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1 **Exploring the PE contexts and experiences of girls who challenge gender** 2 **norms in a progressive secondary school**

3 **Abstract**

4 The relationship between masculinity and sports that is naturalized and reproduced
5 in PE settings has been well-documented, highlighting contexts that privilege
6 certain boys, limit girls and where many teachers view girls as a problem to be
7 fixed. However, social norms regarding what constitutes feminism, gender and
8 sexism are changing, which may impact the experiences of girls in PE. Drawing on
9 data from an ethnographic case study, this paper explores the experiences in PE of
10 girls who resist traditional feminine identities within a progressive school context.
11 In doing so, we aim to understand how this shift in social norms relating to their
12 gendered identities is played out in context. Guided by Foucault's work around the
13 disciplining nature of power, our analysis revealed several interrelated discursive
14 and structural barriers that limited these girls' learning and opportunities in PE, a
15 surprising finding given the progressive ethos claimed by the school. We conclude
16 by suggesting changes that might make PE truly 'progressive' for all students.

17

18 **Keywords:** gender, physical education, social power, resistance, equality

19 **Introduction**

20 Girls disengagement from Physical Education (PE) has been highlighted as a
21 problem widely researched over the past 40 years (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010;
22 Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Hills & Croston, 2012; Oliver & Kirk, 2015). Much
23 research has been done to determine the hurdles that girls face in PE, such as
24 aversion to sweat and dirt, displeasure with PE uniforms and concerns regarding
25 body issues (Mitchell, Gray, & Inchley, 2015). Although research has also
26 attempted to improve the experiences of girls in PE (Oliver & Kirk, 2015), little
27 seems to have changed in practice (Scraton, 2018). This is interesting in light of the
28 social changes that have taken place in western cultures since the 1990's, relating to
29 more progressive attitudes towards gender and sexuality in some sporting contexts
30 (Magrath, 2018). In the present study, this raises two important issues. Firstly, it
31 questions the relevance of previous research to the working lives of teachers and
32 the PE experiences of girls. Secondly, it suggests that liberal attitudes evident in

1 some sporting (and other cultural) contexts, for example greater acceptance of
2 diverse gender identities, may not have penetrated the values, beliefs and practices
3 of teachers. It important, therefore, to explore the experiences of girls in PE in
4 contemporary times. Specifically, this research seeks to explore the experiences in
5 PE of a group of adolescent girls who challenge normative constructions of gender.
6 Furthermore, the girls who are the focus of this study attend a UK school that self-
7 identifies as progressive, in other words, a school that claims to prioritise and
8 promote respect and diversity. We employ the theoretical lenses of Foucault to
9 analyse the relations of power evident in the PE context and how girls performed
10 their identities in non-normative and complex ways.

11 *Understanding the lived experiences of girls in schools and physical*
12 *education*

13 Previous research that has explored girls' participation in PE draws attention
14 to the ways in which socially constructed norms around masculinity and
15 femininity shape the curriculum, and limit opportunities for girls in PE and in
16 schools more widely (Evans, 2006; Fisette, 2013; Wright & Burrows, 2006).
17 Therefore, while exploring the lives and experiences of individual students is
18 important, their lives cannot be separated from the wider social and cultural
19 processes evident in the school context. Schools serve not only as academic
20 learning communities, but also as sites of regulation and reproduction of
21 socially constructed gendered expectations (Connell, 2003). Schools
22 unknowingly help to construct, normalize, inform and define expectations of
23 masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, gender binaries guide ways of
24 organizing, teaching and disciplining in the classroom (Hey, 1997). In this
25 way, students learn to forge their identities and their place and power in their

1 local school cultures (Paechter, 2007). As traditional norms of femininity
2 suggest that girls should be passive, compassionate and conforming, girls are
3 confronted with social pressures to hide, downplay, or deny; rather than
4 embrace and celebrate their achievements (Gill & Scharff, 2011). This can be
5 evident in all school spaces, but especially in PE, a ‘gender saturated’
6 (Flintoff, Fitzgerald, & Scraton, 2008) and often gender-differentiated site.

