Recycling and resistance to change in physical education: The informal recruitment of physical education teachers in schools

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**Purpose:** Physical education (PE) teachers’ interactions with students were explored to examine self-selection for PE teaching as a career option during school.

**Method:** Semi-structured life story interviews were conducted with 29 PE teachers at different career stages. Complementing occupational socialisation, Bourdieu’s habitus, capital, field and practice were adopted as thinking tools to inform thematic analysis.

**Results:** 3 key themes were identified: a) Acceptance into the inner sanctum based on physical competence, effort and enthusiasm for the traditional curriculum, b) Opportunities provided to students accepted into the inner sanctum, and c) Outside the inner sanctum: Mismatched habitus and self-selection for PE teaching.

**Conclusion:** Students exchanged competence, effort and enthusiasm in the traditional curriculum for acceptance and opportunities to encourage self-selection for teaching PE. Without acceptance, individuals experienced challenges gaining career support. Dominated by a homogenous group resistant to change, PE needs independent careers information to promote change through heterogeneity.

**Keywords**

teacher habitus, symbolic capital, inner sanctum, subjective warrant, acculturation, PETE recruitment
Despite being described as agents of change (Fullan, 1993; Van der Heijen et al, 2015), teachers’ deeply held beliefs established during their time at school affect how they teach when they enter the profession (Stran & Curtner-Smith, 2009). Shared beliefs and practices, developed through intergenerational interactions (Green, 2002), have contributed towards the profession’s resistance to change (Brown, 1999; Brown & Evans, 2004; Brown et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2016). Scholars have attributed this to physical education (PE) teachers being a homogenous group with a strong disposition towards sport (Curtner-Smith, 2009; Ferry, 2018; O’Neill & Richards, 2018). The recycling of practice within PE contributes to debates surrounding the effectiveness of PE in its current, recycled form: a multi-activity, teacher directed, sport-as-technique approach (Kirk, 2010; Walsh, 2019). This exclusionary practice leads to high levels of marginalisation of children in PE (Smith and Karp, 1996; Mowat, 2015). Worryingly, unfavourable memories of PE contribute towards physical activity disengagement in adulthood (Ladwig et al., 2018). Within the UK context, there is limited evidence of significant change in practice (Casey & MacPhail, 2020). Drawing from the foundational work of Dewar (1989), scholars have long ascertained the significance of in-service teachers in the recruitment process for PE teaching (Bulger et al, 2015; Woods et al., 2016; Curtner-Smith, 2016; Kern et al., 2019; Richards & Templin, 2019). Furthermore, Richards et al. (2021) suggest that recruitment efforts are not active, and therefore perpetuate the status quo embedded within PE with regards to the background of recruits and their strengths in terms of preferred physical activity and sport engagement.

However, what is less explored is the extent of the influence that in-service teachers wield in recruitment, and the impact of their beliefs on the process for self-selection and elimination of potential recruits. This paper addresses this problem by exploring how the intergenerational interactions between PE teachers and their school students shape the selection of PE teaching as a potential career route. The subjective warrant, defined as the social mechanisms that ease one’s entry into one’s chosen profession (Lortie, 1975), is a facilitator to individuals considering PE teaching as a career choice. The subjective warrant ‘consists of each person’s perceptions of the requirements for teacher education and for actual teaching in schools’ (Lawson, 1983, p. 6). Dewar and Lawson (1984) describe it as a construct that links all factors (personal, situational and societal) that influence recruitment into the profession; thus creating a vision that is shaped and developed as a result of all the attractors and facilitators identified in Lortie’s
(1975) foundational work. Building on Dewar and Lawson (1984), recent studies still identify time in schools, participation in sports teams, secondary involvement such as coaching and assisting, and stereotypical practices in physical education as instrumental in informing one’s subjective warrant for teaching PE (Curtner-Smith, 2016; Author, 2018; Richards et al, 2019; Richards & Templin, 2014).

Lawson (1984) argues that the perception for career entry into physical education teaching is easy; therefore, it has a permissive subjective warrant. In contrast, Ferry’s (2018) observations exposed the homogeneity of PE teachers. Drawing from this, we argue that the subjective warrant for PE teaching should be seen as stringent, not permissive, because the beliefs of in-service teachers influence whom they see as potential PE teachers and subsequently allow access into their social spaces such as the PE office and staffroom. Interestingly, the PE office/ staffroom is considered as a field that can shape the practices and individuals within it; nurturing some and eliminating others (Rossi et al., 2016). Using this as a starting point, this paper explores the influence of the PE social spaces outside of the classroom on potential recruits’ subjective warrants entering the profession.

