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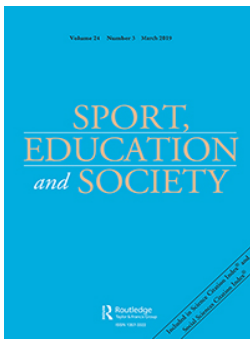
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# The enactment of setting policy in secondary school physical education

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## ABSTRACT

The micro-level enactment of educational policy has received little attention in the physical education [PE] literature, particularly as it relates to setting policy. This study employs enactment theory to provide original insights into the ways in which setting policy was enacted by PE teachers in three mixed-gender secondary schools in England. The work of Stephen Ball and colleagues is used to examine the distinct and combined influence of the *situated, material, professional* and *external* dimensions of context on setting policy and practices in PE in these three schools. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 PE teachers who were responsible for delivering the Year 9 PE curriculum. Our findings highlight notable variation in the ways in which setting policy was translated and enacted in PE in these three schools and the multiple factors shaping decisions about groupings and, in turn, teaching and learning for students in different sets. This study also provides novel findings regarding the dynamic interplay between the *external* dimensions of context (i.e. neoliberal policy making and pressures and supports from the local education authority [LEA] and the school inspectorate) and the *internal* dimensions of context (i.e. school-based traditions, school demographics, and support and resourcing for PE) in policy enactment. Attention is drawn to equity issues inherent in, and arising from, the varied enactment of setting policy in PE. The paper concludes by arguing for greater scholarly engagement with policy enactment, grouping strategies and constructions of ability in PE.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Ability grouping; Setting; Policy enactment; Physical education and sport pedagogy; Equity

## Introduction

Setting has been a prominent policy agenda for schooling, particularly in the United Kingdom [UK], amidst sustained government concerns to raise standards of attainment (Conservative Party, 2007, 2010; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005). Setting is a method of grouping students by attainment in individual subjects and is referred to as 'regrouping' in the United States of America and in parts of Australia and 'streaming' in New Zealand and in several European and Asian school systems. While it is a practice most commonly associated with the subjects of mathematics, English and science (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Hallam et al., 2003, 2008; Ireson et al., 2002; Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2011, 2013),<sup>1</sup> this research reflected the wider adoption of setting policies in many secondary school PE lessons in England (Wilkinson et al., 2016). More particularly, it sought to make an

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important and original contribution to the literature by addressing an absence of research examining the reasons for the adoption of setting in PE and a lack of research into the specific ways in which setting is enacted in PE in different schools. To pursue these issues, this paper draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 PE teachers from three secondary schools in the north-east of England who shared their insights into the varied application of setting policy in PE in their school.

Conceptually and methodologically, this research recognised the many influences prospectively playing out in the adoption of setting policies in different schools and classrooms and the corresponding complexities in the impact of setting policies within and between schools. It also acknowledged that setting policies in PE express and legitimate particular notions of ability and are a powerful mechanism for signalling the value of specific skills, knowledge and/or understandings (such as specialised movement skills, technical proficiency, tactical knowledge and understanding, and interpersonal skills) in PE. Following others in the field (Croston, 2014; Evans, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Wilkinson & Penney, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2016), this research therefore sought to extend work critically engaging with ability in PE via a focus on setting. Policy enactment, and the work of Ball et al. (2012), was the theoretical frame used to examine the multifaceted and multi-layered nature of the appropriation and recontextualisation of setting policies in PE in these three schools. This paper adds to policy enactment research in PE, and education more broadly, that has drawn attention to the multiple dimensions of context that collectively shape the local adaptation and translation of policies in schools and classrooms (Alfrey et al., 2017; Lambert & Penney, 2020; Maguire et al., 2019). Our data and discussion also draw attention to the complex influence of context upon setting policies, conceptualisations of ability in PE, and in turn, issues of equity and opportunity.

## The policy of setting in schools in England

From the late 1990s, a succession of UK governments (Conservative Party, 2007, 2010; DfEE, 1997, 2001; Labour Party, 1997) have encouraged the use of setting in primary and secondary schools.<sup>2</sup> Setting has repeatedly been associated with raising standards of attainment in schools (Conservative Party, 2007; DfEE, 1997, 2001; DfES, 2005) and is based on the premise that when groups are more homogenous, teachers are better able to tailor instruction and feedback to the particular needs of students (Conservative Party, 2010; DfES, 2005; Labour Party, 1997). While more recent policy documents have not specifically advocated for setting (see, e.g. Conservative Party, 2015, 2019), research has continued to show that setting is frequently practised in primary and secondary schools in England, especially in the subjects of mathematics, English and science (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Ofsted, 2013).

