Check for updates

Received: 14 June 2024 | Accepted: 20 December 2024

DOI: 10.1002/curj.317

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Curriculum Journal BERA

The physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England: A Gramscian critique

Anthony J. Maher[1] | **Thomas Quarmby**[2] | **Oliver Hooper**[3] | **Victoria Wells**[4] | **Lucy Slavin**[4]

[1]Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

[2]Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

[3]School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

[4]Youth Sport Trust, Loughborough, UK

Correspondence
Anthony J. Maher, Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK.
Email: anthony.maher@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Funding information
Youth Sport Trust

Abstract

Curriculum is at the heart of education. It has been said that a broad and balanced physical education curriculum can contribute to young people developing socially, cognitively, affectively, and physically. As such, in this article, we draw on Antonio Gramsci's ideas of culture, power, and ideology to explore the physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England. We did this by generating qualitative data using semi-structured interviews with 13 physical education practitioners working in 13 different alternative provision schools. Interviews were audio recorded, and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, before being subjected to reflexive thematic analysis. The themes generated through these analytical processes were (1) Physical education curriculum should be tailored to the needs and preferences of pupils; (2) The National Curriculum, national qualifications, assessment arrangements and Ofsted inspection expectations influence curriculum decisions; and (3) Group sizes influence the physical education curriculum. We end this article by encouraging physical education and/or curriculum scholars to learn more about alternative provision settings because, at present, there is a dearth of research-informed knowledge about them despite them becoming a much more prominent feature of the education landscape in England.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
© 2025 The Author(s). *The Curriculum Journal* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of British Educational Research Association.

KEYWORDS
alternative provision, curriculum, Gramsci, physical education, teachers

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is situated at the very centre of education. As Philippou and Priestley (2022) suggest, we cannot understand pedagogy, the assessment of learning, pupils, teachers, or others who are part of school landscapes without knowing the curriculum practices that structure, shape and influence them. The time to (re)turn to and (re)focus on curriculum is now. To borrow ideas from Baker (2015), many countries across the world, including for the purposes of this article, England, have become 'schooled societies' in that there is a strong culture of education whereby there is greater access to primary, secondary, and tertiary education than there has ever been before. Accordingly, *what* pupils learn and are expected to know through the school curriculum reflects and influences wider social, political, and economic processes, such as the construction of personal and social identity, political affiliation and action, and the labour market (Baker, 2015). Given its significance and influence, the curriculum is, perhaps inevitably, a source of contestation and struggle where power relations are played out. In this respect, much has been said and written in England—and, indeed, other countries for that matter—about the ways and extent to which the power of academics, researchers and teachers has been eroded vis-à-vis curriculum construction and implementation by successive governments (Sinnemaa et al., 2020). Techno-bureaucrat curriculum policymakers continue to neglect the theoretical and empirical work of academics and the perspectives of teachers during the development of curriculum policy. Whilst policymakers may often overlook teachers in curriculum processes, we consider teachers as 'expert knowers' (Fricker, 2007) because of their lived, embodied experiences of curriculum translation and enactment, and so our research centred their experiences and amplified their voices.

It is crucial to note that nearly all the curriculum-related research conducted in England focuses on and is often situated in mainstream schooling. None of the research to date, to the best of our knowledge, casts light on curricula in alterative provision[i] schools in England despite over 67,000 young people being placed in these settings in 2023 alone (Department for Education, 2024). Of the limited research that has been conducted in and about alternative provision, most of it focuses on: experiences of and reasons for school exclusion (e.g. Owen et al., 2021), the impact of school exclusion on young people (e.g. Gill et al., 2017), the social and emotional support given to young people in alternative provision (e.g. Levinson & Thompson, 2016) and barriers and facilitators to reintegration into mainstream school (e.g. Atkinson & Rowley, 2019). Given that curriculum constitutes a multi-layering of social practices, including school culture and infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment through which education is structured, enacted, and evaluated (Priestley, 2011), it is often 'done' differently across education landscapes. It follows, then, that we cannot simply and uncritically extrapolate what we (think we) know about curriculum to alternative provision settings because, according to Sinnemaa et al. (2020), curriculum is contextualised in policy and recontextualised as it is interpreted, translated, and enacted in different schools. As such, our work is significant because it explores, from the perspective of teachers, how curriculum practices are interdependently connected to educational purposes, staff and pupils, and the wider social and cultural context of alternative provision settings.

To add originality—and perhaps, complexity—to our research, we centre the physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England. Like other curriculum subjects, physical education has a long and complex history as an arena of struggle over its purpose. From roots in the public schools where a games ethic ideology was legitimised as a way of

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

developing the 'character' of those boys who would become the future leaders of Britain's colonial empire (Dunning, 1971), to the military drill approach used in state schools to discipline the so-called unruly and unhealthy bodies of the masses (Kirk, 1992), the early development of physical education curricula was characterised by and reinforced militarism, classism and gendered codes of masculinity. However, the rise of fascism during the 1930s impacted negatively on public perceptions of the purpose of physical education. Young people being taught en-mass, in a very organised, structured, and regimented way, using a command-style teaching approach which emphasised precision and mass synchronisation, became associated with the mass exercising of the Nazi Youth Movement (Kirk, 1992). According to Kirk (1992), the unanimous response was for the curriculum to provide older pupils with more activity choice, specifically, competitive sport and team games, because it was believed that their mature physiques could cope with these activities which were said to require and develop physical prowess. Whilst these roots are still entangled in contemporary mainstream physical education in England, developing skills to improve sports performance, improving physical health, and developing physically literate young people are now widely considered to be the subject's core purposes in England (see Department for Education (DfE), 2014; Kirk, 2010). That said, there is evidence suggesting that some teachers are using their agency and pedagogical knowledge to broaden its purpose by focusing on physical education to develop character, cognitive skills, life skills and social and emotional skills (see Gray et al., 2022) despite these purposes not featuring in England's National Curriculum policy discourse (Department for Education (DfE), 2014). It must be said, though, that this curriculum and its history is a history of physical education in mainstream schools in England. At present, very little can be found in the published literature about the physical education curriculum in alternative provision settings in England.