**Occupational socialisation as a framework to position PE teacher recruitment**

To understand the beliefs and practices of PE teachers, we must explore their network of social relations because the processes through which teachers learn knowledge, skills and dispositions to become effective occur in interactions where norms and values are passed on (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Green, 2002). Occupational Socialisation Theory (OST) is a popular theoretical framework for understanding the recruitment, education and ongoing socialisation of PE teachers across three distinct phases: acculturation phase (birth to physical education teacher education - PETE), professional phase (during PETE) and organisational phase (in-service teaching) (Lawson, 1983; Templin & Schempp, 1989; Richards et al., 2014; Westerlund and Eliasson, 2022).

OST provides evidence that the acculturation phase underpins PE teacher identity development and accounts for their actions and behaviours (Templin & Smith, 1989; Curtner-Smith, 2009). However, limited research has focused on intergenerational relations during the acculturation phase (Templin et al., 2016), or how interactions between in-service PE teachers and their students lead to the development of practices. How these interactions are translated into initiating self-selection or elimination for teaching PE can provide insights into why PE teachers are a homogenous group (Ferry, 2018). Further exploration
of these acculturation experiences in relation to self-selection into the profession and exploration of intergenerational interactions relating to recruitment may help us to understand why certain teacher beliefs and practices are so resistant to change.

The timing of making the decision to enter the profession also has some influence over which recruits are more likely to be resistant to change. Early deciders have more concrete beliefs that were harder to change during teacher education (Curtner-Smith, 2016). Sage (1989) defines early deciders as making the decision somewhere between early adolescence and entrance into college, and late deciders range from college entrance to after their entry into teaching. Whilst early and late deciders are mentioned in physical education teacher socialisation literature, the concept itself has not been fully defined and explored; therefore, further investigation is warranted. From Lortie (1975) we can see that early decisions to enter the teaching profession were common and influenced by positive experiences in school. He argues that teaching is an easy occupation for children to be exposed to and therefore consider as a career choice. Belka et al. (1991) suggested that early deciders were more likely to be influenced by their PE teachers and prioritised fun in lessons, whereas late deciders had a desire to improve the profession. Later studies (Maurer & Curtner-Smith, 2019; Merrem & Curtner-Smith, 2019) suggest that this has not changed.

Spending 13,000 hours watching their teachers teach, individuals establish beliefs about effective teaching and what attributes are needed to be a good PE teacher via an ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975, p. 62). Dewar and Lawson (1984) suggested that recruits self-select when they have a love of working with children and having good interactive skills. Moreover, they develop their sense of self as physically active through sport and want to impart their love of sport to others (Dewar, 1989; Author, 2018). However, this does not fully explain the self-selection or elimination process.

PE teachers are recognised as facilitators for the recruitment process, often giving advice to support potential recruits in their journey to teacher education (Kern et al., 2019; Richards et al., 2014; Richards et al., 2021). Woods et al. (2016) suggest that PE teachers engage with four key informal processes; encouraging those who promise to be a ‘good fit’, providing opportunities to shadow everyday PE teachers, share resources, and introduce potential recruits to current student teachers.
However, there is no active approach towards other students (Curtner-Smith, 2016; Richards et al, 2021; Richards & Templin, 2019).

Dewar (1989) warned that if recruitment were limited to those students who are focused on team sports, PE would be slow to change. Two decades later, Curtner-Smith (2009) referred to the need to break this cycle of recruiting teachers who have a narrow conceptualisation of PE. The recruitment of diverse students into PE teaching is restricted when only those who fit a certain mould are recruited (O’Neill & Richards, 2018; Richards et al., 2013). However, establishing a clear definition for who is deemed a ‘good fit’ by in-service teachers will give insight into the profession’s resistance to change.