7 Applying Foucault’s concepts of the disciplining nature of relational power
8 to the production of gender and other identities, provides an effective framework
9 from which to view how gender identities are re-produced and how masculine and
10 male performances are privileged (Hill, 2009). It is important to point out that
11 gender identities are not fixed, they are temporary and fluid, constantly shifting and
12 changing based on the influential, reflexive power of individuals situated in time
13 and space (Foucault, 1991). However, in PE spaces, dominant discourses of sport,
14 success, ability, masculinity and femininity give shape to rules and practices, and
15 are taken up as social truths. The regulation of gender identities also dictates access
16 to culturally and historically driven forms of power through the relationship of
17 knowledge, power and gender. In PE, privileging of masculinities results in the
18 subordination of femininities as oppression and privilege exist in binary relation
19 (Hill Collins, 1990). This positioning not only dictates the degree of power the
20 individual is allowed, but also impacts their sense of identity, view of reality and
21 future potential (Samuels et al., 2008). In PE, this can lead those who embody
22 feminine identities to believe that this is not a space where they belong or where
23 they can experience success.

24 The very notion of success in PE is highly permeated by naturalized
25 discourses of the superiority of the male body. Even the conceptualization of ability

1 in PE is not neutral, but masculine, as it is strongly associated with the ability to
2 perform those activities valued in the PE field, such as sports and competitive team
3 games (Evans, 2006; Wright & Burrows, 2006). Indeed, many PE teachers enter the
4 profession because of their sporting achievements (Brown, 2005), embodying
5 particular gendered dispositions that are reinforced through teacher education and
6 within school practice. Therefore, they are part of a vicious circle (Brown, 2005)
7 that reinforces the importance of (masculine) ability and performance through their
8 own beliefs, practices and curriculum activities. Team games especially tend to
9 dominate the curriculum and naturalize gender differences to justify the social order
10 of male dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Those girls who attempt to
11 access this space can be actively policed and subject to social exclusion if they
12 demonstrate their competency. These same discourses also reward girls who
13 embrace gender norms, offering activities such as dance and yoga based on the
14 assumption that they align with their femininity and will enhance their engagement
15 (Fisette, 2013). Teachers, therefore, act as mediators in the reproduction of what
16 counts as legitimate knowledge, performance and embodiment in PE (Brown,
17 2005). This process is supported by the agency they are afforded to interpret and
18 enact curriculum (MacLean et al. 2015), agency which is implicitly informed by
19 previous sports experiences and gender normative identities.

20 Importantly, not all girls are the same, and therefore, not all girls will
21 experience PE in similar ways. Flintoff et al. (2008) highlight the need to
22 understand individual experiences and how different girls negotiate and
23 respond to the ways in which gender is constructed and enacted in school
24 settings. For many girls, this inferior position may be incongruent with their
25 own concepts of their capability and self-efficacy (Azzarito, Solmon, &

1 Harrison, 2006). Therefore, their lack of interest in PE may be more reflection
2 of their disinterest in negotiating and challenging gender discourses than the
3 avoidance of curriculum activities (Oliver, 2010). For other girls, resistance to
4 PE may represent their fight against traditional gender norms and for more
5 current forms of social equality than are offered in these more traditionally
6 gendered environments. In some cases, girls' refusals to comply to traditional
7 gender expectations has the potential to destabilize and displace the
8 naturalization of these gender discourses (Azzarito et al., 2006; Hills &
9 Croston, 2012). However, when girls do attempt to resist the expectations of
10 passivity and compliance, they can be seen by teachers as problematic,
11 risking the label of rebel or 'bad girl' (Rich, 2004).

12 Young people today challenge gender boundaries and celebrate difference.
13 However, structural barriers remain and continue to create persistent and shared
14 challenges for girls and women in their day to day lives, despite these progressive
15 attitudes and neoliberal ideals (Flintoff, Fitzgerald & Scraton, 2008). Drawing from
16 the work of Brah (1994) and Archer, Hutchings and Leathwood (2001), Flintoff et
17 al. (2008) suggest that for feminist research to make any discernable impact on the
18 lives of girls in schools, researchers need to consider the wider structures that exert
19 power, how they manifest in practice and how girls interact, negotiate and
20 challenge them. They refer to middle-ground theory which draws from post-
21 structural thinking around power, diversity and difference, but also pays attention to
22 the material structures that create social inequalities (Flintoff et al., 2008; Scraton,
23 2018). From this perspective, we can extend our knowledge of difference by
24 understanding the contexts in which difference is embraced or denied. This offers
25 opportunities to learn from and challenge the inequalities that girls face in schools

1 and create inclusive contexts that support a range of gender identities.
2 Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to explore the PE contexts and
3 experiences of young women in contemporary times. To do so, we situate our work
4 within a self-identified 'progressive' UK school, with a particular focus on a group
5 of girls who disrupt traditional gender expectations in PE. Thus, the following
6 research questions are addressed: What meanings do the girls performing
7 alternative femininities make of their experiences in PE? What are the contexts of
8 those experiences within a progressive school?