The significance of our research centring physical education curriculum in alternative provision becomes clear if we acknowledge that there is reasonable evidence suggesting that physical education has the potential to support young people to develop physically, socially, cognitively, and emotionally (see Sandford et al., 2023). More broadly, it has been found that organised sport and physical activity, which are often a core part of physical education, can contribute towards reducing many of the maladaptive/risky behaviours prevalent amongst some pupils in alternative provision; for example, through lowering incidences of smoking (Audrain-McGovern et al., 2006), illegal drug use (Kulig et al., 2003), engagement in risky sexual behaviours (Miller et al., 2002), and levels of social isolation (Barber et al., 2001). Interestingly, research by Cullen and Monroe (2010) suggests that pupils in a pupil referral unit (PRU), who experienced football as part of a physical education curriculum, demonstrated higher levels of pro-social behaviour, as well as openness to and engagement with learning, relative to their behaviour in the PRU generally. As such, research evidence continues to highlight the potential of physical education in facilitating pro-social behaviour, reducing risky behaviour, and providing opportunities for the development of healthy and supportive peer friendships and adult relationships—culminating in positive youth development (Holt, 2016). In this article, we drew on Antonio Gramsci's concepts of culture, power, and ideology (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971) to explore the dominant beliefs and practices relating to physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England.

CULTURE, POWER, AND IDEOLOGY IN EDUCATION

Much has been written about the life and ideas of Antonio Gramsci since the publication of his seminal work: *Prison Notebooks* (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971). Focus is often cast on comparing his concepts and assumptions to those of other theorists, mostly to 'rethink' and/or 'move beyond' Gramscian ideas (e.g., Kreps, 2016). However, the impact of neoliberalism on education systems has resulted in some scholars returning to Gramsci's work to explore (and

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

challenge) social oppression through critical pedagogies (e.g. Mayo, 2015). When it comes to physical education research specifically, the work of Gramsci has been largely ignored. To the best of our knowledge, only Maher and Macbeth (2013) and Maher (2016) have explored the contested cultural landscape of mainstream physical education using a Gramscian lens. Saying that, Gramsci's work has been used in research about physical education teacher education (see Maher et al., 2020) and special school physical education (see Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022). In our article, we want to build on these foundations by drawing on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971) to explore physical education curricula—as a mechanism of cultural (re)production—in alternative provision schools in England. For us, cultural hegemony refers to processes in which those in positions of authority in political and civic society exercise their power to shape modes of cultural (re)production (Sissel & Sheard, 2001), such as education systems and schools, through ideological leadership. As such, we were especially interested in the culture of alternative provision schools and physical education within them. By culture, we meant the dominant—and, at times, taken for granted—ideologies, values, customs, rituals, practices, and behaviours of alternative provision and physical education. The status of dominant and subordinate groups within education is anchored to cultural hegemony. People with higher degrees of legitimate power, like policy makers in government and senior leaders in schools, are able to use the influence they have over the mechanisms of cultural (re)production in schools, such as curriculum—but also, school policy, resourcing, staff professional development, pedagogy, and assessment—to disseminate ideology and shape culture (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971), such as that relating to the purpose and value of alternative provision physical education (see Maher et al., 2024).

From a Gramscian perspective, power relates to an individual or group's ability to shape the values and behaviours of others, typically through ideological leadership, to achieve one's own objectives (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971). Accordingly, power is multi-dimensional and layered, dynamic, contextual, situational, and constantly in flux. Consequently, the meaning and values that influence the culture of alternative provision physical education are tied to Ball's (1987) notion of schools (and the departments within them) as arenas of struggle where power relations are played out between key stakeholders, such as policy makers, senior leaders, teachers, and pupils, as they contest, negotiate and compromise. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony therefore offered a framework that allowed for meaning to be made through the identification of the specific school and physical education ideologies, experiences, traditions, and rituals that have become so established and privileged that they manifest as common-sense collective arrangements (Engelstad, 2009). It is the common-sense collective and individual beliefs about and practices relating to the physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools that we explored from the perspectives of physical education practitioners because they are able, if they have the expressive freedom to do so, to shape the curriculum in ways that align with their own beliefs about their subject (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2022). As such, the methodology that follows was designed to enable us to explore the dominant beliefs and practices relating to physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England.

METHODOLOGY

Philosophical position

Our research was interpretivist in nature in that it aligned with ontological relativism and social constructionism (Bryman, 2016). As such, we concerned ourselves with exploring the ways and extent to which our participants made sense of and constructed meaning about the curriculum in alternative provision schools. To ensure philosophical coherence as a hallmark of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010), we assumed that there were multiple

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

interpretations of the views and experiences that were expressed—some compatible, others not—that could be explored from multiple perspectives to understand the rich tapestry of views and experiences that relate to the physical education curriculum in alterative provision schools. Accordingly, we were interested in exploring our participants' 'truths', rather than 'the truth', because this was in keeping with our epistemological positioning.

Participants and recruitment

Our research followed the British Educational Research Association's (2024) ethical guidelines and ethical approval was sought and received from Anthony's university research ethics committee. This article is based on data generated from 13 physical education practitioners[ii] who were working in 13 different alternative provision schools in England. Table 1. provides additional biographical information about the participants. To recruit participants, a freedom of information request was sent to the Department for Education (DfE) to source the email addresses of all alternative provision schools in England. As a result, we received an Excel spreadsheet containing 351 schools. Upon receipt, we sent an email to the head teachers/principals of all alternative provision schools that were on our spreadsheet to introduce ourselves and the research, explain its aim, key beneficiaries, and to ask for the school's involvement.

For those settings that were interested in the research, we included a link to an online survey. All participants had to confirm that they had read the information letter and sign the consent form before they could advance to the survey. Forty-eight alternative provision physical education practitioners completed the survey, the data from which are reported elsewhere Quarmby et al., (2022). At the end of the survey, some participants provided their email address to indicate that they wanted to participate in a follow-up interview, whilst others were recruited from an in-person event organised by the Youth Sport Trust[iii] for alternative provision practitioners.

Methods and data generation

Qualitative data for this article were generated via individual, online interviews with 13 alternative provision physical education practitioners working in 13 different settings so that we could capture their 'truths' about cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences. Online, rather than in-person, interviews were used because of the geographical spread of participants and to accommodate their busy professional lives. Prior to interviews commencing, the research team met online to construct an interview schedule that aligned with the research aim and enabled us to probe in more detail the points of interest identified through the analysis of survey data. Example questions included:

- What curriculum can a pupil at your school expect to experience in physical education?
- What informs and influences the planning and delivery of your physical education curriculum?
- What do you believe your school does well in terms of physical education curriculum?
- What aspects of the physical education curriculum do you believe need to be developed further?
- What are the key challenges to delivering the physical education curriculum in your school?

Interviews were semi-structured in nature so that participant and interviewer could explore issues relevant and significant to them as the interview unfolded (Bryman, 2016)

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

TABLE 1 Participant information.

