in partnership with adolescent girls. This could address low participation rates, leading to improved health outcomes, and enhanced personal skills. Programmes for girls increasingly rely on role models or peer leaders developing or delivering a programme of consultation and action to improve physical activity. One such intervention was the “Girls Active” programme from the UK’s largest charity for physical activity and sport among young people, Youth Sport Trust (YST). The “Girls Active” school-based programme was developed in partnership with educators and adolescents and is a core offering by the charity to secondary schools in the UK. A framework of ten components supports schools in implementing the programme (see Table 4 of Harrington et al., 2019). Participating schools nominate a lead teacher who completes a self-review of current PE and physical activity provision. A training day for these teachers supports them in developing school action plans to address gaps and issues identified in the self-review. Teachers are given resources and online materials to assist them in recruiting and training peer leaders and marketing groups comprised of influential girls in Years 7–9 (12–15 years of age). Peer leaders promote school-based physical activity to girls and advocate for increased physical activity opportunities and choice (see Youth Sport Trust, 2020a). Teachers have ongoing support with YST via a mentor. The ultimate ambition is that these activities could, longer-term, alter the culture towards girls’ physical activity in the school, have girls’ driving the choices offered and peer leaders becoming embedded in decision-making processes into the future.

Focus and aims

Through attention to girls’ voices, we aim to explore the potential value of gender-focused interventions in practice and recognise how broader challenges might influence any benefits. To achieve that, we performed a secondary analysis of qualitative data from a school-based intervention designed for girls, “Girls Active”. Our guiding question was: what are the perceived benefits, challenges, and consequences of using a gender-focused

intervention to address inactivity in schools? We provide a unique addition to the literature by utilising a feminist epistemology to advocate for more appropriate physical activity programmes designed for and with girls.

Methods

Authors one (MO) and two (AT) are social scientists and author three (DH) is a health scientist. This interdisciplinary input, from Psychology, Sociology, and Health Sciences, strengthens the paper as it allowed for an open dialogue during coding that was informed by different training backgrounds, and a critical engagement with the literature and data, which strengthened the immersion in data and the identification of themes. All authors see the benefit of feminist-informed analysis in the context of health inequalities so promote feminist analysis due to their strong advocacy of gender equality, women's rights, and the importance of choice. Furthermore, all three female authors are heterosexual females, from working-class backgrounds before entering into an academic world of research and teaching.

Participants

In 2015–16 a cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT) investigated the effectiveness of “Girls Active” in 20 secondary schools in the East Midlands, UK (Harrington et al., 2018). Schools represented a range of socio-economic indices, ethnicities, and cultures. Focus groups were chosen because of their value to health research (Wilkinson, 2004), providing space for adolescents to share ideas, debate core issues concerning the research agenda, and comment on others' contributions (Willig, 2008).

The purposive sample included eight groups of female “Girls Active” peer leaders ($N = 46$) and eight groups of female peers ($N = 58$) aged 12–15 from 8 of the 10 intervention schools. “Girls Active” peer leaders in each school were invited to participate. Peer leaders were girls chosen to drive peer leadership and marketing of “Girls Active”. Each school chose peer leaders that suited their school context but were encouraged to choose influential girls and those willing to speak and act on behalf of their peers. To get a different perspective on the programme, teachers were asked to select girls from the same year as peer leaders for inclusion in separate focus groups. The girls represented a range of activity levels and consented to speak about topics related to physical activity. Girls were not asked about their sexuality, gender identity, or their gender-role principles. Participants were approached at school with information packs with parent/guardian information sheets, opt-out consent forms, and adolescent information sheets. Written assent was obtained from adolescents. Quotations from peer leaders (PL) and other females (girls) are labelled and each school is assigned a letter (A–H). Ethics approval was granted by the University of Leicester College of Medicine and Biological Sciences College Research Ethics representative.

Data collection

Sixteen audio-recorded focus groups were conducted by DH (PhD, Lecturer, female) and another experienced qualitative researcher (PhD, Lecturer, female) who were supported by

a project manager (female). Focus groups ranged from 8–32 minutes, with an average of 20 minutes, and took place in schools. Participants were told the researchers' interest in adolescent girls' physical activity. No other information about the researchers was given. The discussion was structured around three concerns for "Girls Active" implementation: role and impact of peer leaders; how peer leaders were perceived by themselves and others; and educational issues in physical activity and PE. Interesting responses were pursued further.