9 **Methodology**

10 This research forms part of a larger study that explored the wider school
11 experiences of a group of girls that perform alternative feminine identities, students
12 identified as girls at birth, attending a UK secondary school. The term 'girls' is used
13 in this paper to describe the participants as a group. This was instead chosen out of
14 respect for the participants' experience as it is the term they mostly use to describe
15 themselves or the group they are constructed within. However, we acknowledge
16 that the girls' individual experiences of gender remain fluid and changing,
17 challenging universalistic notions of femininity and providing a more nuanced and
18 complexed understanding of gender (Butler, 1999).

19 To address the research questions, a six month qualitative study using an
20 ethnographic design was conducted. Throughout the data collection phase, the
21 researcher (first author) was positioned as a non-participant observer. Serving as an
22 ethnographic tool, the researcher endeavored to provide an accurate reflection of
23 data through interpretation and analysis that represents the participants' voices. The
24 ethnographic narrative was approached in the tradition of an anthropologic
25 outsider's perspective, unfamiliar with and not immersed in the specifics of the

1 local cultural knowledge. As a North American, female adult, the researcher was
2 not just an outsider to this school, but to the UK schooling system as well.

3 The University's ethical procedures were adhered to and permission granted by the
4 ethics committee. The participants were informed about the aims of the research,
5 the nature of their involvement and how the data generated would be used.

6 Informed consent forms were signed by participants and parents/guardians, and all
7 participants were informed that anonymity was guaranteed.

8 ***Research setting***

9 The setting was a state funded secondary, non-denominational community school
10 of more than 1000 students, located in the UK. This school was selected because it
11 self-identifies as 'progressive', publicly claiming to embrace a strong ethos of
12 diversity and openly encouraging all students to be, for example, confident,
13 respectful, and appreciative of a culturally diverse world. The teaching staff are
14 encouraged to be reflective and to adopt varied and student-centred teaching
15 approaches. This school site discontinued student uniforms in the early 1990s to
16 allow for diversity in dress. The school building is relatively new and had only
17 been occupied from the academic year of this study. Consequently, this was a
18 modern school, with open-plan and bright spaces, installation of the latest
19 technology for learning and non-gendered toilets.

20 ***Data Sources and Participants***

21 *Participant observation*

22 Three months were spent observing this progressive school community, to
23 understand the material structures of the school and to view how gender became an

1 intersectional influence in the construction of power hierarchies within this space.
2 Observations included regular and multiple classroom activities and subjects,
3 lunchtime activities, between classroom passing times, assemblies, sporting
4 activities and after school clubs. Information such as location, individual
5 descriptions including information on social positionings, classroom activities,
6 verbal and non-verbal communications, agentic action or power, were documented
7 in fieldnotes with a shifting focus between individuals and classroom dynamics. As
8 the importance of space and its complex relationship with power and identities
9 began to emerge, more ‘middle-grounding’ focus was given to how identities are
10 often negotiated and constructed around location (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Early
11 in the research process, it became clear that PE spaces were often divided as ‘ours’
12 and ‘theirs’ allocated by gender categories (Tyler & Cohen, 2010). For this reason,
13 several weeks of observation were spent in the PE department for a total of 14
14 classroom observations in a variety of PE lessons such as team, individual and
15 aesthetic sports ranging in levels from S1 up to S6 (students aged 12-18). The
16 observations from this PE space form the focus of the current investigation.

17 *Focus groups*

18 As the observational phase progressed, interview questions were formulated, and
19 potential focus group participants were identified. Students were selected from a
20 variety of contexts including regular and multiple classroom activities and subjects,
21 lunchtime activities, assemblies and sporting activities. A total of 23 students were
22 selected to participate in this research phase based on observable actions that
23 suggested they may be resisting traditional femininities. These included, for
24 example, resisting activities which unfairly privilege boys, questioning the
25 undervaluation of girls’ participation and the lack of representation of girls in

1 certain settings. All participants were aware that they were participating in a study
2 on gender equality. Six focus groups ranging in number of participants from two to
3 six members were arranged around the participants' free time, and were conducted
4 in different schools spaces (e.g. the open break area, available classrooms). The
5 girls were asked open-ended questions in a semi-structured format to allow data to
6 emerge through individual responses in a comfortable, conversational way to relate
7 the stories that have caused them tension or anxiety regarding gender in their
8 educational settings. Generalized questions (e.g. 'What is a typical girl like at this
9 school?') expanded to more specific questions about how they understood and
10 identified themselves and what positions they consider available to them. Three of
11 the focus groups interviews included discussions about specific PE contexts and
12 experiences, thus generating data to inform the present study.