Name (pseudonym)	Role	Responsibility	School type	Age range
Benjamin	PE Lead	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE, including multiple staff that deliver PE	Independent SEMH School	5–11 years
Carla	Ex-CEO	Ex-CEO of a multi-academy trust specifically for schools who work with children with medical and mental health difficulties	Hospital School	4–18 years
Claire	PE Lead and Teaching Assistant	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE and working as a classroom assistant in other curriculum subjects	Hospital School	11–16 years
David	Acting Head Teacher	Acting Head Teacher for a new school with responsibility for developing projects that support young people in need	Independent SEMH School	6–16 years
Donald	PE Teacher	Responsible for the delivery of PE to children from reception through to year six	Hospital School	5–11 years
Graham	PE Teacher	Responsible for the delivery of PE to children from year seven through to year 11	Hospital School	11–16 years
Harriet	PE Teacher	Responsible for the delivery of PE to children from year six through to year 11	Alternative Provision Academy	10–16 years
Joseph	PE Lead	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE, including multiple staff that deliver PE	Alternative Provision Academy	7–16 years
Jamie	History Teacher	Primarily a History Teacher with responsibility for delivering PE following the departure of previous PE teacher	Hospital School	11–16 years
Jennifer	Acting Head Teacher	Responsible for day-to-day school operations across four sites (including a PRU, AP and Hospital School)	PRU, Alternative Provision Academy and Hospital School	11–16 years
Lenny	Head of PE	Responsible for overseeing the delivery of PE, including mentoring multiple staff that deliver PE	Alternative Provision Academy	11–16 years
Lucy	PE and Wellbeing Teacher	Responsible for the delivery of PE to children from year seven through to year 11 across three different sites	Hospital School	11–16 years
Stacey	Personal Development Coach and Mentor	Responsible for working with the senior leadership team to help consider mental health and wellbeing as a whole school approach	Alternative Provision Academy	11–16 years

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

because we were interested in how they made sense of and constructed meaning about their experiences of alternative provision physical education. Expansion, clarification, example, justification and probe questions were used so that participants could story their own views and experiences of the physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools, which enabled us to cultivate a rich tapestry of knowledge by accessing thick descriptions (Tracy, 2010). Prior to the interviews commencing, participants were again asked to read an information letter which detailed the aim and purpose of the research, what was expected of them as participants, who the key beneficiaries of the research were, how data would be handled, stored and anonymised, and their right to withdraw, to ensure that consent was informed (Bryman, 2016). Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 min, but the duration of each interview depended on the time that each participant had available and the extent to which they were able and willing to discuss in detail the topics under investigation. With the permission of participants, the audio of all interviews was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and used as a data source.

Data analysis

Anthony analysed the data using a thematic approach which was inspired by the work of Braun and Clarke (2022). Stage one of data analysis involved listening to the audio recordings of interviews and reading and rereading the verbatim interview transcripts until Anthony felt that he had become intimately familiar and connected with the textual and linguistic representations of participant views and experiences about the physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools. Next, codes were systematically assigned to chunks of the interview text that were deemed significant in relation to the research aim of exploring the dominant beliefs and practices of alternative provision physical education, published literature, and embodied experiences of our participants. Codes were descriptive (what was said about their beliefs, practices, and experiences), analytical (the significance and implication of what was said in relation to relevant policy and research relating to physical education curriculum and the nature, purpose and value of the subject across mainstream, special and alternative provision settings), and theoretical (how concepts of culture, power, and ideology could be used to make sense of and construct meaning about what was said). Example codes for the theme *Physical education curriculum should be tailored to the needs and preferences of pupils* include (1) pupils' needs are complex; (2) the curriculum must be flexible; (3) pupils will not engage with curricula if they are not interested in what is offered; and (4) staff do not know how long pupils will be in alternative provision. Once codes were assigned, Anthony then moved to considering the meaningful essence (Braun & Clarke, 2022) that was woven through the dataset so that he could cluster codes around central organising concepts to establish candidate themes. For instance, it became clear that physical education practitioners had a great degree of autonomy over curriculum decisions and that they used it to plan a flexible curriculum that considered the needs, abilities, and preferences of pupils. At the same time, their curriculum decisions were mediated by a need and desire to align with the National Curriculum, Ofsted inspection expectations and compensate for a smaller number of pupils attending physical education than would typically be the case in mainstream schools. Theme titles were then given that reflected the meaningful essence permeating each theme, which then prompted some removal of codes, shifting of codes and collapsing of themes to ensure coherence between data and the theme that represented them. Once themes had become more established, interview transcripts were trawled for verbatim quotes that were missed, or their significance overlooked, during the initial analysis. Throughout the analytical process, Anthony kept a detailed reflexive

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

diary relating to the ways and extent to which his knowledge, assumptions, emotions, and prior embodied experiences may have shaped his interpretation of data, which enabled him to check and challenge himself during the analysis, which is in keeping with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The themes constructed through the analytical process were (1) Physical education curriculum should be tailored to the needs and preferences of pupils; (2) The National Curriculum, national qualifications, assessment arrangements and Ofsted inspection expectations influence curriculum decisions; and (3) Group sizes influence physical education curriculum, and these themes are used to structure the findings and discussion which follow. We (re) present findings as rich, thick, descriptions of participant views and experiences to capture the complexity and nuance of ideologies and cultural practices relating to the physical education curriculum in alternative provision and invite our reader to consider the ways and extent to which what participants said connects and resonates with them as a way of facilitating empirical generalisability (Smith, 2017). To complement this, our discussion of data draws on Gramsci's concepts of culture, power, and ideology to facilitate theoretical generalisability (Chenail, 2010).

PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM SHOULD BE TAILORED TO THE NEEDS AND PREFERENCES OF PUPILS

All our participants, regardless of the alternative provision setting in which they taught, articulated a strong ideological commitment to physical education curriculum being tailored to the needs and preferences of pupils. For instance, David said: ‘some of our children have extremely complex needs. We need to consider those needs when planning activities and curriculum. Some activities just don't work for them’. Similarly, Donald suggested: ‘sometimes we must think carefully about what to do [in PE]. In a hospital school, it can depend on the child. Some can't move out of bed, so I have to try and stimulate their mind through PE’. Given what has been said here it seems that physical education practitioners are using their power to disrupt standardised, normative, and often take-for-granted beliefs about and approaches to curriculum development and enactment. As Maher and Fitzgerald (2022) argue, ‘one size does not always fit all’ when it comes to curriculum, and as they add, pedagogy and assessment arrangements in alternative provision schools. That said, it is noteworthy that there were few concrete examples in the dataset about how this ideological commitment manifested in practice. Moreover, in this respect, we note Biesta's (2010) concerns that learner/pupil-centred curricula, which may intend and indeed challenge the cultural assumption of adults and teachers as monopoliser of expert knowledge, can be problematic if they fail to consider what should be learned and why it should be learned. To add, we express concerns that needs-based approaches in education, which are prevalent in alternative provision and physical education, could reinforce and reproduce deficit beliefs and practices because they focus on what pupils cannot do, and thus their limitations, rather than emphasising and capitalising on learner capabilities (Maher et al., 2024).

