

Decision-making in the physical education curriculum: an analysis of the student voice in English secondary state-schools

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Abstract:

Debates surrounding youth participation in governance have permeated a range of fields in the last two decades. This commentary is predominately situated in education and civic participation domains, with sporting domains remaining largely under researched. Indeed, this research becomes sparser when considered in school physical education and sport. In this paper we consider the position of the student within decision-making in the physical education curriculum in English secondary state-schools. The study draws on survey data from 288 English secondary state-schools exploring physical education administrator's knowledge and practice of engaging with student's decision-making related to the PE curriculum. Findings reveal considerable numbers of the schools reported no contribution from students to the physical education curriculum (n=54), and processes that were in place were problematic. Drawing on the legal framework of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we argue that the lack of student voice in the physical education curriculum presents a contemporary policy concern within the English education system that requires further investigation.


Keywords:

Physical Education Curriculum; Student Voice; Sports Governance; Child Rights; Decision making.

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INTRODUCTION

The governance structures in secondary education institutions within the United Kingdom have instigated debate concerning the role of the student, and their lack of agency specifically, in decision-making processes (Mitra, 2006, 2018). In response, the past two decades have seen calls for reform to educational governance, largely due to students citing experiences of schools being a space in which they have little autonomy, respected voice, or influence (Cook-Sather, 2015; Earls, 2003; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Pope, 2001). This marginalisation within the governance structures has been associated with consequences of student-disengagement within secondary education (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Quinn & Owen, 2016). This is problematic as research suggests that disengaged students will attend school less, achieve lower academic results, have lower self-perception of ability, as well as an elevated rate of dropping out of school (Fullan, Quinn & McEachen, 2017; Lukes, 2015; Noguera, 2007).

The expectation of public organisations (e.g., secondary state schools) to be representative of their stakeholders is a widely accepted responsibility of such organisations (Campbell, Eden & Miller, 2011). Therefore, all stakeholders should be included and engaged with governance and decision-making processes. This should also be the case in sport (Dowling, Leopkey & Smith, 2018). However, akin to students in education, the lack of user-representation within sporting organisations has been a salient issue amongst academic enquiry, with much previous work focusing on the lack of gender representation in sport governance (Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 2000; Sykes, 1998; Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2018; Burton & Leberman, 2019). Here, a lack of female representation in governance is confounded with the dominance of men in sport (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Acosta & Carpenter 2014). As such, women are under-represented in positions of leadership, suffer marginalisation, and are remunerated at lower rates for their work compared to men (Hower & Hums, 2013; Whisenant et al. 2002).

This lack of representation is not solely a gendered issue, as scholars have highlighted the absence of the athlete in sporting governance, too (Thibault, Kihl & Babiak, 2010). Athletes, regardless of sex, can be marginalised by a lack of influence or power, with 'tokenistic' structures implemented by organisations to address athlete participation in decision-making (Thibault et al. 2010).

At the same time, there remains a lack of literature on age representation in sport governance. This is germane as youth inclusion in governance in sport has been cited as having positive benefits for child development (Gould & Voelker, 2012). Due to a dearth of literature, legislation needs to be examined in order to understand youth participation in decision-making processes, as related to youth sport. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC - 1989) offers a legal structure to frame such debates.

Specifically, the UNCRC provides children the right to have input on decisions that impact them.

Nevertheless, there have been some concerns around this in the education system, with initiatives addressing youth participation not complying with this legal framework (Lundy, 2007). Furthermore, school councils are often the primary method to ensure student input to decision-making in education which have been problematised in the literature (Andersson, 2019). In addition, an area seemingly absent from academic enquiry concerns youth participation in decision-making within school physical education (PE). This is an area of growing academic interest (for an overview of recent literature see O’Sullivan and McPhail, 2010; Aarskog et al. 2019, 2021; Aurtun et al. 2020; Nuñez Enriquez et al. 2021) There is, however, limited academic work related to this intersection in the English educational setting. Therefore, we begin by discussing the application of the UNCRC in this context, arguing that it applies to the PE setting, too.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Youth participation within an authority, or organisation, is not only a democratic process, but also a legal imperative in many countries (United Nations, 1989). The UNCRC is an international, and widely supported (Alderson, 2000) human rights treaty with 195 state signatories. Germane to this paper is that the UK government ratified the UNCRC in 1991. The convention consists of 54 articles, with the focus being on the best interests of the child (United Nations, 1989). The rights fall into four broad categories: ‘rights to survival, protection, development, and participation’ (Limber & Flekkøy, 1995, P.4). In an examination of sport governance and youth participation, we focus on the participation aspects of the UNCRC.