13 *Individual interviews*

14 Eight students were chosen for individual interviews based on their
15 advanced understanding around the social construction of gender. The individual
16 interviews were semi-structured with broad, open-ended questions such as: 'What
17 is your opinion of school uniforms?' and 'What is the aspect you most value about
18 your school?'. The girls were asked to give examples of when they felt empowered
19 and who or what helped to support them as well as questions about how they came
20 to occupy and defend the positions they choose. Of the eight students who were
21 individually interviewed, five participants talked explicitly about their experience in
22 PE.

23 In both the focus group and individual interviews, where explicit reference
24 was made to experiences in PE, all of the girls except for one were white, middle-
25 class, aged between 14-18 years, identified as female and believed that they were

1 recognized as such in their community. However, one student, Sheena is a black,
2 third culture, female identifying who was born in Uganda and now resides in the
3 UK with her adoptive mother.

4 The researcher also engaged in informal discussions with all the six PE
5 teachers in the department (three male and three female), and the principal PE
6 teacher, Mr. Knight (pseudonym), a 40-year old male who had been teaching for
7 ten years, took part in a semi-structured interview. This interview was designed to
8 explore the influence of their expectations of, and behaviour towards pupils,
9 regarding gender construction and how it emerges and is mediated in the classroom.
10 It also helped to gain deeper insights into the whole culture and context of the
11 school.

12 Focus group and individual interviews lasted between 45 – 90 minutes
13 based on the availability and discretion of the participants. All the data were
14 recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim.

15 *Analysis*

16 Poststructural theory suggest that people are not socialized or actively or passively
17 shaped into their world, but instead are socially organized through the common
18 factor of language. Because language does not reflect an already given social
19 reality, but rather constitutes social reality for us (de Saussure, 2011) it is necessary
20 to understand the relationship between language, subjectivity and power located
21 within social institutions. Utilizing Foucault's (1982) concept of discursive fields
22 and the structuring principles of a range of competing meanings, this research
23 considered forms of social organization and the girls' contestation or acceptance of
24 the social and political consequences (Weedon,1997). The researcher reflected on

1 the girls lived experiences flowing through the thick description of the data and
2 analysis, as themes interconnected, forming a relational web. Contextual analysis of
3 the influence of discursive formations and the corresponding relational power is
4 utilised to explore how the girls understand their PE experiences within their school
5 context.

6 **Results**

7 The results of this study reveal several interrelated discursive and structural barriers
8 that limited the girls' learning and opportunities in PE, a surprising finding given
9 the progressive ethos claimed by the school. Four major themes emerged: limited
10 and gendered choices and opportunities for girls; their restricted access to
11 discourses of success in PE; the unequal resources and social representation for
12 girls; and the teachers' lack of awareness of their own gender expectations in PE.

13

14 *Limited and gendered choices and opportunities for girls*

15 In this progressive school, PE lessons were usually organized to offer 'choice' as a
16 pedagogical strategy to cater for the preferences of both boys and girls. For
17 example, in a PE rugby class that was observed, the students were given the option
18 of participating in full contact rugby training or noncontact rugby. All the boys in
19 the class chose full contact rugby while only three girls joined this modality. These
20 choices are based on a gendered understanding of sport and invariably result in
21 single-sex learning environments. Here, binary concepts of male/female,
22 strength/weakness become sorting categories for team membership, policing the
23 discourse that strong, active, sweaty bodies are a masculine performance while
24 aesthetic, feminine displays of nonaggressive skill constraint girls' bodies. In this
25 school, although choices are provided, the male superiority in the social hierarchy

1 in PE is reinforced through the hegemony of competitive sport within the
2 curriculum (Hill, 2015; Wright & Burrows, 2006). This highlights the teacher's
3 power to construct and reinforce gender norms that privilege masculine
4 performances, while simultaneously marginalising feminine performances (Wrench
5 and Garret, 2017). Although this social practice is often offered under the guise of
6 keeping girls interested (Paechter, 2007), it instead works discursively to normalize
7 and embed the masculine entitlement to team sports while limiting the movement
8 experiences of girls.

9 Those girls who choose to participate in male-dominated sports can be
10 subject to rejection or aggression based on the omnipresent, relational nature of
11 power (Foucault, 1982). For example, the three girls who chose to participate in full
12 contact rugby were not passed the ball and had few opportunities to contribute to
13 the game. This was evidenced in the following fieldnote:

14 As the girls reached the front of the line to catch the ball in their turn,
15 they fruitlessly sought eye contact with their passing teammates. Each
16 time, the boys 'blanked' them, refusing to meet their gaze and pretending
17 that they weren't a part of their group, only acknowledging their male
18 teammates in what appeared to be a passive relational display of social
19 value.