To ensure that the curriculum was tailored to the needs of pupils, physical education practitioners deemed it crucial that they developed a strong and trusting relationship with pupils so that they could better know their needs, prior experiences of physical education, and what was happening in pupils' wider lives. For Stacey, working in small groups was beneficial to this endeavour:

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> We have the luxury of working in small groups to build up that relationship and get to know them and we get a real understanding of them. We're able to adapt the lesson and curriculum to their needs, as in a mainstream [school] you haven't always got the time or resources to do that (Stacey).

A well-established belief of teaching is 'know your learners', and the significance of this was evident from the conversations that we had with participants about curriculum planning. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge, as participants in our research did, that young people's lives extend beyond the spatial and cultural confines of schools. Accordingly, young people have lived, embodied experiences, which are influenced by others who are part of their relational networks and cultural formations outside of schools, and these influence ideologies, values, attitudes, and behaviours that shape experiences (Elias, 1978) of physical education that practitioners must account for.

Given the variable and transient needs of pupils in alternative provision, it was important that practitioners and the physical education curricula that they planned were flexible enough to be adapted, modified, or even changed:

> It's the fluidity of the PE curriculum. Our children present so differently every day and sometimes they can become very agitated and aggressive. I think it's that being able to have the flexibility to change the curriculum to meet the needs of that young person. I found that really frustrating in a mainstream setting, not having that flexibility' (Joseph).

What was evident from the findings was that practitioners seemed able to exercise a greater degree of power when it came to curriculum decisions than perhaps would be typical in other school settings where neoliberal ideals relating to performativity and accountability have, by degrees, eroded teacher autonomy (Perryman et al., 2018). Whilst part of the greater power and influence amongst participants in our research may be explained by the fact that physical education teachers in mainstream and special schools generally have greater curriculum autonomy than teachers of other subjects, especially prior to standardised testing at year 11 (pupils aged 15–16 years) (Morley et al., 2021), it may also be because alternative provision schools generally are more able to offer a truly 'alternative curriculum'. Unfortunately, that question is beyond the reach of our research and thus is for others to address.

Nonetheless, the transient nature of alternative provision and the pupils within it, according to participants in our research, exacerbated difficulties associated with planning a curriculum. Indeed, many of our participants talked about not being able to plan longer term for some pupils because they were either in alternative provision settings for a limited time or their attendance and engagement in physical education was sporadic. Whilst this was relevant to all alternative provision settings, it was especially the case for hospital schools:

> It varies depending on whether they are phase two or phase three students. Phase two is they've been in for five days and phase three is three weeks, so they're all long-term patients who we can build up a better relationship. That's when you can start to teach more of a scheme of work. However, some [pupils] are with us for a relatively short time so it is very difficult to deliver a proper curriculum (Lucy).

Discussions about the ways and extent to which the needs of pupils influenced curriculum planning revealed that the type of activities that were taught needed to be carefully considered because some pupils, especially some of those in pupil referral units, were said to 'struggle' with team games and competitive sports, as illustrated by

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Benjamin: 'We focus on the multi-skills. We don't have many team games, especially the big games, because our kids just cannot cope with them. They cannot cope with the competition'. This finding is perhaps unsurprising given that mainstream school teachers report particular challenges in teaching team games and competitive sports to pupils with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (Morley et al., 2021), with these young people being one such group who are more likely to find themselves in pupil referral units when compared with their same-aged peers. What is perhaps more interesting and novel is the ways and extent to which physical education practitioners in alternative provision schools seem to be using their power to challenge the deep-rooted ideological commitment of the teaching profession to physical education as competitive sport and team games (Kirk, 2010). Accordingly, some participants said that they preferred to teach individual, self-paced, and self-regulated physical activities:

> It's finding the individual things that they want to do because they're not being judged at that point of doing it. They don't mind being compared afterwards, but whilst they're doing that no one's pointing and no one's laughing. We went down the individual sports route (Lenny).

As a way of increasing the likelihood that curriculum decisions would be suitable, many participants emphasised the importance of aligning them with the preferences of pupils, as suggested by Claire:

> I do try and give them [pupils] a variety of activities. I've had a couple of students that tried to teach me to dance, because they do that in clubs, or used to. It wasn't easy [for me] but that is what they are into. So, I try and go with the interest in the students just to get them active (Claire).

Centring the preferences of pupils may ensure that the physical education curriculum and experiences of it are more meaningful (Fletcher et al., 2022). Moreover, it may go some way to disrupting epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007) by recognising that pupils—rather than teachers only—also have expert knowledge of and ownership over their mind–body-selves in physical education (Maher et al., 2023). Again, however, we are reminded of the importance of curriculum intention rather than the 'anything goes' approach which may lack educational purpose and curriculum coherence (Biesta, 2010).

Whilst it was deemed important that the physical education curriculum was tailored to the needs and preferences of pupils, it was also noted by our participants that pupils should experience a broad and balanced curriculum where possible. For instance, Harriet said:

> We've got a real mix of characters, and we need to make sure that everybody is having the opportunity to do something that suits their personality. However, we do a mixture of individual and team sports because, even the pupils that don't like the team sports, it encourages them to develop skills that they might not necessarily have because in mainstream school they may have sat out of the team sport or not gone to the lesson. The curriculum needs to be balanced and not too narrow (Harriet).

Whilst not explicitly stated, Harriet does seem to be suggesting that a wide repertoire of activities in physical education may support pupils to develop what Cronin et al. (2023) term transferable life skills. The National Curriculum is a mechanism of cultural (re)production that articulates

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

an expectation that all pupils experience a broad and balanced curriculum, and it is to this that we now turn.

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM, NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS, ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS, AND OFSTED INSPECTION EXPECTATIONS INFLUENCE CURRICULUM DECISIONS

Whilst the participants in our research were clearly able to exercise their power to tailor curricula to the needs and preferences of the pupils in their charge, there was still evidence that the National Curriculum in England—and thus policymakers as part of what Gramsci termed the ideological state apparatus (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971)—influenced the curricula that our participants planned and taught. Joseph, for instance, said: 'We do follow the National Curriculum as closely as we can. That gives us the framework to follow but it is not always easy to follow that with our kids. I still need that flexibility'. Similarly, Carla said: 'We teach towards the National Curriculum. That is our planning point. We can just adapt that if we need to'. According to Priestley (2011), flexibility in the National Curriculum was a key claim made by its architects:

> Many curricula, including the National Curriculum in England, seek to combine what is claimed to be the best features of top-down and bottom-up approaches to curriculum planning. Their architects claim that they provide both central guidance for schools (thus ensuring the maintenance of national standards), and sufficient flexibility for schools and teachers to take account of local needs in designing programmes of education (p. 223).