Here, Article 12 of the convention is most salient for this analysis because it explicates for the right of children to have input in decisions that affect them. The article is important as it positions the child as having the ability to participate in society (Freeman, 1998). It reads:

State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (United Nations, 1989).

The article has instigated discussion among politicians and academics due to its ambiguous and subjective nature (Bentley, 2005; Limber & Flekkøy, 1995). Yet, despite concerns around the vague nature of the article, Lundy (2007) posits: ‘Implicit within the

notion of due weight is the fact that children have a right to have their views listened to (not just heard) by those involved in the decision-making processes' (P. 935).

In the UK, Article 12 has been implemented in various areas of society, most notably within education. This has not been without controversy, with the Committee on Human Rights of the Child (CHRC) criticising the UK's initial report, in 1995, stating:

Greater priority to be given to incorporating the general principles of the conventions, especially ... article 12, concerning the child's right to make his/her views known and to have these views given due weight (CHRC, 1995).

Further, in 2002, the Committee on Human Rights of the Child expressed concern: 'In education, schoolchildren are not systematically consulted in matters that affect them' (CHRC, 1995). As a response, under the Education Act (2002), schools were required to include students in decision-making on matters affecting them, with Ofsted inspectors having an additional criterion to examine such relationships in governance (Shier, 2001).

The Student Voice

The term 'student voice' encapsulates a range of processes in which youth may participate within the governance of their school (Mitra, 2018). This may be through having space to express their opinions, working with adults to address issues within their school, or taking a lead on seeking refined change (Cook-Sather 2006; Fielding 2001; Pekral & Levin, 2007; Mitra, 2007; Lac & Cummings, 2018). In the education environment, school councils are the dominant provision to ensure a student voice in decision-making (Flutter & Rudduck, 2005; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Andersson, 2019). These platforms aim to 'provide a formal, democratic, transparent, accountable, whole-school policy forum' (Alderson, 2000. P. 124) for students to express their views.

The concept of the student voice has been central to much critical debate, with frameworks that allow for youth participation in decision-making being cited as ineffective (Alderson, 2000; Kilkelly et al., 2005; Ruddock & Fielding, 2006). Spaces for students to formally participate have been criticised for being tokenistic, without tangible power or influence; and not affording students the opportunity to discuss matters important to them (Alderson, 2000; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Lundy, 2007). Hence, students are often marginalised in the decision-making process, their input not taken seriously and, sometimes, entirely overlooked (Shier, 2001; Nelson, 2019).

This issue is often compounded by an environment that is ill-equipped to invoke honest and open feedback (Kilkelly et al., 2005; Ruddock, 2006). Indeed, Robinson and

Taylor (2007) commented on the need for schools to progress from the simple collation of student perspectives, to a more concerted effort to engage students in the process as 'active agents of change' (P. 14). The position of youth in decision-making processes has been theorised by multiple academics (see; Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001). However, we find Lundy's (2007) work particularly important here. This is because Lundy recognises the influence of adult concern in the outcomes of youth participation:

Adult concerns tend to fall into one of three groups: scepticism about children's capacity (or a belief that they lack capacity) to have a meaningful input into decision making; a worry that giving children more control will undermine authority and destabilise the school environment; and finally, concern that compliance will require too much effort which would be better spent on education itself (Lundy, 2007, P.929-930).

Systems in place to allow for children's agency are often problematic. Wyse (2001) recognises that school youth councils, or youth forums, do not necessarily align with children's rights legislation, as they are often run by junior staff as opposed to the 'decision-makers' in management positions (Alderson & John, 2008).

While educational environments infrequently account for children's capacity to be involved with decision-making processes (Alderson & Goodwin, 1993; De Winter, 1997; Forde et al., 2018), in other domains, this is not the case. Health professionals, for example, use and engage with children's views during medical procedures (Alderson, 2000). Indeed, Flutter and Ruddock (2004) found the inclusion of children's views to improve teaching quality within democratic cultures.

Concerns from adults, however legitimate, should also not prevent youth participation in decision-making processes. Framing this, Lundy (2007) suggests that the practice of allowing a student voice should not be thought of as a process at the discretion of adults, but a legal imperative and right of the child. Lundy's (2007) work on the UNCRC offers an understanding of what participation means regarding the convention and legislation, negating many perceived barriers that adults construct (Detrick, Doek & Cantwell, 1992). Lundy (2007) argues that young people need tangible 'influence', where their views are respected and acted upon. Unfortunately, however, many platforms allowing for a student voice continue to limit students to offering an opinion, with little influence. Yet, a greater focus is needed on involving students with decision-making, with their views holding both power and influence.