Analytic method

We used Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) to acknowledge the heterogeneity of our sample of adolescents. This epistemology positions girls' voices as being crucial in illuminating the gendered processes in society (Bowell, 2011), since girls have a relatively lower social position. This is theorised as giving girls a deeper understanding of gendered processes that other social groups may not be aware of or have lived experiences of (Longino, 1993). For these voices to be heard and prioritised, we used an analytic approach that was participant-centred and data-driven.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcription company and analysed by MO and AT with reflexive organic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach promotes reflexivity where themes represent shared meaning across participants, with reflexivity referring to the centrality of the researcher's role in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We engaged in an iterative and flexible approach to coding and thematising data. In so doing we acknowledged that saturation of the broad conceptual issues was accomplished, and no new main issues were discussed, but smaller discussion points are potentially infinite and thus saturation was achieved to that point (see Braun & Clarke, 2021; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Six meta-themes were identified for the paper with the dominant discourse relating to gender and gendered norms in physical activity. We subdivided this meta-theme into four smaller themes to reflect this gendered discourse. Most participants did not provide lengthy in-depth responses, and so we present the data consistently with how the questions were answered. We provide multiple quotes at some points of analysis to illustrate depth and consensus across the groups.

Findings

Four themes were identified that had notable gendered dimensions: stereotyping; choice; empowerment and voice; and equality.

Theme one: Stereotyping

Feminists commonly argue that women have been socially assigned a host of negative stereotypes that they unconsciously embody and "walk out" (Hesse-Biber, 2012). In relation to physical activity, this has been subsumed into how adolescent girls should present both emotionally and physically. This implies that girls have been construed as meek and incapable of displaying the boisterousness "required" for sport (Griffin & Griffin, 1998). For

example, girls are encouraged to participate in “feminine sports” like tennis, netball, and dance (Yungblut et al., 2012). Adolescent girls who take part in “masculine sports” are typically othered, masculinised, and/or subjected to misogynistic, racialised, and/or homophobic abuse (Sliwa et al., 2017). Our participants raised three stereotype-related points: the association of gender with PE activities; the school institution and its role in perpetuating gender myths; and signs of change in stereotyping.

Participants recognised gender stereotypes, particularly relating to girls’ interests. Their narratives implied that teachers, the PE curricula, and peers all contribute to stereotype (re)production. The social context of mediated sport was also identified as a source of stereotype production. Several participants wanted to distance themselves from stereotypes and instead be viewed in a heterogeneous light. An important concern about the perpetuation of gender myths was that the participants connected stereotypes and gender to girls not wanting to engage in activities that were overtly physical, masculine, or might impact their appearance, with some girls maintaining a preference for more traditionally feminine activity:

R: I think we have tried to change a little bit and sometimes I’m not sure that all girls want to do different things. Like rugby, I think, some of them aren’t as keen on the physical contact.
(School E: Girls)

R: A lot of people like nowadays are focusing on like what they’re wearing and then there’re quite a lot of teenage girls that don’t do PE because they think that the boys are watching them or ... and like stuff like that.
(School E: PL)

A host of activities were developed at the “Girls Active” schools beyond organised sports. This included loyalty/reward schemes, changes to PE kit, and promotional posters and assemblies (see Table 4 of Gorely et al., 2019). Some girls expressed disappointment that schools were promoting normative feminine sports, something some of them did not necessarily enjoy as they preferred more traditionally male sport:

R: Because the boys have, like, football and we don’t really have them, so ... I just want to do football with the boys.
(School A: Girls)

R: We are not allowed to do rugby during class or football because we do dance instead and not a lot of girls prefer to do dance.

R: Rugby and football is a man’s sport, but we enjoy it just as much and they think that we wouldn’t want to do it because we are getting muddy.
(School B: PL)

For many participants the school institution, including the PE curriculum and teachers, played a significant role in (re)producing dominant heteronormative gendered ideologies about girls in sport. Importantly, schools were seen to reify stereotyped ideas about masculine sports through their organisational and political system:

R: it [football] could be for women as well.

R: And by not allowing us to do, like, rugby and football in the school is kind of going along with the stereotype that we don't want to do it because it's mans' sport.

(School B: PL)

R: And there's like ... in this school like there aren't many all-girls like clubs. There's like ... there is girls' football and netball, and stuff like that ...

R: But there's like boys' football ... boys' rugby.

R: Yeah, there're lots more boys' clubs. So, there's rugby, for example. Girls don't do rugby at all really.