The National Curriculum's reach and influence, it seems, extends into the cultural terrain of alternative provision schools despite increased curriculum autonomy in those educational settings. In hospital schools, an ideological commitment to the importance of following the National Curriculum was bound to ensuring curriculum continuity and coherence for young people, especially for those who would transition across cultural landscapes when they go back into mainstream schooling and thus National Curriculum physical education. For instance, Lucy (based in a hospital school) said: 'I try and keep in line with what they should be doing with their expectations in terms of the National Curriculum'. Donald (also based in a hospital school) elaborated thus:

> We want to keep it [PE] as authentic as we can to what they would normally be doing in [mainstream] school. When you asked me before 'what does a lesson look like?' My response was the lesson here looks exactly the same as a mainstream lesson. The only difference would be that I'm with one child working… We try and keep it exactly the same to keep it authentic for when they go back [to mainstream] (Donald).

Ensuring that the National Curriculum was followed increased in significance, according to our participants, at year 9 (pupils typically aged 13–14 years) to ensure that pupils met GCSE content and assessment expectations:

> Once they hit the Easter point in year nine for my key stage three class, we move on to GCSE sports. Purely for the fact, and I've researched this, lots of the mainstream schools only do one or the other of GCSE sports and that's

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> what they [pupils] are assessed on. Our GCSE sports are table tennis singles and badminton doubles… They're two of the highest scoring sports [in terms of GCSE grading]. Things like rock climbing, lots of schools have had their [GCSE] scores deducted so it's not worth doing it (Harriet).

Selecting curriculum activities based on GCSE assessment expectations is perhaps unsurprising given the pervasiveness of neoliberal, standardised, performative test cultures in schools (Perryman et al., 2018). However, like Priestley (2011), we caution against alternative provision physical education curricula becoming instrumental (rather than educational) because they are 'based on the demands or a narrow attainment agenda driven by league tables' (p. 227). We have seen this become a part of the cultural landscape of mainstream schools especially, wherein the formation of a marketised educational system involving standardised, high-stakes assessments, which align with neoliberal ideologies and discourses, has enforced competition between schools via normative comparatives such as league tables and school rankings (Forrester & Garrett, 2016). Such school systems, prioritising performance monitoring and management, have led to an education culture of performativity and 'the possibility that commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance' (Ball, 2000, p. 6), something that mainstream physical education departments and teachers are not immune from (see Thomson & Sparkes, 2020).

It should be noted that GCSE qualifications were not the only assessment mechanism influencing the curricula of practitioners in alternative provision physical education, as illustrated by Jennifer:

> In our Fieldway [pseudonym] setting, which is the one for vulnerable and anxious children, the PE is delivered at key stage three and then a sports qualification offered at key stage four. We use the OCR national qualification so our curriculum aligns with that, when it can (Jennifer).

A 'curriculum for qualifications' approach is understandably appealing to school leaders and educators given the political discourse, which has been reinforced by comments made by former Secretaries of State for Education Michael Gove (Taylor, 2012) and Damien Hinds (Hinds, 2019), that pupils in alternative provision schools in England are an education 'underclass' because they 'fail academically' and 'grow up without the qualifications and skills to become successful members of society'. However, a narrow curriculum and bandwidth of activities may disadvantage some pupils in alternative provision physical education, especially those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (Maher et al., 2023).

For those alternative provision physical education practitioners who were not following the National Curriculum, mostly because it was deemed inappropriate for the needs and abilities of pupils in their schools, there was some expressed concern about how, if at all, what they were teaching was ideologically aligned with Ofsted inspection expectations. David, for instance, said:

> I do wonder what Ofsted would make of all this? You know, our PE curriculum? How would they judge it? It's tough because it's not like mainstream [education]. We cannot do it the same as them, but we will be judged in the same way, using the same criteria (David).

Graham was another participant who expressed concerns:

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> I do wonder what happens if Ofsted walks in [school] tomorrow [for an inspection]. How do I justify what I'm doing? Not that I'm convinced they'll have a clue what they're walking into anyway. But they'd walk in and, basically, they would want to see the physical element [of physical education] where the kids are going to be hot and sweaty and running around. I know that's one of the main criteria and restricting factors in mainstream [schools]; if you don't get all the kids active then you're getting marked down [in the grading of the inspection]. If I push that on these kids to be that active and sweaty, I won't get any attendance (Graham).

To clarify, Ofsted is a non-ministerial government department that inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages in England (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2024). In research, it is well-established that Ofsted, as a state-orchestrated mechanism of cultural (re)production in schools (Maher et al., 2020), influence—by degrees—the ideologies, values, practices, and behaviours in schools generally (Perryman et al., 2018) and physical education specifically (Thomson & Sparkes, 2020). As such, it is unsurprising to hear that some practitioners in alternative provision schools are concerned about their curricula not aligning with inspection expectations, especially given that some research suggests that mainstream school teachers who do not ideologically assimilate and conform to Ofsted expectations can become marginalised in schools, potentially decreasing career advancement opportunities and decreasing job security (Ball, 2003; Thomson & Sparkes, 2020). In this respect, there was some evidence in our research of tension between what the school leadership team wanted physical education practitioners to teach, which was often tied to Ofsted inspection expectations, and what participants wanted to teach, as illustrated by Joseph:

> I think sometimes I've had an experience where alternative provision is reluctant to be truly alternative. To deliver a curriculum that is truly alternative and suited to our pupils. And when you have line managers who really want you to stick to a type of curriculum, a national curriculum because Ofsted might come, it can go against what you're able to do with the kids (Joseph).

The transmission and normalisation of hegemonic ideologies of control by the senior leadership team, in this way, is, according to Perryman et al. (2018), indicative of the power and authority of dominant groups, such as the government. According to Gramsci, social norms in education are created and maintained once hegemonic ideologies are internalised, accepted, and promoted by those who are part of cultural formations in schools, particularly when it is by those who have their hands on the levers of power (see Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971), such as senior leaders in alternative provision settings.

GROUP SIZES INFLUENCE PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

A final theme constructed during data analysis related to group sizes influencing physical education curriculum decisions, particularly in relation to the type of activities that could be taught. There was often only a small number of pupils attending physical education which made it difficult to teach team games and some competitive sports. In this respect, Jennifer said:

> It is quite challenging to get a game of football, or any team game, when you've only got two people in your class. We don't have the big numbers and that

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> provides its own challenges. So, the children necessarily getting a normal experience (Jennifer).