In a nationwide survey of grouping practices in primary schools in England, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) found that children as young as three were grouped by ability or attainment for mathematics, literacy and phonics, and that there was a general increase in the use of ability grouping with age. In the secondary sector, Ireson et al. (2002) and Ofsted (2011, 2013) similarly noted higher levels of setting in mathematics and English than in other subjects and observed that setting was typically used from Year 8 onwards, particularly in English and science, and was more common in schools with a higher number of students. While mixed-ability grouping has been reported as the most common practice in other subjects in secondary schools (Hallam et al., 2008; Ofsted, 2011, 2013), recent research has revealed a notable increase in the adoption of setting in PE in England (Wilkinson et al., 2016). In Wilkinson et al.'s (2016) survey of 155 PE departments in the north-east of England, 96 (62%) reported using setting and a further ten indicated that they had plans to introduce setting in PE. This research has also reaffirmed the need to closely examine setting practices, particularly from an equity perspective (Wilkinson et al., 2016).

## Complexities and inequities in setting policies and practices

International meta-analyses challenge claims that setting is uniformly beneficial for student attainment. Their findings suggest that, overall, setting is not of significant benefit to student attainment

outcomes, and that where setting raises attainment, the prime gains are for higher attaining students (Higgins et al., 2015; Slavin, 1987, 1990; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016). Research has further highlighted a lack of neutrality inherent in setting decisions, with students from low socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds consistently found in low sets in mathematics, English and science (Connolly et al., 2019; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). Studies have also repeatedly indicated a tendency for mathematics, English and science teachers to have fixed and stereotypical expectations about pace and level of work appropriate to the learning capacities of students in different set levels (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler et al., 2000; Marks, 2013; Mazonod et al., 2019; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014). As a consequence, students in the top set in mathematics, English and science often experience independent, fast paced and challenging work, while those in the low set, and often already disadvantaged groups of students, proceed at a slower pace and receive less stimulating teaching (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler et al., 2000; Francis et al., 2017; Mazonod et al., 2019; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014).

Setting is thus a complex practice that can have a sustained impact on the educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes for students in different sets. Indeed, research highlights that irrespective of progress or attainment, there is little scope for movement between sets (Croston, 2014; Ireson et al., 2002; Marks, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019). Teachers report that upward set movement is impractical because students in the lower set have not covered the equivalent material required for the higher set (Boaler et al., 2000; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Taylor et al., 2019; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003) and reluctance to consider downward set movement is associated with fear of damaging students' self-esteem and levels of motivation (Boaler et al., 2000; Croston, 2014; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003). Pragmatic considerations associated with timetabling and space are often shown as factors further constraining opportunities for students to move between sets (Ireson et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2019; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003).

## Policy enactment and setting in PE

In this study, setting was acknowledged as a policy that is enacted in distinct institutional contexts (with their own histories, cultures, facilities, budgets, intakes, pressures and supports), amidst a particular wider education policy and political context, and by teachers with particular professional beliefs and values pertaining to setting and ability in PE. In discussing enactment, Ball et al. (2011) distinguished between *imperative/disciplinary* policies and *exhortative/developmental* policies. While the former tightly frame policy responses by virtue of 'the requirements of performance and delivery' (Ball et al., 2011, p. 612), exhortative/developmental policies leave notable space for school leaders and teachers to use their judgement and creativity in the policy process (Ball et al., 2011). In the context of this research, setting is best described as an exhortative/developmental policy because it was recommended rather than mandated at the time of the study (Conservative Party, 2010; Ofsted, 2013).

Accordingly, this research sought to examine how and why setting policy was enacted in particular ways by PE teachers in different secondary school settings. More specifically, the research was designed to interrogate the basis upon which specific setting decisions were made in PE and explore the varied influence of different aspects of context (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2011) on teachers' enactment of setting in PE. The former emphasis reflected a concern to extend previous research in PE highlighting the need to critically examine the constructions of ability promoted by policy and pedagogic practices in PE (Croston, 2014; Evans, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Wilkinson & Penney, 2016, 2020). The inter-related and inter-dependent dimensions of context articulated by Ball and colleagues were used as a generative frame to examine the specific constraints and possibilities that PE teachers in different schools faced and variously responded to as policy actors shaping the enactment of setting policy in PE. Briefly, the *situated* dimension refers to issues of locale, including school histories and demographics; *professional* encompasses issues associated with school culture and teachers' professional values and biographies; *material* addresses pragmatic

issues, including staffing, budgeting and infrastructure; and *external* acknowledges the influence of local authority and broader policy contexts, agendas and requirements (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2011).

As the following research questions reflect, each dimension, and the linkages between them, were an explicit focus in this research.

