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Connecting Communities through Cheerleading: the *Cheer in Schools* Programme

Lisa White and Joanna Hardman

The aim of this article is to reflect upon and evaluate the experiences of a group of key partners and physical education teachers who took part in the *Cheer in Schools* (CIS) programme. CIS is a volunteer scheme, developed and operated by students from the University of Gloucestershire, which delivers cheerleading workshops and a cheerleading competition to young people in the local community. The aim of CIS is two-fold: (1) to provide young people from the local community, particularly females, the opportunity to participate in a new and non-traditional physical activity programme and (2) to promote cheerleading as a sport.

This article explores: (1) the delivery of physical education and school sport in secondary schools; (2) the perceived barriers females encounter when participating in physical education and school sport; and (3) the views, thoughts and feelings of those directly involved in the delivery and implementation of the CIS project.

Introduction

The role that physical education and school sport play in promoting participation has been an area of great debate during the last decade as research suggests that a negative experience of physical activity and sport during school years can contribute to a lack of engagement by teenage females (Allender *et al.*, 2006). Research also indicates that the most dramatic decline in female participation in PE and school sport occurs around age 14 and that participation continues to fall throughout adolescence (Butt *et al.*, 2011). Findings from a report by the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF 2012:64), entitled *Changing the Game for Girls*, concludes that 46 per cent of female participants do not like the activities they experience during their physical education lessons. Butt *et al.* (2011) suggest that it is important to offer activities that sustain interest in life long participation but recent figures from the Active People 8 Survey show that, although female participation rates have increased, only 30.3 per cent of women take part in sport

once a week compared to 40.9 per cent of men (Sport England, 2014).

A number of factors can influence female participation in sport, physical education and physical activity, including issues related to time (Reichert *et al.*, 2007; Butt *et al.*, 2011), body image (Allender *et al.*, 2006; Butt *et al.*, 2011), the nature of physical education (Utley, 2005; Penney and Evans, 2005) and activity choice (Townsend *et al.*, 2012). This article is specifically interested in activity choice for females in school since it has been suggested that a lack of choice, when it comes to selecting activities, contributes to this decline in participation by young females (Williams and Bedward, 2002; Lubans *et al.*, 2011).

Previous revisions of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) saw changes in the type of practical activities offered to young people but the overall focus remained the same, with traditional team games or activities dominating the provision. Usually these activity areas were determined and selected by the educator in charge and the young people

participating in the activity had very little say in what they wanted to do (Whitehead *et al*, 2010), leading to disengagement in lessons (Kirk *et al*, 2006). Recent changes to the physical education curriculum have, however, seen the introduction of 'non-traditional' gymnastics activities, such as parkour and cheerleading (Pocknell and Smith, 2011).

Grindstaff and West (2006) describe cheerleading as a sport that incorporates advanced tumbling, stunting and pyramid building as well as involving dancing, jumps and gymnastics skills. The British Cheerleading Association (2014) believes that cheerleading can have a positive contribution to participation by offering pupils an activity that is different and inclusive and fulfils the curriculum guidelines that require learners to "get involved in a broad range of different activities that, in combination, develop the whole body" (QCA, 2007:195). Though cheerleading is not widely used as a part of physical education in English schools, figures from the Department for Education (DfE) show an increase in the amount of schools offering cheerleading: 37 per cent in 2010 compared to 32 per cent in 2009. Those schools that did offer cheerleading as part of their PE curriculum or extra-curricular provision reported a rise in participation levels by pupils across years 1-13 (Quick *et al*, 2010).

Intervention: the CIS project

Following the recommendations that multi-activity physical education programmes increase participation (Green *et al*, 2005), and the recognition that traditional team games can act as a "turn off" for some young people, (Kirk *et al*, 2006) a group of students at the University of Gloucestershire created an programme that aimed to diversify physical education and school sport and promote an environment for learning that encouraged young females to want to participate in physical education and school sport activities. A consultation process was held with a group of students, teachers and the School Sports Network Manager and from these discussions the CIS programme was born. To begin with CIS was introduced to the community in four local Gloucestershire schools, utilising the university cheerleading team members as coaches to provide weekly extra-curricular cheerleading clubs in schools. Participants were taught stunting techniques, tumbles, jumps and motions which collectively created an individual cheerleading routine for each school's team. The aim of the CIS clubs was to provide a fully inclusive atmosphere that enabled all ages, genders and abilities to be involved but, initially, a large number of female participants attended the club. Since its initiation in 2011, over 150 young people from the local community have taken part in CIS.

Method

A case study approach was adopted so the experiences of the physical education staff and key partners who were directly involved in the delivery of a 'real life', contemporary project could be explored (Yin, 2014). This approach was deemed appropriate since the aim of this research was to understand the issues related to female participation in schools and the views of key partners of the CIS project. Five participants were purposively selected to take part in the data collection process: two heads of girls' PE, one female PE teacher, one teaching assistant (with a remit to support PE) and the School Sports Network Manager.