(School F: PL)

As part of that system, it was noted that teachers could restrict girls to normative feminine sports. One participant felt that a male PE teacher did not understand how to teach adolescent girls:

R: I don't want to offend any of the male PE teachers, but I do think it's mainly them that don't want us to do stuff. ... I don't think he'd [PE teacher] feel comfortable teaching girls football because he doesn't know what it's like to teach girls.

(School B: PL)

Stereotyping at an institutional level was embedded in the wider discourse of sporting achievements in the schools. Male sports teams received positive appraisal but the option of that same sport was absent for girls. Much like the wider society in which male sports players achieve high levels of recognition and pay for their sporting achievements, and a significant gender gap remains (Clark, 2021), this recognition of male sporting achievement was reported as problematic and endemic in the school system. We are not suggesting that the girls were told they cannot play football or rugby, rather that schools did not always offer these sports so the subtle gender discourses inferred that these sports may not be suitable for girls:

R: I think it's bad though because at the minute I think that's part of another one of the things we do, is we try and get like more for the girls because sport is like not at the school is more based around boys but like if the boys have a fixture, it'll be read out in a bulletin or like in assembly after. Oh, the year nine boys had a football match against de, de, de last night ...

R: Yeah, they always get praise for it.

R: ... and they won two ... they won two nil.

(School E: PL)

Several participants' schools were delivering "Girls Active" through reiterating gendered stereotypes. In some cases, this meant arranging non-competitive or non-contact activities for girls during lunchtime or after school, such as dance, and some participants actively contested this.

R: They got a lot of dance clubs and they've got ... I think Miss R puts on like Zumba classes sometimes.

(School F: Girls)

R: Like I love football, at primary school I was the only girl in the boy's football team and, like, I used to love it, but then like I came up here and they took it off the curriculum because it wasn't like typical girly things, but then you never know, like, what is girly, like, dance could be for boys as well, it's not necessarily for girls.

(School B: PL)

"Girls Active", therefore, was seen by the participants as a mechanism for schools to address the inequity in girls' physical activity opportunities. In doing so, some actively challenged stereotyping by directly appealing to their desire to do "masculine" sports. Notably, however, the girls' narratives revealed that school resources, attitudes, and male peers could be obstacles to successfully implementing these opportunities. Nonetheless, participants did reveal some changes because of the intervention, with some schools more active in challenging gendered stereotyping than others. It was noted that these opportunities were not taken up by all girls:

R: I mean, like, sometimes in "Girls Active" we talk about the ideas of doing other things in PE and we've, kind of, seen a change where we used to do ... we used to ... have to do tag rugby and football and cricket. And we didn't ... some girls did that, and some didn't.

(School H: PL)

Indeed, some girls argued that although they had conformed to gender norms around physical activity in the past, they would not necessarily agree with those gender ideas now because of the work achieved by peer leaders:

R: I think it makes the sport less gender-based. You get a lot of people that a year ago would have been like, oh, I'd never do rugby, it's a boys' sport, it's not for me, and everything, and now they're taking part in all the rugby games, and everything.

(School B: Girls)

Importantly, many participants felt gender stereotypes had influenced their attitudes towards being active. There is a clear diversity in thinking, preferences, feelings, and

attitudes towards physical activity and sport that needs to be accounted for to reduce gender stereotyping. This could be achieved through choice.

Theme two: Choice

Participants advocated for an active school culture that listens to the diversity of girls' preferences and gives them choices. We argue choice plays an important role in motivating girls to participate in, retain membership in, or try different sports and activities. Schools must be mindful of the childhood rights paradigm, positioning the agency of girls as central to human rights. In doing so, we recognise the double marginalisation of girls, who are positioned as having reduced social competencies due to their chronological and developmental age and as being female. Yet, the UNCRC (1989) treaty functioned to promote the rights of children to be involved in decisions that affect them, and legislation advocating gender equality at least to some extent provides a foundation for girls to be involved in their physical activity choices.

Our participants' narratives indicated they are more likely to be interested in school activity offerings if they are involved in making decisions. Several girls expressed dissatisfaction that there was insufficient choice:

R: They [boys] have a rugby club and there is really good numbers that turn out. Then we ask for it and they are like, no we can't do it, but half of the girls, more than half in our PE class are like why do we have to do dance, I'd rather be doing football or why do we have to [do] gymnastics, I'd rather be doing rugby – why can't we have a choice at least?