The same challenges were evident in hospital schools, where physical education practitioners would often be teaching one pupil at a time: We do a lot of one-on-one teaching because some kids can't and won't mix with others. So, we do what we can. Most mainstream schools do a lot of team games and competition, but we can't really do that (Donald). Interestingly, then, despite team games and competitive sports occupying a privileged position on the physical education curricula in mainstream schools (Kirk, 2010), they are often situated on the periphery of the physical education curriculum in alternative provision settings because of group sizes and, lest we forget, they are not always tailored to the needs of pupils as we reported earlier.

Whilst small group sizes posed curriculum challenges in general, these were exacerbated by the fact that group sizes fluctuated, often daily, because of poor school attendance, pupils refusing to go to physical education, and the frequency at which pupils transitioned from and to mainstream schooling. As one participant noted: 'Group numbers are always changing. Attendance can be an issue, some days kids just refuse to do PE, and we have kids in and out of here [alternative provision] all the time' (Stacey). In hospital schools, numbers were often only known each morning and depended on events that occurred on the previous day:

> I find out how many [pupils] I've got in the morning. I will turn up [to work] and find out that x, y, and z are not allowed [to do physical education] because they've not eaten. Or those three aren't allowed [to do physical education] because they've ligatured last night, or they've assaulted staff. Or they're in holds or seclusion calming down because they've had a big incident. Your hands are tied (Donald).

Some of the participants mixed year and thus age groups to increase group size to enable for team games to be taught, as discussed by Harriet:

> In terms of PE delivery, we've trialled working with key stages, so pupils working together of different ages. In terms of alternative provision, the numbers change all the time, things effect attendance so you've got to be able to work quite flexibly and mixing ages is one way that we can do team games (Harriet).

This finding, which seemed common cultural practice in alternative provision settings, is interesting and novel because, to the best of our knowledge, the mixing of age groups in physical education or, for that matter, any other curriculum subject in alternative provision settings has not been explored by researchers previously. As such, we endeavoured to discuss, with participants, the implications of such age-mixing given that there is a lack of empirical evidence about it. In this regard, Joseph noted that the mixing of age groups often meant that there were a wide range of abilities in the classes that he taught, which posed additional challenges vis-à-vis curriculum planning:

> Because I don't have sets or the capability to be able to split the group up necessarily, you might have somebody quite advanced in year nine and then somebody who has just started in year seven and has never done PE before. That can be very tricky to plan a curriculum for (Joseph).

There is perhaps a paradox here in that according to our research, it was typical cultural practice for alternative provision physical education practitioners to mix age groups to increase group size so that pupils could experience the team games and competitive sports that are ideologically entangled with dominant beliefs about the purpose and value of the subject (Maher &

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Fitzgerald, 2022). However, the consequence of this was that there were pupils with a wide range of abilities participating in the type of activities that typically require, value, and reproduce a narrow bandwidth of psychomotor skills and performance-related capital that few pupils can demonstrate (Evans, 2013). In this respect, we highlight the work of Evans (2013) and Maher et al. (2023) who argue that normative, performative cultures permeate the field of physical education and associated ideologies of ability are socio-political in nature. Such performative cultures shape normative perceptions of corporeality and thus the construction of legitimate forms of ability-related (physical) capital. According to Croston and Hills (2017), pupils who are positioned and perceived as possessing such physical capital are privileged over others. Those who do not, regardless of the education setting in which their experiences are situated, often have their bodies and movement patterns judged negatively through a normative gaze, which can result in them becoming marginalised in physical education (Lynch et al., 2023).

Another tactic which was often used by the practitioners in our research to boost group numbers was to teach mixed-gender groups in physical education. In this respect, Lenny argued:

> We have a mix of year sevens [11-12 years old], eights [12-13 years old] and nines [13-14 years old], males and females. By mixing it with the other form groups it just gives us that chance to deliver our team sports, like your handball, football, so they get that opportunity rather than just doing small group work. They have a larger group and they're not missing out on what they would do in mainstream (Lenny).

Whilst this approach may seem obvious to those on the periphery of cultural practices in physical education, we consider this a notable finding given the long history of an ideological commitment, which prevails to some extent to this day, of teaching boys and girls separately in physical education in England (see Kirk, 1992). Whilst mixed-gender groupings served to increase group sizes in physical education, this approach was also said to have its challenges. According to Lenny, challenges increased as pupils moved to years 10 and 11 [typically aged 14–16 years], which he attributed to girls not wanting to get involved in team games and competitive sports:

> It [mixing gendered groupings] works quite well. It's as they get older the gender mix becomes a little bit more of an issue, which we're trying to come up with solutions. We have some girls that will just literally get involved and stuck in and they're not bothered, nothing phases them, and some of them are really good sportsmen [*sic*]. But we've got some [girls] who are a little bit more hesitant. They're worried about what people think of them, they said, “it's embarrassing,” we look silly (Lenny).

Although boys are three times more likely to be permanently excluded from mainstream school than girls (Department for Education, 2021), it is noteworthy that girls' exclusions grew by 7.8% compared with 4.8% for boys (Agenda, 2021). Despite the increasing number of girls finding themselves in alternative provision schools, such as the one that Lenny teaches in, there seemed an expectation that girls should culturally assimilate into competitive, (hyper) masculine cultures (Swain, 2006) in physical education where participants are expected to be enthusiastic team players. To be fair to Lenny, and others that we interviewed, there was an expressed desire and commitment to disrupting the normative, masculine cultures of team games (Croston & Hills, 2017), but they seemed yet to achieve that aspiration. Instead, it could be argued that curriculum decisions were perhaps unintentionally reproducing an exclusionary culture in physical education. As such, we note the activist approach developed and advocated by Oliver and Kirk (2016, p. 324) for, to use their words, ‘breaking what we have characterized

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

as a reproductive cycle that has done little to improve the current situation for girls [in physical education]'. To achieve this, they suggest that there are four critical elements for a physical education agenda that facilitate girls' active engagement: (1) that teachers be student-centred in their pedagogical practices; (2) that teachers create spaces in their curriculum for girls to critically study their embodiment; (3) that physical education be inquiry-based and centred in action; and (4) that there is sustained listening and responding to girls over time (Oliver & Kirk, 2016). Whilst alternative provision physical education practitioners have made some progress in this respect—endeavouring as noted earlier to be student-centred—it seems that they still have some way to go to truly disrupt some of the exclusionary cultures that pervade physical education.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The work and ideas of Antonios Gramsci enabled us to generate new knowledge about the established and contested ideologies, values, assumptions, experiences, traditions, and practices of physical education curricula in alternative provision schools. A key finding of our research, explored through a Gramscian lens, related to physical education practitioners in alternative provision being able to exercise their power much more than their counterparts in mainstream schools vis-à-vis curriculum development and implementation. In this respect, this article highlighted that it is common cultural practice (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971) for alternative provision practitioners to use their power to endeavour to develop a curriculum that is tailored to the needs and preferences of the pupils in their charge. They did this, mainly, through developing strong and trusting relationships with pupils to learn about their needs and understand what was happening in their wider lives, and through attempts to amplify pupil voice to know their preferences. Whilst we advocate for these approaches as a way of ensuring that the physical education curriculum is meaningful for pupils who find themselves in alternative provision settings, we again highlight the importance of curriculum intention (Biesta, 2010)—the relationship between the 'what' and the 'why'—not being lost in the drive to appease pupils. Whilst it would be easy for us to recommend that mainstream physical education teachers do the same, we acknowledge that this is much more difficult—but not impossible—in a very different cultural landscape where you are teaching multiple, large groups, with varying degrees of ability-related capital, which is often the case in mainstream schools (Morley et al., 2021).