- How is setting policy enacted in PE in different secondary schools?
- What criteria are employed by teachers in making setting decisions in PE?
- How do different dimensions of context (situated, professional, material and external) individually and collectively influence the enactment of setting policy in PE in different secondary schools?

## The research context and methodology

The research reported in this paper employed case study methodology and involved three mixed-gender secondary schools in one LEA in the north-east of England. The study was conducted from September 2016 to April 2018 and used semi-structured interviews with a total of 15 PE teachers across the three schools.

### Sampling and participant recruitment

The three schools were purposively selected to provide contrasts with respect to size, type (specialist<sup>3</sup> and non-specialist), Ofsted inspection rating,<sup>4</sup> levels of attainment in General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE] examinations and known approach to setting students in PE. Table 1 provides an overview of these contextual contrasts in the case study schools. School names have been replaced by pseudonyms and their sizes have been rounded to the nearest 100 to preserve their anonymity. Student population and attainment data have also been rounded to the nearest 10.

Following agreement from school head teachers for teacher participation in the project, all PE teachers with responsibility for teaching PE to Year 9 students were invited to participate in this research. A total of 15 PE teachers across the schools (eight male and seven female) agreed to participate. Year 9 was chosen as a focus for data collection because it was recognised as a time when greater attention may be given to setting decisions because of the commencement

**Table 1.** Details of the case study schools at the time of study.

	Oakside	Burnway	Sandwest
Type of school	Specialist Sports College	Local authority maintained	Local authority maintained
Age range	11–18	11–18	11–18
Gender	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
Students on roll	1300	900	400
Students eligible for free school meals	40% (average for English secondary schools = 28%)	40%	70%
Students with Special Educational Needs Support	10% (average for English secondary schools = 11%)	10%	10%
Students achieving grade 5 or above in English & mathematics GCSEs	40% (average for English secondary schools = 43%)	30%	10%
Ofsted grade	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement
Setting used from	Year 7 to year 11 in boys' and girls' PE	Year 8 to Year 11 in boys' PE only	Year 7 to year 11 in boys' and girls' PE
Number of set levels in PE	Three (top, middle and bottom <sup>a</sup> )	Two (top and bottom)	Two (top and bottom)

<sup>a</sup>These were the terms that most PE teachers in the case study schools used to describe different sets in PE.

of examination PE in Year 10 in most schools. Table 2 provides further details of the PE teachers who participated in this study.

### Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the 15 PE teachers over an eight-month period. The interviews were based on an interview guide designed to elicit information on perceptions of ability and setting in PE, perceptions of and justifications for setting in PE, and teaching of sets in PE. The interview guide was informed by relevant literature and responses from a preliminary survey of setting practices in schools in the north-east of England (Wilkinson et al., 2016). Interview questions were adapted to each case study school and a pilot study was conducted with two PE teachers (one male and one female) in a school that was not included in the main research study. The interviews were conducted by the first author in a quiet classroom during PE teachers' planning and preparation time. During the interview process, open-ended questions and detail-oriented, completion, clarification and elaboration probes were used to generate a rich data set (King et al., 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In total, more than twelve hours of interview data were generated. All interviews were recorded on a digital audio device.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and rigorously analysed using a process of inductive and deductive thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The corpus of data was read multiple times and coded to identify category labels. Text segments that appeared to carry similar meaning were assigned provisional category labels and data further assessed to determine their accuracy and comprehensiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Further analysis specifically explored the relationship of category labels and data extracts to the dimensions of context identified by Ball et al. (2012) (i.e. situated, professional, material and external). The process of analysis continued until the point of saturation.

### Findings: the varied enactment of setting in PE

In reporting findings, we address each case study school in turn, detailing how setting policy was enacted in PE and exploring the ways in which different contextual factors influenced enactment. Table 3 below provides an overview of the specific features of context that we observed as shaping setting in each school and that we therefore bring to the fore in the sections that follow.

**Table 2.** Details of the PE teacher participants at the time of study.

School	Teacher/ Role	No. of years teaching/ at school	'Group' taught in Year 9 PE
Oakside	Liam (Head of Department)	12/ 12	Top set boys
Oakside	Sarah	14/ 12	Top set girls
Oakside	Charlene	23/ 12	Bottom set girls
Oakside	Andrew	15/ 15	Middle set boys
Oakside	Paul	13/ 13	Bottom set boys
Oakside	Amy	1/ 1	Middle set girls
Burnway	Stephen (Head of Department)	13/ 13	Top and bottom set boys
Burnway	Karen	22/ 22	Mixed-ability girls
Burnway	Anna	20/ 15	Mixed-ability girls
Burnway	Mark	7/ 7	Bottom set boys
Burnway	Thomas	1/ 1	Top set boys
Sandwest	James (Head of Department)	17/ 10	Bottom set boys
Sandwest	Susan	16/ 14	Top set girls
Sandwest	Charlotte	10/ 6	Bottom set girls
Sandwest	Matthew	7/ 7	Top set boys