(School B: PL)

I: Why is it important to give girls a choice for what they want to do?

R: Because if we do something they don't want to do, then they're not going to come, it has to be something they want to do so then they come.

(School A: PL)

R: If we had a choice in what we do we'll enjoy it more and we'd want to take part in it.

R: It makes us enjoy PE more because it's doing something that we want to do rather than being ...

R: forced to do it.

(School D: PL)

For some there was a level of choice in terms of PE which was seen as important. Specifically, participants argued that being listened to by teachers helped them to enjoy PE on a greater level, and having their preferences heard and respected encouraged engagement.

R: Sometimes they do ... they have a choice though. The boys can do more than one sport. Like half of them may be doing football but the other half might be doing basketball.

(School D: PL)

R: The PE teachers give us a choice of what we want to do in PE rather than telling us what we've got to do.

(School D: PL)

R: I think the staff have changed their approach as well, because, like, now they're not as harsh and stuff and they actually listen to your input and what you want to do.

R: I think it's 'cause was, like, a massive push for it and it 'cause they realised that girls ... like, they ... like, the students wanted to have input into their PE lessons.

(School H: PL)

For many adolescent girls, being included in decisions related to physical activity made them feel excited to participate in what was offered. For PE specifically, choice was seen as especially important to engagement. In that sense, "Girls Active" was viewed as a conduit to increased choice, and the peer leader role was important in communicating those preferences within the school.

Theme three: Empowerment and voice

Programmes like "Girls Active" are typically underpinned by equity concerns whereby participation is viewed as empowering as it transcends gendered expectations about girls' physical incapacity. Yet this potentially relies on the idea that girls should be committed to maintaining an effort despite any difficulties, systemic challenges, or other influential factors like social class or race (Clark, 2021). Importantly, therefore, it is essential to identify and consider how girls take up this personal responsibility rhetoric and the extent to which they embed a sense of empowerment in relation to the programme. For participants who were selected as peer leaders, this assignation of role gave them some sense of empowerment and responsibility, as well as opportunity to represent their gender and year group peers. One participant described feeling proud to be chosen for the group and referred to the skills she has learnt because of the scheme.

I: When you first then became or asked to be a peer leader, how did you feel?

R: I was really excited, because it's a really good opportunity to encourage more girls to do sport and develop your skills by working with people and getting hands on with activities.

R: I felt excited as well because it's a new thing that I could try out and see how it goes.

R: I felt quite proud, because, like, we've just [been] picked out of, like, the whole school to do it.

(School A: PL)

"Girls Active" also facilitated opportunities for participants to speak up in relation to physical activity. The lead teachers encouraged them to do so as part of their peer leader

role. In one example, as a school banned leggings for PE for some year groups, the girls sent a questionnaire around to their peers to gain support for changing policy:

R: Only year nines could wear leggings and I think it was mainly only during winter and people would find it very stupid if you wore leggings during the summer.

R: That was really unfair because you can get, like that was, I think I thought that was really unfair that only year nines could like – why do you get a privilege just because you are [a] year older?

I: How did that change happen?

R: Well at first, we thought of ideas, so we thought of skorts [a pair of shorts that is designed to have the appearance of a skirt] and the leggings ideas. Then we, I think we went to the PE department and tried to ask them. Then we did an assembly and a questionnaire on how the other students thought about our idea and we got a lot of good votes back. Then we used the questionnaire votes to give to the PE department to show them and then they brought someone in to make the school leggings for us.

(School B: PL)

This representation and empowerment provided by the peer leaders was appreciated by their female peers. Girls believed this provided a mechanism for them to have their voices heard.

R: It gives us a voice and makes it seem like rather than just doing what we're told to do like we can choose what we want to do as well because not everyone likes every sport.

R: They've been making our voice like heard to the teachers so that we can get what we think makes the school better.

(School B: Girls)

R: Encourage more girls to do sports.

R: Giving girls a voice and power.

R: It's, like, showing girls can do it and, like, it's [not] only just boys. Like, we can all do it and be part of something altogether.

(School H: PL)

This notion of encouraging “*girls to do sports*” was also connected to the motivation to do so. The girls recognised that the programme empowered them to take control of their PE, and consequently encouraged them to have healthier lifestyles, which contrasted with other influences on their lives, like social media.

R: But it's like more healthy for you, like if you exercise and it's like a good way to like lose weight, and stuff.