20 The boys' collectively organized behavior controls and limits the girls'
21 participation in order to mobilize the power of the social hierarchy. The absence of
22 intervention by the PE teacher then provides structural legitimization and
23 normalization for the boys' masculine behavior. This story also exposes the
24 relational nature of power as it is produced on multiple levels: personally, culturally
25 and institutionally (Foucault, 1982). When asked about the boys' refusal to include
26 the girls in the rugby game, the PE teacher suggested that the girls would need to
27 work harder to prove themselves to the boys and earn their own inclusion. This
28 teacher's unconscious support of this gendered hierarchy, reinforces Foucault's

1 (1991) suggestion that it is our inability to recognize, reflect on and disrupt these
2 naturalized norms as potentially unnatural that drives the unconscious policing of
3 disciplined gender compliance.

4 This focus on individual effort is coherent with current neoliberal
5 postfeminist discourse of opportunity that fails to account for persistent inequalities
6 that limit opportunities for girls, regardless of their efforts (Gill & Scharff, 2011).
7 The teacher's response reinforces the gender hierarchy by supporting the boys'
8 entitlement to power and dominance as well as the construction of the girls as
9 subordinate in the game context (Fagrell, Larsson & Redelius, 2012). This is
10 despite the fact that one of the girls, Sheena, a fifteen-year-old Ugandan student,
11 had an obvious desire and drive to play and was a very competent athlete. As
12 described in the following fieldnote:

13 But Sheena did not seem to care. She did not search for eye contact.
14 How they judged her, or whether or not they liked her, didn't hold much
15 weight. She was just interested in their ability to pass her the ball. She
16 wasn't there for their approval. It appeared to me that she was there
17 because she loved the game.

18 Despite her advanced movement skills, Sheena does not enter PE with the
19 same social gravitas as the boys, as gender becomes a sorting category evoking
20 power relationships and binary implications (Foucault, 1982). She must fight for
21 legitimacy and inclusion to participation. Sheena reports that her love of sports
22 motivates her efforts to claim her place in PE. In this way, she exercises agency by
23 resisting the normative gender expectations (Fisette, 2013; Hills & Crosston, 2012).
24 Other girls may not have the same drive to sustain their efforts in PE, especially
25 those who are less skilled. Their empowerment may take the form of a boycott,
26 accepting the idea that they are not entitled to participate in these sports. Therefore,
27 they are complicit in adopting their marginalized position within the subject.

1 The girls' discomfort with male domination and aggression was not
2 exclusive to the PE context. For example, Moira, a fourteen-year-old girl, explains
3 how her desire to be physically active out of school is overruled by the male
4 domination in sporting club spaces. She describes herself as 'not the sporty type'
5 and explains how she avoids participation by referring to her experiences accessing
6 rugby and boxing:

7 I do nothing. I just sleep. Honestly, I'm not the sporty type. I hang out
8 with friends. If I were to do one sport .. I think actually .. rugby .. but
9 I'm not on a team because there are more boys really on the rugby team.
10 I was trying to find a boxing class to sign up to, and I was searching
11 boxing classes for girls. And there is none that came up. It said all ..
12 'boys boxing' .. 'boys boxing' .. I don't know. I know a couple of
13 boxing places in nearby. All of them are full of boys. They accept
14 girls, but all of them are full of boys. I don't know why. I watched
15 kick boxing, but all of them were boys. I felt uncomfortable..
16

17 Moira learns to identify with the hegemonic social narratives of femininity
18 that construct her as an outsider in sport. She is aware that she lacks the power to be
19 recognized as legitimate in this masculinized space. Consequently, she disengages
20 from such activity and learns to identify herself as an inactive being. Unfortunately,
21 such social narratives are also evident in the PE context, reinforcing her 'not the
22 sporty type' identity (Fagrell et al., 2012).

23 As girls, like Sheena, choose to compete regardless of the gendered
24 consequences, their brave acts of resistance can be read as agentic and potentially
25 self-emancipating as they fight to disrupt the fixed and naturalized understanding of
26 the gender hierarchy in PE. However, such resistance is extremely difficult for
27 many girls based on their diverse identities and material barriers such as lack of
28 choice, teams, and resources. In the face of such challenges, it is easy to see why
29 many girls 'choose' either to accept their position in a more 'feminine' space or

1 avoid participation altogether as refusal becomes their point of resistance through a
2 network of capillary power (Foucault, 1991).