**Table 3.** Summary of the contextual influences shaping setting in PE.

	Oakside	Burnway	Sandwest
Situated	Specialist Sports College; School oversubscribed; Large school roll (>1300)	Mixed socio-economic intake	School undersubscribed
Material	Expansive facilities for PE; High level of staffing for PE	Physical geography of the school	Poor quality facilities and limited resources; Funding cuts
Professional	High status department; Differing personal philosophies	Low status department; School culture and ethos; Gender differentiated practices established in PE	Low status department; Prescriptive stance on setting
External	Pressures from the LEA linked to Specialist Sports College status and funding	High rating from Ofsted; Gender differentiated history in PE	Pressures from Ofsted and the LEA

While directing attention to each dimension of context, we also highlight important interrelationships coming through in our data and particularly the overarching influence that aspects of the wider context had upon the internal dimensions of context in particular school settings.

### Oakside: pressures, performativity and privilege

Both situated and external factors were highly influential in shaping the ways in which setting policy was enacted in PE at Oakside. PE teachers at Oakside spoke candidly about the pressures they faced from the LEA, particularly as the school was a Specialist Sports College. As such, the Head of Department at Oakside explained that continued significant funding was dependent on high levels of attainment in GCSE PE examinations:

We're a sports college and so we need to hit a number of targets to keep our funding. It means we've really got to focus on our grades in GCSE exams. (Liam)

These funding pressures also resulted in setting policy being used specifically as a sorting mechanism to identify and recruit students with the potential to achieve high-grade passes in GCSE PE. Students were actively prepared for, or channelled away from, GCSE PE based on their set placement in Year 8. PE teachers explained that setting allowed them to disproportionately concentrate attention and resources on potentially high attaining students in the subject. Liam explained his staffing strategy:

I deliberately put my strongest member of staff with the top sets. It's about making sure the lessons are at a high quality. It's about building positive relationships and giving them a good experience, so they'll pick us at GCSE.

Students in the top set were thus taught by more experienced members of staff. They were also privileged in terms of access to after-school clubs and PE-related trips:

We probably encourage the top sets to attend extra-curricular clubs and trips a bit more because it gives us more time to work with them and develop them further. (Liam)

As part of the overarching strategy to achieve GCSE targets, students at Oakside commenced GCSE course studies in Year 9 rather than Year 10. Sarah explained:

... our top set Year 9s are doing GCSE PE. We start them a year earlier so that we've got more time with them. We have them all together in one group and they're working at a higher level all the time.

Students in the middle and bottom sets were not afforded the same opportunities and were guided towards other subject areas in their GCSE option choices.

PE teachers at Oakside also indicated that external performance indicators influenced how setting policy was enacted in different year groups. In Year 7, setting was acknowledged as more 'relaxed' because the demands of performativity were less acute and immediate than in other year groups

in the school. Students were therefore allocated to sets in Year 7 based on one-off observations in the subject. Liam noted:

It's a one-off observation over the course of an afternoon. [Sarah] does the same with the girls. We probably get away with it because we don't have the same results pressures in Year 7. Things are definitely more relaxed.

Liam clarified that these observations were based on students' physical abilities in a variety of team-based activities in PE:

So, we do a range of activities. Things like football, rugby and cricket for the boys and netball and hockey for the girls. We're just looking at them physically and marking down on a register what set we think they should be in. That's it really.

For Year 8, PE teachers acknowledged the need for a broader and more nuanced notion of ability to be reflected in setting decisions because the GCSE examination consisted of both practical and academic components. Students were therefore, for the most part, allocated to sets based on judgements of their physical ability and the quality of their written work in academic subjects in the school. Notably, this approach led to a marked change in how PE teachers viewed the abilities of some students and prompted a reconsideration of their set placement in the subject. Sarah commented:

We start to think a bit more strategically about setting in Year 8 because we're under a bit more pressure with GCSE starting in Year 9. So, we sometimes find that students are in the middle or bottom sets because we initially looked at them physically.

Things have changed with the syllabus as well. So, 60% of the overall mark is now based on academic work. So, we enquire about how students are performing in other subjects to give us an indication of how they might perform in GCSE PE.