Lundy (2007) suggests four key areas to allow for such influence: space, voice, audience, and influence. For young people to participate in decision-making, a space to freely discuss their views and opinions is necessary. Here, young peoples 'voice' must be met with respect and value, allowing the opportunity to express perspectives and opinions: a human right for all people, not only children (Universal Declaration on Human Rights, 1948). Lundy (2007) notes: 'Children's right to express their views is not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view; it is dependent only on their ability to form a view, mature or not' (P.935). Without engagement from decision-makers, and those with power, a young person's voice is easily lost. As such, an appropriate 'audience' is required for young people's voices to be heard (Lundy, 2007).

Children's participation in Physical Education decision-making

The UNCRC (1989) and Lundy's (2007) theoretical framework of youth participation recognise young people as having a legal right to involvement in decision-making processes where they are impacted by those decisions; and this applies to all areas of their lives. Sport is one such area. David (2004) argues that there should be a requirement to ensure that young people's rights are protected according to Article 31, which affords children the right to engage in cultural activities, such as sport, meaning they should be involved in sport governance structures.

Sport within the English PE curriculum is particularly contentious, namely because of participation being compulsory. The UK's government Department of Education state: 'Physical education (PE) is a compulsory part of the curriculum for all pupils at every Key Stage, from age four to 16.' (DoE, 2022). Numerous issues arise, here, which outline the importance of youth participation in the decision-making process of curriculum development in PE. One area of concern suggests children simply want different things to what adults impose upon them within a sporting environment (Witt & Dangi, 2018). Much of this ideology stems from adult aspirations being imposed on children (Anderson & White, 2018; Sánchez-Miguel et al., 2018), without consultation or sufficient consideration for children's views or opinions.

This top-down approach to sports governance also carries significant safeguarding concerns; again, particularly salient within the compulsory environment of PE. Sport takes place within an environment where injury is commonplace, and often normalised (Pike & Scott, 2015). Thus, the inclusion of contact sports, particularly tackle forms of rugby, in English school's PE, places participating children at a comparatively high risk of injury (Abernethy & MacAuley, 2001). A risk of injury that is likely to be significantly lower should non-contact forms of rugby be played instead (Griffin et al., 2020). Indeed, there has been calls from academics for a ban of contact Rugby in schools PE due to concerns over the health risks (BBC, 2020).

Instead, cultural tradition and adult agendas likely drive decisions around activity inclusion within PE curriculums (Anderson & White, 2018; Whigham et al., 2019). In addition, it would appear as though children's views are given little consideration in this process - a process that directly impacts them, and their health - which could be in contradiction to article 31 of the UNCRC. There are also contentious issues around consent (Anderson & White, 2018), with some scholars suggesting children are compelled to participate in these activities without informed consent being a requirement (White & Robinson, 2018).

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on the governance of sport within education, and a child's legal entitlement for representation in PE. Thus, this study sought to address this through a preliminary investigation of how English state-schools manage youth participation in the decision-making processes within the PE curriculum.

METHOD

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

Public institutions, such as state funded schools and hospitals, are important bodies to examine and research, yet data and information is often concealed from the public domain. The Freedom of Information Act, 2000 (FOIA) is essential to allow for transparency within these publicly funded institutions. All public bodies are required by the FOIA to respond to requests for data within 20 working days. If the request is declined the institution must provide a valid reason for the refusal. An FOIA was deemed an appropriate method in order to obtain this public data. Schools were requested to return information on PE and school sport activities offered, both inside and outside of curriculum time, and what the students' contributions in decision-making were on the selection of these activities.

Sample

Pupils aged from 11 to 16 were of interest to this study, with 3408 state funded schools educating this age group in 2016-2017 (Department for Education, 2017). England has 48 counties outlined by territorial divisions with each having local administrations. For this study, 11 out of the 48 counties in England were randomly selected through the use of <https://www.random.org/lists/>, resulting in a total of 788 schools being eligible for inclusion in the study.

The 788 selected schools were then also input into random list software with the first 400 schools produced being the sample contacted. Of the 400 requests, 296 responses were returned, with 8 duplicates identified through IP address and school name. Duplicates were subsequently removed, leaving a final sample size of 288 schools.