3

4 ***Restricted access to discourses of success for girls***

5 Gender in PE acts as a regulating force that governs the space and performances
6 available to girls, policed by a focus on their physical presentation while their
7 bodies are expected to remain controlled and constrained (Hill, 2015). Boys in this
8 space are expected to be muscular, athletic and able. Girls who attempt to display or
9 celebrate their athletic skills are often labelled as ‘show offs’, a form of discursive
10 policing that can censure girls to limit their expectations in PE. As Sheena
11 highlights:

12 You don’t ever show off your own accomplishments if you’re in the
13 sport like .. hall. Boys can show off more, because they’re less
14 emotional about it. So their friends will be like, ‘Yea, yea, yea .. okay
15 show off!’
16

17 Larisa, a highly gifted, athletic student who plays on her school basketball
18 team, as well as two National teams, tells the following story of her difficulty
19 celebrating her success in sports and how she chooses to limit her athletic skills in
20 PE, to avoid policing discourses:

21 People are like, ‘You’re good at everything!’ because I focus on like two
22 sports. I am quite like .. adequate at most. Cricket and basketball. So like, I
23 play them at a really high level, but I can pick up sports quite quickly and I
24 think like it’s hard because I know the girls mean it, but they don’t mean it
25 what they say. So I never used to try in core PE. There is a guy who played
26 basketball for Scotland with me. He’s the cockiest guy in this entire school.
27 He just .. (sound of exasperation) he really annoys me. But he has only
28 achieved half of what I’ve achieved. A lot of people don’t know what I’ve
29 achieved. I never told .. I never told people, so no one really knew that I
30 played cricket for Scotland or basketball for Scotland.
31

32 The limiting narratives of success in sports can become a deterrent to
33 achievement for many girls in PE. Girls who refused to be policed into compliance

1 may run the risk of other sanctions such as questions relating to their
2 heterosexuality or being eliminated from same-sex friendship groups (Connell,
3 2003). As girls learn the limitations of being discursively positioned as ‘successful’
4 in PE, they adjust their expectations to these limitations that allow success but only
5 within a framework of subordination to the hegemonic masculinity (Fagrell et al.,
6 2012). They also may gravitate away from PE to spaces where they can access
7 discourses of success (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001).

8

9 *Unequal resources and social representation for girls*

10 These discourses of masculine success that dominate PE contexts (Hickey, 2008)
11 suggest that gender inequalities are a biological fact rather than a social
12 construction. This is then used as evidence and justification to center boys as
13 successful and offer them greater resources and opportunity (Oliver & Kirk, 2015).
14 This ‘natural order’ and ‘general politics’ of truth (Foucault, 1991) is observed
15 through the disproportionate number of sports teams and resources available to
16 boys, which according to the girls, significantly advantages the boys. In a focus
17 group of three fourteen-year-old girls, Katie states:

18 The boys have so much more squads. The boys have like, under 14s,
19 15s, 16s, 17s, 18s, 19s, 21 Senior. Girls have under 17 and Senior.
20

21 Sheena explains how resources differ based on gender as boys’ team sports
22 are allocated more money, time and space than most activities for girls. She also
23 states that the girls’ basketball team did not even get weekly court time to practice
24 as boys’ teams took priority to that space expanding the gender value disparity
25 outside of the PE class and into the sporting culture of the school. Sixteen-year-old,
26 Karen, describes her experience of gender inequitable opportunities, and how it

1 disrupts her ability to successfully compete with the boys in basketball. She also
 2 explained that the girls petitioned their PE teacher to create a second basketball
 3 class just for the girls, so they would be able to play more and enjoy the game:

4 There are like about 40 students, so we asked if we could have a girls'
 5 class and a boys' class rather than a dance class cause no one wanted to
 6 do dance. And they were like, 'No.' But we were saying that we'd
 7 participate more. That it would be better. But then they were saying,
 8 'You need to be able to interact with the boys.' And we said, 'Yea, but
 9 the boys don't interact with us.'

10
 11 In an interview with the Head of PE, he describes the same lack of equality
 12 in resources based on gender by suggesting that, even though football has become
 13 an emerging sport for girls, there are no Secondary Schools Football Association
 14 teams available to them. He explains that despite the number of girls who are
 15 interested in a joining a football league, the limited number of volunteers and
 16 resources can only currently meet the needs of the boys' league. Here, the school
 17 indicates who it values by who it supports, doing little to disrupt the material
 18 barriers girls' face. The disempowering contexts experienced by the girls in this PE
 19 department are far from progressive and serve as strong social message indicating
 20 their subordinated position in the gender order (Connell, 2005).