(School E: PL)

R: They put the wrong impression on social media because they show pictures of people eating more healthily, but they're not going to show them having a bad day and stuff like that, so girls usually think, oh, I have to be like that because ... like Kylie Jenner.

(School G: Girls)

R: I think that, like ... 'cause girls go on social media a lot. So I think it can influence people. And that if they see, like, their ideal image a lot of girls ... like, they'll want to lose weight even if they don't need to. But ... by showing some different sports and things, it can encourage them to do it in a more healthy way.

(School H: PL)

Participants recognised that encouraging girls to be active could be negatively influenced through social media and through individual concerns about body image. However, they argued that the programme encouraged healthier lifestyles in a positive framing which was empowering because it listened to girls' perspectives. They noted that, while not necessarily its purpose, engaging in "Girls Active" provided a platform to manage their weight "*in a healthy way*" so as to help those that wanted to do so without the negative influences.

R: And you help people feel good about themselves and feel confident.

R: I was going to say confident.

(School F: PL)

R: Just giving girls more confidence and more opportunities. Like loads of girls want to do more stuff but sometimes the opportunities just aren't there.

(School D: PL)

Thus, "Girls Active" was seen to empower girls' as it boosted confidence, which was seen as being intrinsically tied to opportunities, and the need for more opportunities for girls so that there is the promotion of equality with boys' opportunities.

Theme four: Equality

Our analysis has illustrated the gendered process that positions some sports as inherently masculine and others as inherently feminine. Despite recognising some of the gendered norms operating within schools, participants were clear that this transcended the school environment and, as a society, there should be a wider gender equality.

R: Because women are just as strong and as equal as men, I don't see why we should be put down because of our gender, because everyone can be just as good as each other at everything.

I: Do you think the school understands that?

R: No.

(School B: PL)

R: We're as equal as the other gender.

(School H: PL)

R: It's like when girls think of maybe football, or something, they think it's more for like male dominated sport and that not many girls are actually doing it but if you look at it in like the big picture there are quite a lot of girls that actually do football for a living.

(School F: PL)

While some participants thought "Girls Active" promoted equality and fairness, one girl suggested it was detrimental to adolescent boys not to be offered activities and sports they might enjoy and that some male peers perceived the intervention to be biased. However, most female participants felt the gender-focused intervention helped to address feelings of embarrassment and lack of confidence.

R: They're just, like, jealous ... they think that we're being sexist because it's just girls and they don't understand ... like, if you try and explain to them, girls ... like, they tend to have a lot of confidence issues and they need help with it. They go, well boys have it too.

(School H: PL)

Indeed, some participants emphasised feeling empowered *because* boys were excluded and saw male exclusion as necessary to promote physical activity in girls. Some girls felt having boys around during PE or extra-curricular sport could be damaging to their learning and skill development and to their likelihood of participation and enjoyment:

R1: And it's private so the boys can't come in and interrupt and mess about.

R2: And girls got to do something on their own for once

R3: It sounded fun, and it was like, away from the boys.

(School A: Girls)

Other girls described the existence of more options as creating a positive atmosphere in the changing rooms and a broader scope of options contributing to a more positive attitude toward PE. One participant pointed to how crucial peer groups were:

I: Do you think "Girls Active" has managed to do that, make more girls want to do it [more sport] rather than have to?

R: Yeah, like in the changing rooms it always used to be quite negative, like no one could really be bothered, or whatever, but now everyone seems to be quite happy doing it, and everything.

I: Why do you think that is?

R: The PE lessons have changed, like so there's like a wide range of different PE lessons that you can do.

(School B: Girls)

One participant noted how not having boys around and being with girls of a similar skill level reduced feelings of embarrassment. She also presumed, however, that girls typically lack sports skills. This could be interpreted that girls-only interventions like “Girls Active” reproduce gender stereotyping by homogenising girls’ skill levels:

R: Well like because we’ve got a club that’s like a cricket club that our science teacher runs and because he does like a specific one for girls and another one for boys it makes more girls want to go to the girls’ one because they don’t think like ... because a lot of the boys have been playing since they were really young so they’re really good and the girls have only been playing for like six months. It makes them more likely to go to it because they’re not embarrassed.

(School B: Girls)

Many of our participants felt that the intervention helped address feelings of embarrassment and nonconfidence in physical activity which suggests that ultimately gender-focused interventions have an important role for encouraging girls to participate and to promote gender equality.