The 288 schools sampled accounted for 8.43% of secondary schools in England and 9.1% of secondary school pupils (293,414). While data for school type is unavailable nationally, the present sample was predominantly Academy Converters ($n = 160$, 55.5%), followed by Academy Sponsor-Led ($n = 49$, 17.0%), Community ($n = 32$, 11%), Foundation ($n = 15$, 5.2%), Voluntary Aided ($n = 14$, 4.9%), and other school types ($n = 13$, 4.5%). The present sample of schools had a larger average pupil size (mean pupils per school = 1018 ± 461) than that of the national average (mean pupils per school = 946). National data is unavailable for Ofsted's categorization of schools, however the present sample consisted of 8 schools that were rated as 'inadequate' (3%), 31 schools as 'requiring improvement', 168 schools rated good (58%), and 55 schools classified as 'outstanding'.

Procedures

Data were obtained between the 9th of January 2017 and the 21st of July 2017, with schools being identified with the above random sampling strategy. Schools were then emailed a FOIA request. Responses were submitted via a pre-populated online survey or via post. Postal entries were uploaded to an online database upon arrival to ensure data was collected in a timely and organised manner. Paper copies were then destroyed in line with university guidelines. The online survey captured information on the PE curriculum (e.g., detailing the differences and options the male and female students had throughout their years of study), school demographics (e.g., number of teachers, number of pupils, OFSTED rating, type of school and FSM provision), as well as student participation in curriculum activity selection.

Understanding student participation in decision-making in the PE curriculum was the aim of this study. Schools were asked: *How do students get to contribute to the decision-making concerning which activities are compulsory in the physical education curriculum?* Responses were coded in an inductive framework, with categories agreed across researchers, resulting in total co-verification of codes (1.0) by at least two researchers. The 288 responses from schools were grouped under each theme for analysis, with responses per theme presented.

Ethics

The University of Winchester Faculty Ethics Board granted ethical approval prior to the start of the study. The use of FOIA requests means the data reported on is public data. While it is not necessary to anonymise data in accordance with the FOIA, it was deemed ethical to do so, and as such school names have been removed from the data set.

RESULTS

Data on the inclusion of students in governance and decision-making in the PE curriculum in English secondary state schools is presented below. In total, 288 responses

were returned to the question about student contributions to decision-making, with six clear themes from the data, as shown in Table 1.

Responses varied greatly, with some consisting of brief phrases such as ‘Student Survey’, while others provided more detail ‘Via Student voice - termly. More formal questionnaires/survey monkey bi-yearly’. Although brief responses limit the scope of this study in developing a holistic understanding of student engagement in curriculum decisions, a number of the responses given demonstrated that students had minimal involvement in decision making related to the PE curriculum.

Table 1. Student contributions to decision-making concerning compulsory activities in the PE curriculum.

Theme	Responses (%)
Student Voice	78 (26.8)
Informal feedback	55 (20)
No contribution	54 (18.6)
Some input at KS4	47 (16.2)
Sports/Student Council	43 (14.8)
Pre-determined Pathway Options	11 (3.8)

n per themed response

Table 1 details 26.8% ($n = 78$) of schools referred to the ‘student voice’ as the framework allowing students to contribute to PE curriculum decisions. This theme was defined through any explicit reference to student voice. Common responses were that of ‘student voice’ and ‘student voice questionnaires’, with some responses detailing the frequency of the questionnaires as ‘termly’ or ‘annually’.

Overall, student voice initiatives were the primary method to include students in governance. Yet, the literature suggests student voice initiatives are ineffective vehicles to invoke change (Ruddock, 2006). One of the school’s demonstrated this with the following

response: 'Student voice surveys allow us to gather information on the activities that students enjoy, but they have no say in what they can and can't do.' The response is poignant in demonstrating the tokenistic nature of such initiatives, something cited in the literature (Alderson, 2000).

'Informal feedback' returned as 20% ($n = 55$) of the total responses. This was defined as any response that suggested student involvement but not within any official frameworks. Most responses had a high level of ambiguity making it difficult to understand the role or impact the students had within the process. Examples of these include: 'feedback sometimes' and 'some feedback annually'. The lack of detail and information about the processes in the institutions suggests student engagement in decision-making is not a key school policy in these cases.

'No contribution' accounted for 18.6% ($n = 54$) of responses. This theme was easily defined as any responses stating students had no contribution to decision-making processes. These responses are particularly concerning and may contradict legal frameworks. We see students' views are not provided due weight and students do not have the ability to freely express their views on matters impacting them, something mandated through the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989).