21 Another important support to the masculinized hierarchal structure in this
 22 school is the unbalanced and gendered representation of women in sports and
 23 physical activities, which reproduces what happens in media representations more
 24 widely (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005). Here, Sheena talks about the gymnastic
 25 booklet that the PE department constructed as a resource for student learning:

26 So it was small things .. So on the gymnastics booklet, (Sheena pulls a
 27 booklet out of her notebook) because we've done PE gymnastics, all the
 28 gymnastics ones .. they are all girls- (laughs). So gymnastics ..they are
 29 all girls .. and then we have athletics..(Sheena gets another PE booklet
 30 out of notebook.) .. oh wait .. there's a girl! .. but she's doing
 31 gymnastics! (Sheena rolls her eyes and laughs).

32

1
2 Through this complaint, girls make meaning about who is socially valued
3 based on who is discursively represented as legitimate in sporting spaces. Another
4 example was the football booklet, a similar resource to the gymnastics booklet, also
5 designed by the PE department. This booklet had fourteen photos of male athletes,
6 three male silhouettes and only two photos on the back page of teams with anything
7 other than white masculinized males. Furthermore, the team photos which included
8 one white, feminized girl in a group of white, athletic males was next to the
9 description of teamwork, which is considered to be a more feminine trait. There is a
10 naturalized perception that activities like football and rugby are masculine sports,
11 desired and performed only by men; while girls, are better suited to more aesthetic
12 and feminine activities.

13 Such perceptions unconsciously shape the decisions that teachers make and
14 highlight the power they have to reinforce normative conceptions of masculinity
15 and femininity through their PE curriculum and pedagogy. It could be argued that
16 there is an unconscious agenda to steer boys towards activities such as rugby and
17 football, where they can use their bodies in forceful and powerful ways to organize
18 identities through traditional ideas of masculinity (Light, 2007). In contrast, girls
19 are steered towards non-contact activities where they can display their feminine
20 identities through movements that are graceful and controlled. Such discursive
21 messages may influence girls' beliefs regarding their power and skill to engage in
22 certain activities, shaping how they understand their capabilities, their bodies and
23 their future participation choices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

24

25 ***Teachers' lack of awareness of their own gender expectations in PE and school***
26 ***sport***

1 The naturalization of gender inequalities through institutionalised practices and
2 discourses makes it difficult for teachers to see when they are reinforcing these
3 norms and limiting girls' agency and power, even in a school that makes explicit
4 claims about a strong ethos of inclusion and diversity (school website). For
5 example, Mr Knight was surprised when the gendered nature of the teaching
6 booklets was described during an informal discussion. During a more formal
7 interview, he explains his understanding of girls' resistance to participating in team
8 sports:

9
10 We just had a split where we had basketball and dance in higher [certificated
11 PE elective] .. and there are some [more able] girls who have chosen
12 basketball. And already in the first lesson we've got a few girls who...like
13 Jack said to me .. aren't really engaging in the game. This was the first
14 lesson, and right from the start the girls were already saying that the boys are
15 not passing the ball. 'Well we've only just started! You've got to give them
16 a bit of a chance here!' It was like they came in with that barrier already. It
17 was kind of like a learned helplessness, because of a previous poor experience
18 in that activity, 'Well he's not passing the ball.' The barrier is already up
19 when they've gone into that activity, and it's difficult to break that barrier
20 down.

21
22 The characterization of girls as the 'problem' in PE effectively erases the
23 discursive structural barriers that limit and constrain them (Flintoff & Scraton,
24 2001; Scraton, 2018). It suggests instead that resistance is a form of obstinance that
25 can result in a punitive response rather than an agentic counter-discourse worthy of
26 social support. In placing the responsibility for the systemic barriers to success on
27 the girls, this PE teacher fails to recognize their own responsibility to disrupt the
28 masculine power. In contrast, reflecting a neoliberal perspective, the teacher states
29 that they will need to exert more effort to overcome their own self-constructed
30 barriers (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Scraton, 2018). Mr Knight explains:

31 It's a difficult thing to help them with, because they are already going into the
32 activity with a predetermined idea, because it's from previous experience that
33 they have gotten that these boys aren't passing to them .. These boys might

1 not be passing to you, but we need to put in the effort as well. Make sure we
2 are calling for a pass and moving into spaces. It's a really, really difficult
3 one, but these are girls who are excelling at sport that do really, really well, so
4 the barrier for someone who doesn't particularly like sport are huge ..
5 absolutely huge!
6