Data was collected in the form of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Participants were asked to reflect on the following:

- their perceptions and experience of female participation in physical education and school sport
- what types of activities were currently being offered in their schools
- their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of cheerleading (before and after the event)
- their overall views about the CIS programme.

Utilising the method of Thematic Analysis, patterns were identified and analysed from the qualitative data, aiming to develop an understanding of the participants' views and experiences (Flick, 2009).

Results and discussion

The results are organised, presented and discussed under four major themes:

Views on female participation

Nature of activities

Views on cheerleading

Thoughts, feelings and views of CIS

Views on female participation

The overall consensus was that female participation in physical education and school sport is still a major issue in schools. One of the teachers stated "... it's shocking. I feel a majority of schools struggle when it comes to girls participating in both PE and extra-curricular clubs". Building on previous research completed in this area (WSF, 2012) the key partners in this project believed there were numerous factors that impacted on the participation rates of young girls, including modern technology, friendship groups, socialising and body image. The teaching environment was also seen as



a major factor that affected the delivery of physical education. For example, all of the participants felt that teaching games activities outdoors, in inclement weather conditions, affected motivation levels and enjoyment. Connected to this the participants felt the focus on the "symbolic values" (Penney and Evans, 2005) associated with sport, in particular competitive team games, served as a barrier to participation as females feel discouraged and embarrassed when they do not perform well.

Nature of activities

All of the participants suggested the revision of the NCPE allowed for more flexibility and provided opportunities for teachers to adapt their lessons to meet the needs of their learners, but they all felt that, in the local area, traditional team sports still dominated provision. The participants recognised that traditional team games did not appeal to all of their pupils and suggested that, "If a school only offers traditional sports they are limiting the girls and their potential". In line with research completed by Townsend *et al* (2012), all five teachers described how providing more activity choice was a significant factor that could positively impact on the motivational levels and participation of females in physical education and school sport. One teacher described how:

We as a school have learnt that it is important to offer a variety of sports and activities to encourage participation as there is obviously something out there for everyone to excel in; traditional sport is not something that appeals to everyone, even though that is where I am most comfortable teaching.

All of the participants explained that, although they recognised the benefits of including non-traditional activities in the curriculum, they did not feel confident or competent enough to provide these alternative activities. Participants discussed how their initial teacher training focused on showing them how to teach specific activities rather than concepts. This raised issues about their teacher training programme and the fact that their training had focused on the delivery of traditional activities that were underpinned by the symbolic values associated with sport. All of the participants commented that teacher training programmes needed to provide more opportunities for trainee teachers to engage in and learn about non-traditional activities that young people want to participate in. Katene (2004) believes awareness and understanding of continued professional development is an entitlement of all teachers and is central to raising the standards of teaching, learning and assessment.

Views on cheerleading

All of the participants believed cheerleading could be a valued addition to physical education lessons and school sport. However, they all stressed concerns related to the specialist knowledge required to teach the sport.

With the technical aspects such as stunting and the level of gymnastics involved I wouldn't feel comfortable teaching it myself, however with specialist coaches or a high level of training I completely feel this could be utilised in PE and school sport.

Participants also suggested that there are many negative stereotypes about cheerleading, implying that the teacher's views and perceptions of cheerleading could influence the inclusion of cheerleading as an activity area in physical education and school sport. Three of the participants admitted that, before they became involved in the CIS project, they had very specific views of cheerleading. One of the teachers described how:

...a few years ago I probably would have been involved in the stereotypical view that it's shaking pom poms on the sidelines of other sports games, which sounds terrible coming from a PE teacher but I'd never been aware of the true athleticism involved in the stunting, dance and gymnastics involved.

Another teacher described how she originally thought, "Cheerleading was all about girly people waving pom poms and jumping up and down in short skirts".

When the participants got involved in the CIS programme they were surprised, however, by the high level of skill and athleticism involved in cheerleading. In this respect, CIS helped to change the views of the participants in this study and challenged their perceptions of cheerleading. This is important since research has shown that the delivery of physical education and sport in schools can be influenced by what teachers deem to be "worthwhile practice" (Evans, 2004). How teachers perceive certain activities is extremely relevant because pre-conceived assumptions about an activity can lead to stereotypes and labels that discourage the promotion and facilitation of certain activities in a school environment.

Thoughts, feelings and views of CIS

Finally, all of the participants agreed that cheerleading was a positive addition to the activities offered at each school. One of the teachers explained that she felt cheerleading had a lot to offer since it was:

...really inclusive because of the many elements involved with cheer, such as having stunts, jumps, tumblers. There is something suitable for all ages, abilities, and body types. I think cheerleading in PE lessons, because of these reasons, can be very inclusive.