Some input at KS4 made up 16.2% ($n = 47$) of the responses. This theme was defined through responses suggesting students were not provided with any platform to engage in governance until KS4. However, there was a degree of ambiguity with regards to the extent of engagement at KS4 not explicitly stated, with the suggestion that the choice consisted of a predetermined set of activities or pathways that the student could choose from, but no mention of the process to input into decision-making around these activities or pathways. As such, responses were vague and varied. Common responses included 'KS4 there is an option system' and 'In KS4 they have options'. The responses demonstrated that a choice is offered for students in KS4, but few detailed the extent of choice or variety of the options on offer.

Furthermore, no school stated why the implementation of choice was brought in at KS4, with an example in this response 'They do not get any contribution in the decision making regarding the activities they participate in until Key Stage 4 when all but 1 term of their activities is options based'. The responses under this theme suggest minimal differences in terms of choice compared to that of the 'No contribution' theme. Although the students may have the option of a pathway, these are predetermined without flexibility to meet the needs of the individual (Flutter & Ruddock, 2004). It must be noted, however, this choice may be indicative of the transition to GCSE where PE becomes optional as an extended subject.

'Sports councils' accounted for 14.8% ($n = 43$) of total responses. Any reference to democratic groups or council-type set ups, some specific to sport, formed the definition of

this theme. Again, responses here were often vague and ambiguous, such as ‘sports council’ and ‘we have a School Council to air views’. No responses detailed the impact of the sports councils or the changes enacted, making interpretation of these processes somewhat difficult.

It is also important to note the responses did not detail how the sports councils are formed; for example, if they are formed from selected programmes or using a democratic voting system. It is possible that the Sports Councils are made up from individuals who have benefited from the current construction of the PE programme and thus reproduce the status quo (Anderson & White, 2018). Therefore, the use of Sports Councils could be suggested to enable the continuation of the top-down approach that exists within the PE curriculum, as students that have benefited from the existing programmes are unlikely to be active agents for change (Anderson & White, 2018; Pike & Scott, 2015).

‘Pre-determined Pathway Options’ accounted for 3.8% ($n = 11$) of total responses. This theme was defined through a choice being provided from a predetermined pathway or activity list. Importantly, there was no mention of the student involvement in the production of such options, or at which stage of schooling this occurred as per the ‘Some input at KS4’ theme. Responses here delivered slightly more detail in comparison to the responses in the ‘Some input at KS4’ theme, allowing for a better understanding of the child’s role within the decision-making process. Example responses include ‘each class chooses sports that they would like on their curriculum map, from a table of choices’. This demonstrates that - although the choices are predetermined - the students are given more autonomy to decide the shape of each term. Yet, some responses were still ambiguous in nature: ‘they sometimes have a choice of three activities in lessons’. Responses here suggest occasional choice was provided; yet the frequency of this choice is not determined. The data suggests most students are provided a restricted choice, in which the students are often given tokenistic opportunities to express their opinions to satisfy the perception of choice, facilitated through predetermined pathways. Again, responses did not indicate at which stages of schooling these choices are offered and how this relates to national curriculum requirements.

DISCUSSION

Lundy (2007) frames children as active agents that should be included, consulted, and listened to in decision-making processes that impact them. Historically, however, students have not been systematically consulted on matters that affect them (CHRC, 1995), resulting in the inclusion of an assessment of this in Ofsted remits under the Education Act (2002). Yet, there remains limited research on how child rights manifest in education (Holzscheiter et al., 2019), and fewer still studies relating to youth governance and children’s rights in formal sport (Eliasson, 2015; Lang & Harthill, 2015; Rhind et al., 2017). Thus, we

extend this line of research inquiry to explore the question of viewing children as active agents in their own domains as applied to the school PE context.

Analysing FOIA requests on 288 state-funded secondary schools in England, we found that large numbers of schools did not recognise student capacity to make informed decisions on the activities they would partake in. As such, the results from this study suggests that students may not be systematically consulted on matters that affect them, which is particularly contentious within the PE domain with the elevated risk for physical and psychological harm present in sporting domains (Fitzgerald & Deutsch, 2016; Anderson & White, 2018). This leads to several points of policy concern regarding children and their own agency.

First, the results suggest students within English secondary state education are not provided sufficient platforms to allow for engagement in the governance of the PE curriculum. Indeed, where issues of participation and choice are concerned, robust and defined procedures are not in place to enable students to enact their views. This highlights the barriers that face students in relaying and actualizing change within their PE curriculum (Kilkelly et al., 2005; Ruddock, 2006).