7 This view reflects teachers' frequent perceptions of girls as the 'problem to
8 be fixed' (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001), and in this school, the primary solution is to
9 separate the girls from the boys through gendered activity choices. This also
10 reflects more traditional, rather than progressive, practice in PE as other studies
11 have previously highlighted (Fagrell et al., 2012; Fisette; 2013). Many teachers
12 have very strong beliefs about effective teaching and learning in PE, often shaped
13 by traditional sport practices and performances (Dowling, 2011). As a result, pupils
14 who do not conform to the teachers' performance expectations (in this case the
15 girls) are classified as low-ability and inferior (Wright & Burrows, 2006). This
16 could also explain why, even in this co-educational class, the girls are not offered
17 truly progressive learning experiences. The persistence of this problem is
18 significant, especially given the wealth of research that has attempted to understand
19 and 'fix' the problem of girls' disengagement in PE (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010;
20 Hills & Croston, 2012; Oliver & Kirk, 2015).

24 **Conclusion**

25 The aim of this research was to explore the PE experiences of girls within the
26 context of a school that self-identifies as progressive. The results from our research
27 indicate that their PE experiences were far from progressive, and that the structural
28 barriers to their learning are more than 'learned helplessness'. The regularly

1 imposed and disparaging gender practices and expectations naturalized in PE limit
2 what the girls can do, what they can learn and their opportunities for success. This
3 is even the case for those girls who have the capacity to understand and/or ignore
4 and resist the restrictive nature of this context. The gendered limitations on
5 resources and opportunities place them in a position where they (dis)engage in a
6 form of PE that does not reflect who they are, or indeed, carries some level of risk
7 for their diverse and complex identities. Importantly, the girls were highly aware of
8 these limitations, frustrated at the teachers' inability to understand or accommodate
9 their desire to take part in a form of PE that represented their gendered and diverse
10 selves.

11 Given the impact that the teacher, the curriculum and pedagogy seem to
12 have on the experiences of the girls in this study, we suggest that attention be
13 directed away from the girls in solving this 'problem' (Scraton, 2018). Instead we
14 suggest a focus on the teacher and question how they might develop their
15 knowledge, pedagogic practices and social awareness to support more diverse and
16 comprehensive concepts of success in PE, and thus align their curriculum and
17 practices more closely with the progressive values of the school. This shift in focus
18 towards the teacher is especially important in light of the discursive gap we
19 identified in relation to how they understood girls' participation in PE. The girls in
20 this study appeared to be much more aware of the oppressive practices in place that
21 limited their opportunities for learning in PE.

22 In order to raise teachers' awareness of the contemporary gender issues in
23 their schools, and to offer them the means of translating this to their everyday lives
24 and practices, we see much promise in the application of transformative or critical
25 pedagogies that aim to empower students to analyse and transform their social

1 realities (Ukpokodu, 2009). Within this orientation, the Activist Approach (Enright
2 & O’Sullivan, 2010; Oliver & Kirk, 2015) is a pedagogical practice that aims to
3 make PE better for girls by providing them the space to ‘identify, critique and
4 negotiate their self-identified barriers to valuing the physically active life’ (Oliver
5 & Kirk, 2015, p 2). Moreover, we need to approach the hidden forms of exclusion
6 that emerge at the intersection of gender and other identity positions (e.g. sexuality,
7 ability) (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2016), and work towards creating safe and
8 empowering spaces for all the students whose identities are far from the hegemonic
9 masculinities that dominate the PE field. In order to support multiples ways of
10 being, it is necessary to legitimize the disruption of gender, sexuality and body
11 norms and the re-articulation of these expressions within PE (Fitzpatrick &
12 McGlashan, 2016). Essential to teachers’ successful uptake of these approaches, is
13 their ability to identify and critique their own gendered perceptions, through a
14 critical analysis that disentangles the relationship between their subjective,
15 performance identities and PE teacher identities (Dowling, 2011). Other more
16 ambitious approaches that attend directly to issues of power within PE are also
17 needed to challenge the narrow gender norms within this field. This could take
18 place during PETE in the form of sustained, critical and specific learning
19 opportunities to challenge gender power relations. Some have even suggested the
20 recruitment of PETE students who embody non-normative gender expressions
21 (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2016; Landi, 2018) as a key action to disrupt gender
22 norms in PE. These strategies have the potential to bring the PE teacher’s discursive
23 practices more in line with those of the girls, progressive school values and
24 contemporary society more widely, and effectively move PE toward a more
25 democratizing model of gender.

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2 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

3

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