Another participant described how cheerleading allowed each learner to take ownership for their actions and to work at their own pace and ability level:

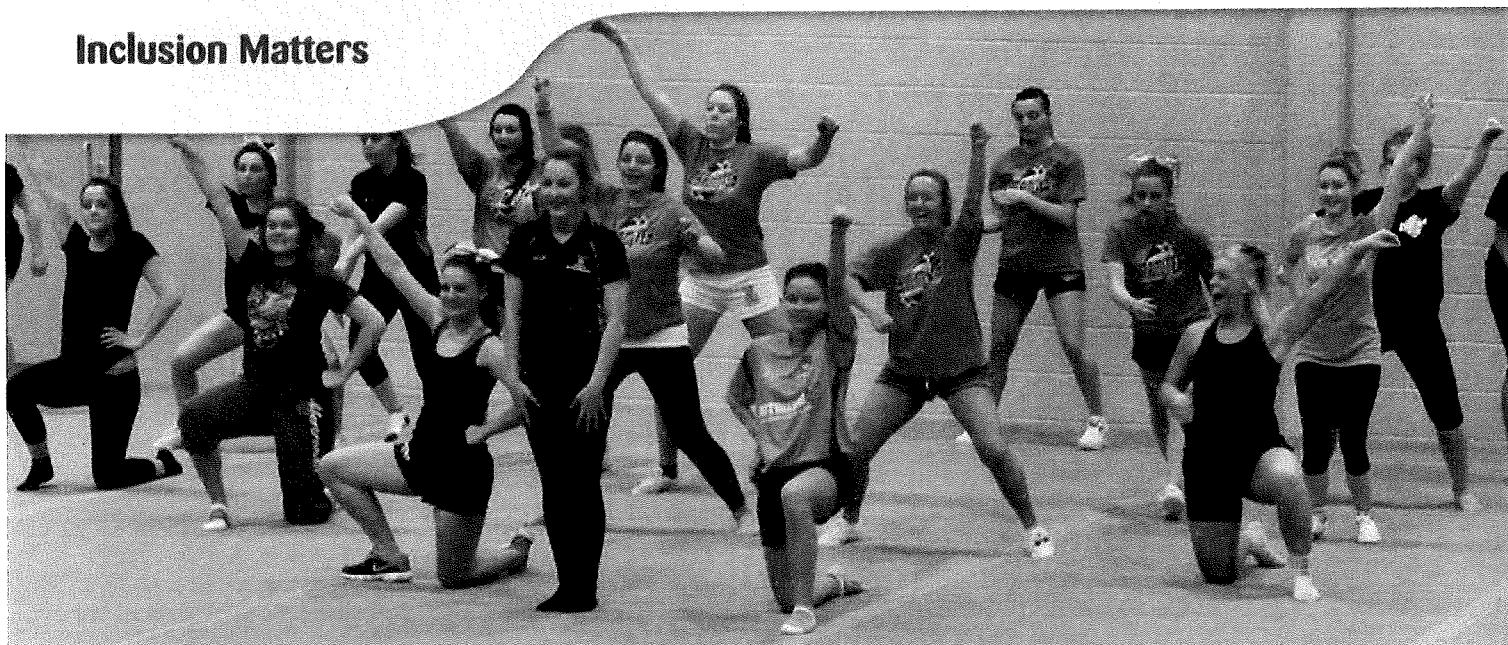
Cheerleading is constantly progressive, there is always something else that can be learnt, a way to make a stunt harder or higher which is why I think it engages so many of our students. There is a great sense of pride and accomplishment from learning so many new skills that they haven't ever tried before.

Conclusion

The physical education teachers and key partners commented that, overall, the CIS programme was a positive addition to the school sport provision in local schools.

I'd say it has been extremely successful, it has served as a valuable tool to get the girls involved in more activities and we're certainly seeing more and more people join it each year. We as a school have learnt that it is important to offer a variety of sports and activities to encourage participation as there is obviously something out there for everyone to excel in, traditional sports is not something that appeals to everyone... I have more and more girls each week asking about more opportunities to take part, it's fantastic.

Female participation in sport increased within the schools as a direct result of the intervention. CIS provided pupils with an alternative activity to become engaged in, as well as challenge and the option of competition. The intervention brought alternative activities to the physical educator's attention and taught them that the



introduction of diverse physical education and school sport activities will engage, motivate and interest pupils as well as promote lifelong participation in physical activity.

The authors recognise that cheerleading is often perceived as a gendered activity and sometimes it is criticised for promoting a particular expression of femininity. This is something that could be explored in more depth in future research. There were also some specific comments raised to further the programme's future success, including:

- offering taster sessions in physical education lessons, led by the young people who attended CIS
- providing a training event to introduce teachers to the basics of cheerleading
- inviting local schools, who currently do not take part in the cheerleading festival, to come along to the event, and then offer taster sessions to these schools
- providing 'open events' at local cheerleading clubs in the community showcasing the work of the students who attended CIS at local events such as the School Games and the local physical education conference.

It was also acknowledged that it was important to ensure that students had the opportunity to continue participating in cheerleading outside of school, if they wanted to. School-based opportunities need to reflect provision outside of the school system, so that lifelong participation in physical activity is a realistic option (Hill *et al.*, 2013). In the case of this study, there are five cheerleading clubs in the local area, as well as a university squad, that offer an exit route for all participants; the key issue is that teachers and deliverers of school sport are aware of these opportunities so that they can signpost young people in the right direction.

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