Decisions about the allocation of students to sets in PE in Year 7 and Year 8 at Oakside were also contingent on a number of other considerations, 'including behaviour, levels of effort and motivation' (Andrew). Here, Andrew explained the underlying concerns informing this approach and the consequences:

We've got to get the top set right to make sure they aren't distracted and are making good progress. I suppose it means we have more behavioural problems in the middle and bottom sets but the pressures from above are all about achievement. We need to hit our achievement targets. That's what we're judged on. I'm judged on A\* to C grades.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in the context of accountability and performativity pressures on the school and department, students who were perceived as threatening the learning progress of students in the top set were moved to the middle or bottom sets in PE, particularly after Year 8. Furthermore, the decision to introduce GCSE PE for the top set in Year 9 meant that it was regarded as not feasible for any student to move up to the top set after the first few weeks of Year 9 because they had increasingly missed out on work that was only undertaken by the top set. Most set movement in PE after Year 9 at Oakside was thus downwards and frequently associated with students' behaviour.

Elements of privilege in the context at Oakside also played their part in the enactment of setting policy in PE. Specifically, Oakside was oversubscribed, with a twelve-form entry and over 1300 students on roll. These factors determined the number and size of sets in PE and the level of staffing for the subject. In all subjects in the school, each year group was divided into two halves for timetabling purposes. In PE, students were then separated by gender and organised into three set levels for lessons. The total number of students in a half year group necessitated a three-set format, and the number and availability of staff in the department and the availability of physical space for PE in the school made this format practicable:

We have six members of staff in the department, so it works really well. We each take one of the sets and teach that set for the whole year. (Amy)

We're really lucky with the facilities we have. So, even though the groups are pretty big, we're not really treading on each other's toes. (Charlene)

The status of the subject and the reputation of the department in the broader school were also important factors in the enactment of setting policy in PE at Oakside. The PE department had a track record of successful examination results and Liam explained that this meant that they were able to leverage relative autonomy (from senior management and Ofsted) in their enactment of setting, albeit within the broader context of performativity described above. Liam highlighted elements of the professional, situated and external context combining to shape his approach:

Getting some of the best GCSE results in the school has its benefits. We're successful in what we're currently doing so I don't have massive issues with Ofsted and the senior leadership team. I've kind of got a bit of freedom to make my own decisions about setting. I suppose I probably get a bit more say because I'm Head of Department too.

This relative autonomy extended to other PE teachers at Oakside being able to enact some aspects of setting policy in accordance with their personal and professional histories and their dispositions towards teaching and learning. For example, Charlene took care to avoid using the labels of top, middle and bottom in talking about differences between students in PE and Andrew stressed that he avoided using these labels in talking with students. Charlene and Andrew also drew on their personal experiences of setting as students and teachers in using within-class ability grouping in setted PE lessons, with the goal of avoiding the potential negative impacts of setting on students' self-esteem and motivation. Charlene explained:

It's not official policy, but me and [Andrew] group the students within sets. It's a bit more flexible that way and means we can move them around as much as we like in a less formal way.

It was thus clear that the personal and professional dispositions of individual PE teachers in the department resulted in differences in how setting policy was enacted in different PE lessons in the school. All were, however, acting within the overarching frame of an approach to setting that was firmly oriented towards maintaining school and subject status in line with externally driven expectations.

### **Burnway: relative freedom, gender, social class and 'choice'**

In contrast to the pressures emphasised at Oakside, PE teachers at Burnway expressed relative comfort and distance from external imperatives. With other subjects seen as the focus for the school and the school also having been rated as 'good' in its recent Ofsted inspection, the PE department felt a comfortable degree of autonomy in their work, and specifically decisions about setting. The Head of Department explained that:

We just get left alone to be honest. So, we can make our own decisions about setting. I think it's probably because there's an attitude that we're just PE and we're not as important as other subjects in the school. (Stephen)

The physical layout of the school, meaning that the PE department was located away from the main school building and that lessons took place in areas 'out of sight' of the school leadership team, added to the PE teachers' sense of autonomy in their approach to setting. One of the teachers explained:

We're separate from the rest of the school. You'll have noticed that our PE office is situated away from the main building. It's the same with our sports hall and our fields. We can try different things in PE because we don't have the senior leadership team checking up on us all the time. (Mark)

The school ethos and culture were, nevertheless, clearly influential in shaping the enactment of setting policy in PE at Burnway. Burnway was committed to empowering students to make decisions about their learning and PE teachers frequently spoke of the importance of enacting policies in ways that were consistent with this emphasis. This was also an instance, however, where gender discourses

came to the fore, with different grouping arrangements enacted for boys and girls at Burnway. The teachers responsible for girls' PE deemed that mixed-ability grouping was preferable for the girls at Burnway. The relative autonomy that they had in policy enactment enabled them to adopt a very different approach to that applied for boys.