Discussion

We explored adolescent girls’ perspectives of a gendered school-based physical activity programme by drawing upon FST to focus on how patriarchal ideologies are embedded in adolescent girls’ perspectives of physical activity opportunities in their school. We also explored whether the “Girls Active” intervention could bypass these ideologies. In so doing, we critically questioned how gendered discourses of physical activity are often associated with individual girls and their preferences, responsibilities, and resistance, and, like Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018), recast this individualised endeavour as located in the educational market.

Our study suggests that the “Girls Active” programme gave girls an opportunity to explore sports and physical activities that have historically been denied them, activities that are reported as embedded in gendered stereotypes in such ways that dissuade them from participating. In examining the narratives of the adolescent girls and through our FST position, we were mindful of the suggestion by Clark (2021) that the well-intentioned ambition of these interventions to empower girls in PE can result in an individual blaming rhetoric. Such individualism leads girls to feel responsible for managing their (dis)engagement without accounting for wider social and educational influences.

In seeking to promote girls’ physical activity in schools, there is a risk that gender-focused interventions could promote rather than reduce physical activity inequality. This would be through creating an ethos of individualism and ignoring the school culture, systemic influences, and gendered discourses as they operate at various levels beyond PE (Clark, 2021). Problematically, any school-based intervention to encourage physical activity operates within a social and societal framing where it remains

challenging for girls to participate in sports seen as masculine and be taken seriously, and gender binaries continue to project the inferiority of women (Pavlidis & Fullgar, 2016). In the promotion of girls' agency within PE, there is a risk that the neoliberalism of gender promotion and an individualistic rhetoric may consequently reinforce the "natural male-ness" of sport or encourage a level of competitiveness not all girls are comfortable with (see Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Indeed, while some find increased opportunity to engage in sporting activity to be empowering, the nature and methods to do so may leave some feeling excluded and disempowered (Pavlidis & Fullgar, 2016).

In contemporary interventions and through the promotion of physical activity programmes for girls there is the risk of reifying the rhetoric and reproducing the motivators that are "in fashion" or are prominent in social media. (e.g., "strong is the new skinny"). We want to be clear that while promoting physical exercise for good health in adolescent girls, we do not want to reify dangerous notions of over-exercising or being active purely for aesthetic reasons (Wiklund et al., 2019). There is clearly a relationship between body image and physical activity (Kerner et al., 2018), and this can be taken to extreme levels. Teachers therefore have an important role of identifying adolescents who may over-exercise or engage with disordered eating, which requires reflection on how to best deliver health and nutrition information. This is especially important given that schools are a crucial space for girls' negative body image concerns to be manifested, with appearance-focused conversations, dieting tips, and weight-monitoring being common to everyday interactions with peers (Carey et al., 2011).

Inevitably adolescent girls' views about physical activity, gender, and their bodies are influenced by the culture of the school, but also by wider social influences like social media. Indeed, the relevance of social media was articulated by the participants in this study. The role of social media in shaping girls' identity and experiences of physical activity is important from a feminist perspective. Social media can be a powerful tool for reworking normative gender identities in sport and ostensibly offers girls a sense of control of how they are presented, and yet, user-generated content can still be inherently problematic (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). For example, while online engagement such as "Fitspiration" can inspire a healthier lifestyle and encourage physical activity, such social media trends are also likely to have negative exposures perpetuating myths of attractiveness and the idea of a certain body shape being the epitome of health, and thus can create unhealthy or negative impacts on girls' body image (Talbot et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). This is especially problematic as evidence shows a strong association between social media and negative body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). An acceptable balance between relevance and not perpetuating the patriarchal culture of femininity is therefore needed. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) argued that this is especially necessary in digital spaces as sportswomen are continually reconfigured by neoliberalist ideology to hold responsibility for the representation of female athleticism and establish women as competitive and successful. In particular, social media may open up female access to traditionally masculine sport by providing platforms for young women to assert an authority in predominantly male spaces (Olive, 2015).

The critical questioning of female-focused interventions, and the underpinning FST to explore girls' voices, is a strength of our study. Specifically, this research is one of only a

few studies that are associated with a gender-focused physical activity and sport intervention. Although the focus group questions were not designed to explore the feminism topic specifically, the secondary analysis of process evaluation data is a valuable use of data from large and expensive research trials. Our findings have important implications for those involved in the development and delivery of physical activity opportunities for adolescent girls. Like earlier research, our data contests the notion that adolescent girls are not interested in sport (Clark, 2012) and instead highlights how gendered stereotypes may play a part in preventing girls from pursuing these interests. However, in the context of the intervention, our data adds further knowledge by suggesting that school-based physical activity, PE, and sport programmes that offer curricula aiming to deconstruct these stereotypes by empowering adolescent girls can positively influence the ways in which girls view and experience physical activity.