Despite alternative provision physical education practitioners having greater autonomy over curriculum development than those teaching in mainstream schools, we should mention again that some of our participants were concerned that their curriculum did not align with Ofsted inspection expectations. Whether this concern was justified is difficult to know given the data that we generated. What we do know is that it was 'true' for our participants and manifested as an existential threat leading to feelings of insecurity. What we also know is that Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971) enabled our research to highlight evidence of some senior leaders in alternative provision schools endeavouring to use their power and influence to shape physical education curriculum so that it better aligned with the National Curriculum and Ofsted expectations. Some physical education practitioners that we interviewed appeared to do that anyway, especially when pupils were at examinable age, to ensure that they achieved qualifications. Whilst our research highlighted these issues, our data did not enable us to explore the experience of an Ofsted inspection because it was not a planned outcome of the research. As such, we recommend that future research explores teacher experiences of Ofsted inspections of alternative provision physical education because we as a research community know nothing about them.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

A final original finding of our research which does not feature in the general physical education literature, related to the problems associated with trying to develop a physical education curriculum when class numbers can be low and vary day-to-day because of PE refusal, poor attendance, and the frequency at which pupils can transition from and back into mainstream schooling. It was when considering the transient nature of pupils in alternative provision settings that practitioners in our research emphasised the importance of using their power and influence to plan a flexible curriculum that could be modified and adapted. To compensate for small group sizes, the practitioners in our research reported that they mixed age groups and genders to boost numbers. Whilst this enabled team games and competitive sports to be taught, which are a staple of physical education curricula in mainstream schools, it did mean that pupils with a wide range of experiences, preferences, beliefs, needs, and abilities were participating with and against each other in the type of activities that are more likely to marginalise rather than include pupils that do not demonstrate or embody physical performance-related capital (Evans, 2013). Whether this approach can be used in a way that disrupts performative cultures in physical education by enabling pupils to develop and demonstrate a wider repertoire of abilities (Maher et al., 2023) is for future research to explore. Accordingly, we encourage physical education and/or curriculum scholars to learn more about alternative provision settings because, at present, there is a dearth of research-informed knowledge about them despite them becoming a much more common-sense feature of the education landscape in England (and other countries globally).

Whilst our contribution to knowledge about the dominant beliefs and practices relating to physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England was mostly empirical, this research did enable us to cast the concepts of culture, power, and ideology in new lights by situating them in alternative provision landscapes to learn more about them. In doing so, the power and influence of PE practitioners were evident vis-à-vis curriculum development and enactment. At the same time, though, their power was not absolute in that ideologies relating to PE curriculum in alternative provision were influenced, to varying degrees, by wider social and political discourses. As such, our research went some way to considering and highlighting the complexity and nuance of curriculum construction and enactment from a Gramscian perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the alternative provision physical education practitioners who gave their time generously and enthusiastically.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was funded by the Youth Sport Trust.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct application of our research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Author elects not to share data.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Research followed BERA (2024) ethical guidelines and received approval from university research ethics committee.

ORCID

Anthony J. Maher https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1628-0962
Thomas Quarmby https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6950-5010
Oliver Hooper https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6303-6017

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

TWITTER

Anthony J. Maher ajmaher5
Thomas Quarmby DrTomQ
Oliver Hooper DrORHooper
Victoria Wells vawells1
Lucy Slavin lucy_slavin

Endnotes

[i] According to the Department for Education (2013), alternative provision refers to 'education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour' (p. 3).

[ii] From this point, we use the term physical education 'practitioners' rather than 'teachers' because not all participants were qualified teachers (of physical education).

[iii] The Youth Sport Trust is a registered UK charity that aims to equip educators and empower young people with the vision of creating a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits of play and sport. The Youth Sport Trust are our research partners and funded this research.

REFERENCES

Agenda. (2021). *Girls at risk of exclusion: Girls speak briefing Sept 2021*. https://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Girls-at-risk-of-exclusion-Agenda-briefing-September-2021.pdf.

Atkinson, G., & Rowley, J. (2019). Pupils' views on mainstream reintegration from alternative provision: A Q methodological study. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *24*(4), 339–356.

Audrain-McGovern, J., Rodriguez, D., Wileyto, E., Schmitz, K., & Shields, P. (2006). Effect of team sport participation on genetic predisposition to adolescent smoking progression. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, *63*(4), 433–441.

Baker, D. (2015). A note on knowledge in the schooled society: Towards an end to the crisis in curriculum theory. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *47*(6), 763–772.

Ball, S. (1987). *The micro-politics of the school: Towards a theory of school organisation*. Routledge.

Ball, S. (2000). Performativities and fabrications in the education economy: Towards the performative society. *Australian Educational Researcher*, *27*(2), 1–23.

Ball, S. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, *18*(2), 215–228.

Barber, B., Eccles, J., & Stone, M. (2001). Whatever happened to the jock, the brain and the princess? Young adult pathways linked to adolescent activity involvement and social identity. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *16*(5), 429–455.

Biesta, G. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement*. Paradigm Publishers.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

Chenail, R. (2010). Getting specific about qualitative research generalizability. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, *5*, 1–11.

Cronin, L., Greenfield, R., & Maher, A. J. (2023). A qualitative investigation of teachers' experiences of life skills development in PE. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *15*(6), 789–804.

Croston, A., & Hills, L. (2017). The challenges of widening 'legitimate' understandings of ability within physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, *22*(5), 618–634.

Cullen, K., & Monroe, J. (2010). Using positive relationships to engage the disengaged: An educational psychologist-initiated project involving professional sports input to a pupil referral unit. *Educational and Child Psychology*, *27*(1), 64–78.

Department for Education. (2021). *Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, academic year 2019/20*. DfE.

Department for Education. (2024). *Alternative provision in local areas in England: A thematic review*. DfE.

Department for Education (DfE). (2014). *National curriculum in England: Physical education programmes of study*. DfE.