This finding also presents an issue when examined in line with the literature on the problematic nature of student voice initiatives in education more broadly (Alderson, 2000; Kilkelly et al., 2005). Indeed, Ruddock highlights that such initiatives can often lead to compliance as opposed to action: “doing student voice’ might come to be seen by some teachers as just another burden rather than a significant opportunity to review the capabilities and identities of children and young people in schools and in society’ (2006, P.133).

However, we acknowledge that this study was limited by the data gained not always being as comprehensive as it might be when it comes to how student voice initiatives manifest in school PE. Future research, and something we plan on undertaking, would consist of follow-up interviews and focus groups with PE teachers and pupils to gain greater insight to these processes. Still, we argue the ambiguity in many of the responses is indicative of this area not being of key concern to school policy. In addition, those delivering PE demonstrated a lack of clarity on the official procedures in place to ensure the student voice amongst governance.

Second, in line with these concerns, a substantial number ($n = 54$) of English state-schools revealed that students are not involved in governance and decision-making, despite research showing the positive influence of student inclusion in curriculum development and positive impact on teacher pedagogy (Flutter & Ruddock, 2004). Further, El-Sherif (2014) demonstrates how participation and student-experience are both improved when physical educators engage with students, allowing a true student voice to be heard. Thus, not including students in decision-making fails to capitalise on the positives for both the teachers’ and students’ experiences.

Third, Anderson and White (2018) suggest adult agendas, along with cultural traditions, often determine activity inclusion within the PE curriculum. This is demonstrated in the data where it is evidenced that large proportions of students are not provided any opportunity for contribution. Further, participants regularly cited taking decisions on activity delivery on behalf of students. This finding highlights an adult-centric decision-making process in the PE curriculum that warrants further investigation in the literature.

This adult-centred approach is problematic, particularly in consideration of health implications of riskier forms of PE activity delivery (Abernethy & MacAuley, 2001). Sport takes place within an environment where injury is common, and often normalised (Pike & Scott, 2015). More so, the potential psychological harm of young people underperforming or overperforming in sporting domains (Anderson & White, 2018) and the research suggesting children's desires in sport differing from adult agendas (Sánchez-Miguel et al., 2013), further problematise an adult-centric approach to PE activity delivery. This is particularly pertinent as sport and PE are often conflated, with sport-based activities dominating PE activity delivery (Gerdin and Pringle, 2015).

A final overarching theme from the data concerns the importance of the overall ambiguity of responses. All themes outside of 'No Contribution' contained responses that were vague and non-descript. Physical educators showing a lack of clarity on the provisions to allow for student engagement in decision-making in the PE curriculum demonstrates an absence of effective and adhered to policy in place within these institutions. However, we acknowledge this may also be a limitation in the methodology, and future research should explore this further.

This prevailing attitude aligns with previous research on student-informed decision making, which cites student marginalisation and input not being respected or taken seriously (Shier, 2001). Other researchers suggest that spaces that are provided for students to be involved in decision-making are tokenistic, with limited capacity to actualise any real change (Alderson, 2000; Morrow, 1999; Lundy, 2007). Our data aligns with the idea of tokenistic structures, which compounded by the ambiguity of responses, represents a lack of engagement or concern with the process in discussion. The purpose of this study was to gain a wide insight to the area, which was the rationale for the methodological design. Further research, such as policy reviews or interviews with students and teachers, may capture in more detail how the student voice manifests in English secondary-state schools. However, data from this study suggests that a significant number of English state-school students are not consulted on decisions affecting them. This conflicts with Article 12 of the UN Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and requires further investigation. In turn, this becomes not only a contemporary cultural issue within the English education system, but perhaps a legislative one, too.

CONCLUSION

Overall, data from this study addresses a contemporary and important issue within the English education system. Legally, students should be consulted within decision-making processes in the PE curriculum, with provisions in place to 'capture' the student voice. This becomes ethically paramount too; particularly considering the compulsory nature of PE in English state-schools; the fact that contact rugby for boys is made compulsory in 88% of those schools (White et al., Forthcoming), yet Rugby Football Union endorsed research states that contact rugby union has a higher injury and concussion incidence rate relative to other sports (Griffins et al., 2020). Therefore, we outline the lack of student involvement in decision-making within PE delivery as an area of concern and need of further academic inquiry, cultural focus, and policy reform

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