We recommend that schools dedicate time and resource for teachers to actively listen to adolescent girls and their desires while remembering not to homogenise due to their diversity of interests. We understand this may be difficult unless the PE curriculum and the school culture allows this, and adequate resourcing is available. We also advocate for providing increased choices for adolescent girls extending to their PE kit and single-sex participation.

This will not be easy; Engel (1994), in discussing her findings on the drop-off in participation that was evident in mixed sex PE classes almost 20 years ago, cites Leman on how all too often decisions on mixed sex PE classes are driven by “structural or economic efficiencies”. We expect that similar dynamics remain in play today, as the financial situation in UK schools has deteriorated with funding cuts for the education sector not yet reinstated and short-term programmes left to plug the gap in financial and human resource. Therefore, we imagine that implementation of our suggestions may be difficult in practice.

Teachers will also find it difficult to offer non-stereotyped options if only small numbers of girls express an interest, as it might not be cost-effective to do so in terms of teacher skills and finance. If the school is to front the response to public health issues, then adequate and sustained funding needs to be in place. In the “Girls Active” trial, the lead teachers did receive external training and support and were certainly passionate about and motivated to respond to girls’ needs and preferences. Even so, in practice, they were limited by time, the pressure to prioritise curriculum teaching and delivering established school sports and not having buy-in from other staff and the wider school, including the senior leadership team (Gorely et al. 2019). Evidence from other girls’ trials also cite implementation difficulties (e.g., resistance to change, lack of support from school senior leaders) that support this notion (Okely et al., 2017). Overall, if girls’ physical activity is not a priority within the school the impact of any programme may be limited and unsustainable. Furthermore, well-meaning approaches may, unintentionally, perpetuate gender stereotypes as teachers are limited by time, resource, support, and the curriculum from taking a sustained and long-term look at girls’ engagement in school physical activity.

On limitations, our sample was just from the East Midlands, UK. We achieved saturation, but it is possible that adolescent girls from outside the East Midlands will have different interpretations of gender-specific interventions like “Girls Active”. Our analysis focused on gendered experiences generally, rather than looking at the intersections of

racism and misogyny, or classism and misogyny, for example. It is evident that these perspectives are largely unaccounted for and therefore we implore researchers to consider working in this area. Considering the low levels of engagement in physical activity also seen in boys (YST, 2017), it may also be appropriate to develop physical activity interventions with and for adolescent boys (YST, 2020b).

To conclude, gender-focused physical activity programmes such as “Girls Active” can offer adolescent girls a pathway into physical activity and sport in ways that were perceived not to be available in many schools. However, schools and programmers need to be aware of potential unintended consequences of compounding gender stereotypes. This study reinforces the need for gender-sensitivity when it comes to physical activity, PE, and school-based sport and illustrates the value of using feminism in gender and PE. Embedding meaningful and long-term roles for school curriculums so that girls have a choice and a voice within their own school’s PE programme and sport so that they have agency in the decision-making process should be prioritised.

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Data availability

Owing to the absence of any specific data-sharing information in the participant and parent/guardian information sheets, there are no data that can be shared publicly. Please contact the corresponding author for further details.

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Amelia Talbot is a medical sociologist and qualitative methodologist in the Medical Sociology and Health Experiences Research Group, Nuffield Department of Primary Health Care Sciences, University of Oxford. She has worked on a series of health-related projects including ones on endometriosis and high-risk pregnancies, but her main interests are in mental health. As of October 2020, she has begun a Rosamund Snow DPhil in the department, looking at people’s and clinicians’ experiences of living with and diagnosing treatment-resistant depression. Outside of her research, Amelia enjoys teaching on qualitative methods courses.

Deirdre Harrington has been a lecturer in physical activity for health at the University of Strathclyde since January 2021 and holds an honorary title with the Department of Health Sciences at the University of Leicester. Deirdre is interested in the development and evaluation of school, family, and community-based interventions for the prevention of long-term conditions, including type 2 diabetes. During her time at Leicester, she led the “Girls Active” evaluation as part of a large co-investigatory team.