Dunning, E. (1971). The development of modern football. In E. Dunning (Ed.), *The sociology of sport* (pp. 133–151). Frank Cass.

Elias, N. (1978). *What is sociology?* Columbia University Press.

Engelstad, F. (2009). Culture and power. In S. Clegg & M. Haugaard (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of power* (pp. 210–238). Sage.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Evans, J. (2013). Physical education as porn! *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *18*(1), 75–89.
Fletcher, T., Ní Chróinín, D., Gleddie, D., & Benni, S. (2022). *Meaningful physical education: An approach to teaching and learning*. Routledge.
Forrester, G., & Garrett, D. (2016). *Education policy unravelled* (2nd ed.). Sage.
Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
Gill, K., Quilter-Pinner, H., & Swift, D. (2017). *Making the difference: Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion*. Institute for Public Policy Research.
Gray, S., Sandford, R., Stirrup, J., Aldous, D., Hardley, S., Carse, N. R., Hooper, O., & Bryant, A. S. (2022). A comparative analysis of discourses shaping physical education provision within and across the UK. *European Physical Education Review*, *28*(3), 575–593.
Hinds, D. (2019). Foreword. In B. Graham, C. White, A. Edwards, S. Potter, & C. Street (Eds.), *School exclusion: A review of literature on the continued disproportionate exclusion of certain children*. DfE.
Holt, N. (2016). *Positive youth development through sport*. London: Routledge.
Kirk, D. (1992). *Defining physical education: The social construction of a school subject in postwar Britain*. Falmer.
Kirk, D. (2010). *Physical education futures*. Routledge.
Kreps, D. (2016). *Gramsci and Foucault: A reassessment*. Routledge.
Kulig, K., Brener, N., & McManus, T. (2003). Sexual activity and substance use among adolescents by category of physical activity plus team sports participation. *Archives of Paediatric Adolescent Medicine*, *157*, 905–912.
Levinson, M., & Thompson, M. (2016). "I don't need pink hair here": Should we be seeking to reintegrate youngsters without challenging school cultures? *International Journal on School Disaffection*, *12*(1), 23–43.
Lynch, S., Simon, M., & Maher, A. J. (2023). Critical pedagogies for community building: Challenging ableism in higher education physical education. *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives*, *28*(1), 195–210.
Maher, A. J., & Macbeth, J. L. (2013). Physical education, resources and training: The perspective of special educational needs coordinators working in secondary schools in North-West England. *European Physical Education Review*, *20*(1), 90–103.
Maher, A. J. (2016). Special educational needs in mainstream secondary school physical education: Learning support assistants have their say. *Sport, Education and Society*, *21*(2), 262–278.
Maher, A. J., & Fitzgerald, H. (2022). The culture of special schools: The nature, purpose and value of physical education. *Educational Review*, *74*(4), 773–787.
Maher, A. J., Fitzgerald, H., & McVeigh, J. (2020). Factors influencing the culture of special school physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, *26*(4), 954–969.
Maher, A. J., Quarmby, T., Hooper, O., Wells, V., & Slavin, L. (2024). culture, power and ideology: The purpose and value of physical education in alternative provision schools in England. *Educational Review*. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2392555
Maher, A. J., van Rossum, T., & Morley, D. (2023). Assessing the learning of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream school physical education. *British Educational Research Journal*, *49*(1), 110–125.
Mayo, P. (2015). *Hegemony and education under neoliberalism: Insights from Gramsci*. Routledge.
Miller, K., Barnes, G., Melnick, M., Sabo, D., & Farrell, M. (2002). Gender and racial/ethnic differences in predicting adolescent sexual risk: Athletic participation versus exercise. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, *43*(4), 436–450.
Morley, D., Banks, T., Haslingden, C., Kirk, B., Parkinson, S., van Rossum, T., Morley, I. D., & Maher, A. J. (2021). Physical education teachers' views of including pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities: A revisit study. *European Physical Education Review*, *27*(2), 401–418.
Nowell-Smith, G., & Hoare, Q. (1971). *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the prison notebooks*. Lawrence and Wishart.
Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. (2024). *Who we are and what we do*. Retrieved, 4 June 2024, from, https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.
Oliver, K. L., & Kirk, D. (2016). Towards an activist approach to research and advocacy for girls and physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *21*(3), 313–327.
Owen, C., Woods, K., & Stewart, A. (2021). A systematic literature review exploring the facilitators and barriers of reintegration to secondary mainstream schools through alternative provision. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *26*(3), 322–338.
Perryman, J., Maguire, M., Braun, A., & Ball, S. (2018). Surveillance, governmentality and moving the goalposts: The influence of Ofsted on the work of schools in a post-panoptic era. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *66*(2), 145–163.
Philippou, S., & Priestley, M. (2022). Curriculum from the past, in the present and for the future? *The Curriculum Journal*, *33*(3), 341–345.
Priestley, M. (2011). Whatever happened to curriculum theory? Critical realism and curriculum change. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *19*(2), 221–237.

14639704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Quarmby, T., Hooper, O., & Maher, A. J. (2022). *The role and value of physical education in alternative provision schools: Project report*. Youth Sport Trust. https://www.youthsporttrust.org/media/0gdfyfyh/the-role-and-value-of-pe-and-sport-in-alternative-provision-schools-final-report-september-22.pdf

Sandford, R., Quarmby, T., & Hooper, O. (2023). Theorising the potential of physical education and school sport to support the educational engagement, transitions and outcomes of care-experienced young people. *British Educational Research Journal*, *00*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3907

Sinnemaa, C., Nieveen, N., & Priestley, M. (2020). Successful futures, successful curriculum: What can Wales learn from international curriculum reforms? *The Curriculum Journal*, *31*(2), 181–201.

Sissel, P., & Sheard, V. (2001). Opening the gates: Reflections on power, hegemony, language and the status quo. In V. Sheard & P. Sissel (Eds.), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education* (pp. 3–15). Bergin and Garvey.

Smith, B. (2017). Generalizability in qualitative research: Misunderstandings, opportunities and recommendations for the sport and exercise sciences. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *10*(1), 137–149.

Swain, J. (2006). The role of sport in the construction of masculinities in an English independent junior school. *Sport, Education and Society*, *11*(4), 317–335.

Taylor, C. (2012). *Improving alternative provision*. DfE.

Thomson, A., & Sparkes, A. (2020). The micropolitics of being a head of physical education in a secondary school: Insights from an ethnographic study. *Sport, Education and Society*, *25*(7), 815–828.

Tracy, S. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(10), 837–851.

How to cite this article: Maher, A. J., Quarmby, T., Hooper, O., Wells, V., & Slavin, L. (2025). The physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England: A Gramscian critique. *The Curriculum Journal*, *00*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.317

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.317 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [31/03/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License