With regard to the setting arrangements for boys at Burnway, the Head of Department explained that:

The ethos of the school is about choice and we make sure we do this in how we set the boys in PE. We allow them to choose their set for PE lessons. (Stephen)

PE teachers explained that they encouraged boys to choose their set based on their perceived ability in PE and where they would feel most comfortable for PE lessons. This was a public exercise with boys indicating their preferred set by sitting in one of two lines in the sports hall. For example, Stephen noted:

We just sit them in the sports hall and tell them to pick either set 1 or set 2. So, we tell them to go where they think they would be best placed ability-wise and where they would feel most comfortable. Once they've decided, they just sit in the line for set 1 or set 2.

Stephen and two other teachers in the PE department explained that this approach was designed to encourage boys to take ownership and responsibility for their set placement in PE, and thereby also make them less likely to want to move. This was an important consideration because movement between sets was constrained by professional and material factors in the school:

I suppose it also means that we can tell them that they made the decision and they need to be sticking with it. It's good for them because it gives them responsibility, but it also helps us out because it means they aren't asking to change every week. We don't have the time or space to move them all the time. (Stephen, Head of Department)

Notably, further probing revealed that setting processes were more complex and nuanced than initially reported in PE at Burnway, with PE teachers' conceptions of ability actively influencing the formation of sets for boys. As Mark's comments below indicate, PE teachers viewed the boys' tendency to make decisions based on friendships as problematic because sets would then contain boys of markedly different (physical) abilities in PE. To avoid this situation arising, Stephen, Thomas and Mark explained that they would intervene, advising boys about the appropriate set 'choice' to make. The enactment of setting policy for boys in PE thus reflected these teachers' perceptions about ability in PE, over and above student agency or their choice of where they felt comfortable as learners. Mark explained that:

Most of the time they just pick friendship groups. So, we keep a close eye on them when they are picking their sets and we guide them and move them around a bit if we think that set isn't going to be suited to them. We have a good idea who our physically able students are because we don't use setting until Year 8. (Mark)

Stephen, Thomas and Mark privileged a narrow conceptualisation of ability in PE, centring on sport-related motor skills, including throwing, catching and running, as demonstrated in competitive team sports. The use of motor skills and physical fitness tests in Year 7 reaffirmed this emphasis and informed their judgements about boys' abilities in PE:

We do a range of motor skills and fitness tests with them in Year 7. So, we kind of know what set they should be in for Year 8. (Thomas)

Situated factors, and specifically the socio-economic demographic of Burnway's school population also came into play, further shaping PE teachers' decisions about setting. Mark explained the ways in which setting decisions reflected different expectations about the behaviour, attitude and potential attainment of students from different class backgrounds:

Most of our students are from deprived backgrounds, but we've also got some from middle-class backgrounds. You can kind of look at their backgrounds with setting. The one's from more middle-class backgrounds tend to be more engaged and don't give you as much trouble. They've been invested in from an early age and have a head start.

## **Sandwest: pressure, prescription and measurement in setting in PE**

As a school with student attainment in GCSE examinations well below national targets and designated as 'requires improvement', Sandwest was under scrutiny from the LEA and Ofsted. Echoing previous national government pronouncements, setting was being encouraged by the LEA and Ofsted as a mechanism to improve standards. One of the PE teachers described their situation:

The message coming from the local authority and meetings with Ofsted is that they want us to use setting to improve standards in the school. We just need to do what we're told really. If we do, we're more likely to get a better grade. (Charlotte)

James, the Head of Department, reaffirmed the link being made between setting and school-wide improved performance in GCSE results, with the consequence that all subjects in the school curriculum were expected to adhere to a policy of setting students from Year 7 to 11 and use some form of assessment to allocate students to sets:

The school is working hard to improve GCSE results, particularly A\* to C grades. So, all subjects have had to move away from mixed-ability grouping. We've been told that we have to use setting in all lessons with all year groups and use some kind of testing to put students into sets.

James and other PE teachers at Sandwest further explained the structure and scrutiny established for setting, with the senior leadership team having formulated guidelines, and an accompanying system of checks, to ensure that policies were being enacted in a coordinated and consistent manner in the school:

We've even got a list of guidelines to make sure we're doing what the leadership team wants us to do. They check up on us by watching us teach and we have to report back to them in weekly meetings. (James, Head of Department)

In this context, PE teachers at Sandwest clearly felt pressured to follow the path stipulated by the school leadership team and recognised that doing so meant compromising their own professional beliefs and values. James, Susan and Charlotte were concerned about the labelling and stigmatising effects of setting students from the outset of secondary school and were keen to postpone setting until Year 8. James commented:

A few of us aren't keen on putting them in sets as soon as we get them in Year 7. That's what the leadership team want us to do though.

