Social class, physical education and sport: re-thinking inequalities

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Introduction
Social class has proved to be related to virtually all areas of life so it is no surprise to find that class is related to leisure in general, and sports participation in particular. However, within leisure there are exceptions (watching TV, for example) and other uses of leisure where the predictive power of class is relatively weak (for example, gambling). This also applies to certain sports such as angling and football. Might it, then, be possible, via physical education, to weaken the link across the whole of sport? Indeed, might it be possible for physical education to have a positive impact upon the likely involvement of young people from all social class backgrounds in sport and physical activity beyond school and into adult life?

Method
Adopting a sociological perspective, this paper teases out the significance of social class for our understanding of physical education and, more specifically, how the class-related aspects of young people’s lives have implications for physical education and sport: such as their leisure lifestyles and sporting abilities. It will do so by answering the question, ‘Can secondary school physical education hope to make any difference in the long run?’ Put another way, can PE do anything to supplement, even extend, the physical and cultural resources of working-class youngsters in a manner that might increase the likelihood of their continued involvement in sport and physical activity beyond school and into adult life?

Conclusion
The paper will conclude that, perhaps, indirectly, over time, it might – by increasing the volume of upward mobility from the working-class. It will be suggested that exposure to a range of activity areas (such as those that constitute National Curriculum Physical Education in England and Wales) enables young people from working-class backgrounds to acquire the broader repertoire of skills and interests that characterize young middle-class males in particular. It may be, then, that physical education can build upon interest in sport and physical activity apparent in the leisure lives of all young people (Sport England, 2003a). Young people’s leisure activities are said to be ‘identity conferring’ (Roberts, 2003: 15) so, whilst young people of school age consider ‘sport to be cool’ (Sport England, 2003a) and a prominent aspect of their leisure lives (Sport England, 2003b), an opportunity clearly exists. In this regard, one might hold out hope for the impact of the recently emerged and rapidly increasing number of secondary schools in England and Wales identified as Specialist Sports Colleges on the future sporting involvement of young people (Penney et al, 2003). However, to the extent that they show a tendency to group and stratify pupils in PE lessons in terms of ‘gifted and talented’ and ‘low attainers’ (Evans, 2004), class-based sporting advantages and disadvantages will be exacerbated rather than nullified or even undermined by physical education lessons in these schools. Such conclusions may not be unexpected - for it is extremely difficult for schools, let alone particular subjects such as physical education, to counteract against wider social processes of which social class continues to be a rather more, rather than less, prominent feature. This is likely to be particularly so if, as appears to be the case, we are witnessing a growing social stratification within the state school system in England and Wales, with working-class children becoming concentrated in ‘sink’ or ‘ghetto’ schools (Gorard et al, 2003).

References