While feeling these internal and external pressures, the PE teachers also acknowledged that the lower status of PE, in comparison to some subjects, meant that they retained some autonomy in relation to setting. Susan noted their capacity to determine the criteria for allocation to sets and movement between sets:

We're under pressure, but probably less so than other subjects in the school. We're not as important as English, maths and science so there's a few things we can get away with. The leadership team doesn't really tell us what criteria to use or how often we have to move them. We're just told that we need to use some kind of assessment.

Other comments indicated, however, the extent to which an expectation that the assessment in PE that informed setting would involve explicit measurement, led to particular discourses and practices being privileged in the enactment of setting policy. Specifically, the department's assessment of 'ability' comprised a series of tests of physical fitness and performance:

It's just a range of baseline tests really. So, we measure their cardiovascular and muscular endurance, their speed, strength and coordination. It means that we can allocate students to groups more accurately than if we were to observe them ourselves. (Charlotte)

As in other schools, situated and material aspects of context further impacted the enactment of setting policy in PE at Sandwest, particularly in relation to group sizes and the scope for movement

of students between sets. With a falling roll, the school had increasingly experienced funding cuts for failing to meet enrolment targets, which resulted in deteriorating facilities and poor resources. With limited indoor space particularly (a sports hall the size of three badminton courts), some PE lessons were conducted in the school canteen. Space constraints meant that it was critical to create and maintain sets of similar size. Charlotte explained:

The facilities in the school are crap. Sometimes we have to share them with other groups too. If you've got two groups of girls using half of the sports hall you can't have 30 in one group and 10 in the other.

Any students moving from one set to another usually had to be replaced by other students from the set they were moving to, and movement between sets was consequently rare:

We've got to maintain relatively equal-sized groups, or it would just get out of hand. There isn't really the space to move them [students] around. So, there's only so much shifting around we can do. (James, Head of Department)

## Discussion

The three case studies served to illustrate notably different ways in which setting policy was being enacted in PE. The data also revealed variation within, not merely between, schools in this regard. Multiple factors were shown to influence different approaches to setting and the adoption of different criteria in setting decisions in PE. More specifically, the varied enactment of setting policy within and across the three schools reflected the collective impact of school-specific factors, including culture and ethos, facilities for PE, and the educational philosophies of individual PE teachers. In relation to the latter, the data presented illustrated teachers as policy actors, variously pursuing opportunities amidst enactment and, correspondingly, experiencing constraints. Teachers' actions and school-level influences spanning the situated, material and professional dimensions of context, were themselves clearly mediated by features of the wider education policy context and by established dominant discourses in PE relating to ability and gender particularly. These external dimensions of context collectively legitimised teachers adopting particular approaches to enacting setting policy in PE in the case study schools and limited consideration of alternatives.

### *Autonomy amidst accountability*

As discussed above, we noted Ball et al.'s (2011) distinction between imperative/disciplinary policies and exhortative/developmental policies and identified setting policy in England with the latter. While the enactment of setting in PE at Oakside and Burnway reflected this relative flexibility, the teachers at Sandwest reflected that for them, setting was more characteristic of imperative/disciplinary policies. Further, we note that a collection of imperative/disciplinary policies, relating specifically to the inspection of schools, reporting frameworks and measures employed for school performance and funding, served as a critical frame of reference for setting policy in all of the schools. In this regard, our data reaffirmed the need for policy research to engage with direct and more subtle linkages between policies, and the intended and unintended consequences of one set of policies for the development and enactment of others (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2011). Data from teachers at Oakside and Sandwest also signalled the cumulative impact over time that broader neo-liberal education policies had on the school context in both material and professional terms, and consequently on the enactment of setting. At Oakside, the enactment of setting reflected pressures to maintain status and funding associated with Specialist Sports College designation, while at Sandwest, the enactment of setting sought to counter a downward spiral for the school in performance, standing, enrolments and funding.

Both across and within schools, differences in the enactment of setting also reflected individual teachers, and Heads of Department particularly, mediating both external and internal agendas and demands in the light of personal professional values. Findings illustrated that PE teachers were far

more than ciphers who simply implemented setting policy in a homogenous, sequential and unproblematic manner (Ball et al., 2011, 2012). Instead, they actively interpreted and enacted this policy in a manner that reflected their understandings of the constraints and opportunities of their local contexts and, relatedly, existing norms and conceptualisations of ability. At Sandwest, teachers' capacities to exercise agency in this respect varied and was openly constrained. At Burnway, relative freedom from internal and external accountability saw gender discourses being privileged in the enactment of setting in PE. Here, and across all schools, the data also illustrated the ongoing dominance of narrow conceptualisations of ability in PE. This study thus reaffirmed Ball et al. (2012) observation that 'policy enactment is inflected by competing sets of values and ethics' and the need (certainly in PE research) to draw out the 'values-talk' in data (p. 10).

### ***Setting, 'ability' and equity in PE***

This study also provided important insight into issues of equity and opportunity amidst the enactment of setting policy in PE. The abilities being recognised and used as the basis for setting decisions in PE in the case study schools were notably narrow and grounded in discourses of sport performance, fitness and competition. PE teachers primarily understood ability and attainment in PE in relation to students' performance of specific motor skills and physical fitness tests, and their application of these in competitive sport settings. We suggest that the data points to the need to interrogate assumptions inherent in the practices being used to inform setting, including the validity of particular tests in relation to ability in PE and the relative value that tests, observations and assessment more broadly in PE accords to particular skills, knowledge, understandings and movement contexts. Indeed, we echo Nadeau et al. (2008) in acknowledging the challenges of designing assessment and identifying measures that align with physical, psychomotor and cognitive domains of learning in PE. Nevertheless, the relative absence of assessment practices that clearly speak to breadth in learning and participation, together with the framing of ability with reference to social and demographic factors (including behaviour, gender and socio-economic background), raised concerns in relation to both quality and equity in assessment in PE (Hay & Penney, 2009, 2013).

Setting policy, as enacted in PE in the case study schools, was also shown to give rise to inequity in relation to the learning opportunities that students in different sets had access to within the curriculum, in extra-curricular activities (including after-school clubs), and in relation to academic and career pathways (through selective access to GCSE PE). This study reaffirmed findings in other educational research that point to the permanency of set allocation (Croston, 2014; Marks, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019). In all three case study schools, there was clearly limited scope for students to move between sets once assigned. The sustained impact of setting, as indicated at Oakside particularly, thus further prompts equity concerns to be at the fore of setting policy and research in PE. A hope arising from this research is that directing attention to the enactment of setting may facilitate renewed professional reflection and debate about grouping strategies and teaching approaches in PE.

### **Conclusion: researching setting in PE from an enactment perspective**

This study has illustrated the complex, combined and multi-layered influence of various aspects of context (Ball et al., 2012). It also particularly revealed the multi-faceted nature of the external context, with broader and parallel policy agendas and imperatives, and dominant subject discourses and practices, variously shaping setting in PE. The inter-relationships between dimensions, and between different elements within any dimension, are critical to understanding 'context' as it relates to the enactment of setting policy in PE and are an important focus for future research. Findings from this study also raise interesting and important questions about how changes in contextual factors, such as the school or department leadership, school enrolment and/or Ofsted inspection rating, may affect the enactment of setting across a school, and in PE specifically. At the same

time, our findings draw attention to the sustained influence of established discourses and practices in PE. Furthermore, while foregrounding context, the data also reaffirms that individual teachers are by no means passive in policy enactment. Different value positions in relation to ability in PE, alongside different degrees of agency, were evident and ultimately important in shaping the impact of setting policy for students in PE. We suggest that longitudinal research is needed to facilitate a values focus (see also Ball et al., 2011) and to enable studies to appropriately reflect that while some aspects of school context remain relatively stable over long periods of time (such as facilities for PE), other aspects are more fluid. We also see merit in expanding the research to look at the enactment of setting in PE across a broader range of schools and in contrasting external contexts internationally. Finally, we note that it is also important for future research to bring to the fore the relational aspects of policy (Ball et al., 2011, 2012) in considering the enactment of setting policy in PE from the perspectives of other stakeholders, including the head teacher, the senior leadership team, and parents, and to expand work seeking to capture the views of students on this important issue (see Wilkinson & Penney, 2020).

## Notes

1. Ofsted is an independent body responsible for inspecting and regulating schools in England.
2. In England, primary school students are generally aged between 4 and 11 years old and secondary school students between 11 and 18 years old.
3. In relation to school type, one of the schools included in the study was a Specialist Sports College. Specialist Sports Colleges were introduced in 1997 as part of the Specialist Schools Programme in England (DfEE, 1997). Primarily, Specialist Sports Colleges aim to raise academic and sporting standards of achievement in PE and school sport (DfEE, 1997, 2001). Although the Specialist Schools Programme ended in 2010, some schools in England have retained their Specialist Sports College status.
4. Schools can be rated as outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate by Ofsted inspectors.
5. A\*, A, B and C are the range of GCSE grades incorporated in targets and league tables in England and Wales. They are considered 'good passes' in GCSE examinations.

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