**Fitting into the field: habitus and capital to understand recycling of practice**

Whilst OST provides a framework to examine when and how socialised beliefs and behaviours are assimilated or accommodated during the different phases, Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and capital can be used to complement OST as pertinent tools to illuminate the ways in which intergenerational relations lead to a reproduction of practice (Brown et al., 2016; lisahunter et al, 2015)” giving insights into why socialised beliefs and behaviours are so potent. Habitus is a ‘practical mastery’ (Bourdieu, 1984) or a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990) that relates to a set of dispositions learnt over time through immersion in a field (the environment). Developing an appropriate habitus can provide an individual with capital in that field; Bourdieu (1986) identified economic, cultural, and social capitals which offer resources that can be exchanged for greater status, or symbolic capital. Scholars in PE have often focused on the embodied elements of the development of habitus and accumulation of physical capital through ‘body work’ (Armour, 1999) or investment in the right body shape and skills by students/athletes. The development and holding of social, cultural and symbolic capital provide a useful frame for thinking about how beginning teachers learn to fit into the field of PE. Lisahunter et al. (2011) argue that the staffroom and PE offices are important professional learning spaces (or sub-fields within the field of PE) whereby beginning teachers interact to develop their own professional identity and as well as the nature of their work. Rossi et al. (2014) highlighted the importance pre-service teachers (PSTs) place on their relationships with their in-service colleagues through participation with office dynamics and feelings of acceptance due to having an alignment with existing practices valued within the department, that is, an appropriate habitus. The cultural codes pre-service teachers are required to
understand in order to fit in are typically passed on to newcomers via existing staff (Schempp, 1993). The more pre-service teachers comply with the existing habitus and practice the more they are drawn to the ‘centre’ of the PE office and become accepted within the field (Rossi et al., 2016). This social space can be perceived as what Brown (1999) describes as an ‘inner sanctum’ in PETE; that is, only those with the required symbolic or cultural capital are invited in, and then further socialisation and identity construction occurs through continuing to demonstrate the required behaviours that make up the group habitus. Previously, focus was on PSTs already in the professional phase of OST. Understanding the point at which potential recruits enter this part of the PE field needs further investigation to highlight how acculturation phase experiences can influence both recruitment into the profession and what is valued within the field.

The habitus affects practice, predisposing teachers and coaches towards specific ways of acting (Light & Evans, 2018). Brown et al. (2016) suggest that once an individual’s habitus has been developed through sustained and repetitive practices within the PE field, the individual’s physical, emotional and cognitive dispositions will continue to shape how they need to act. Bourdieu (1990) indicated that the behaviours of an individual will be viewed positively providing they conform to the practices already embedded within the field. Dispositions/habitus are durable, facilitating deeply embedded practices. A group habitus was possible after a long period of shared and or similar experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). As a result, early career teachers often adopt a pedagogy of necessity whereby if their beliefs and practice do not match with others already in the working environment they change to fit in (Tinning, 1988). Wash out (Zeigner & Tabacknick, 1981) occurs when new ideas are not validated or accepted by a PE team and are therefore dismissed. Socially constructed practices become embodied therefore cementing historical behaviours into the present. Exploring how the group habitus and shared beliefs influence self-selection into the profession gives a deeper understanding of why it is so resistant to change.

The notion of a durable habitus can suggest there is no possibility of change, however developing circumstances and reflexivity can lead to changes in the habitus and hence to practice. At the boundaries of fields, an individual can become aware of their habitus and makes shifts in their dispositions (Author, 2016). Brown et al. (2016, p. 207) suggest that ‘crisis and creativity’ are central to these changes. This study explores the intergenerational interactions between in service teachers and
students during their time as students in school (acculturation phase). It further examines how this
influences the self-selection process towards choosing PE teaching as a career choice. By exploring the
formation of habitus in potential recruits during their acculturation phase, we aim to give insight into its
contribution to recycling.

**Methods**

This study was part of a larger mixed methods investigation that utilised a cross-sectional design
informed by the interpretivist paradigm (Pope, 2006). This section aimed to explore the intergenerational
interactions between in-service teachers and students during the acculturation phase and how this
influences the self-selection process towards choosing PE teaching as a career choice. The experiences of
PSTs, newly qualified teachers (NQTs), and experienced teachers (ETs, with five or more years of
experience) prior to entering teacher education were explored. All methodological procedures were
approved by the [redacted for peer review] Ethical Committee.

**Participants**

Participants were selected by initially employing stratified purposive sampling dependent on career
stage, gender, sporting interests and when they made the decision to enter PETE. This ensured a variety
of factors influencing their thoughts, feelings and perceptions towards their recruitment into and teaching
of PE was accounted for. The PETE cohort at a UK university were contacted, all of whom completed an
initial questionnaire. Thirteen PSTs from this cohort agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews
(8 male and 5 female); Twelve expression of interest forms were returned following graduation for
students beginning their NQT year. Eight NQTs agreed to be interviewed for the study (1 male and 7
female). An alumnus mailing list was used to recruit ETs; eight consented to take part in the study but
one withdrew later. Using snowball sampling, another ET was recruited for a total of eight ETs (2 male
and 8 female). In total, 29 participants took part in the study. They are identified in the Results by their
pseudonym. Their level of experience was not taken into consideration in this section of the larger study
as there was no relationship found between career stage and recruitment experience.
Setting

The setting for NQTs and ETs comprised of the PE environment in multiple schools (each of the 29 participants’ own workplace). Each school has its own rhetoric although PE habitus and practice is embedded more broadly across all of them due to the intergenerational and interdependent links (Brown, 1999; Green, 2002). Interviews took place within each participant’s school during the school day in a designated classroom or office. PSTs were interviewed in a private space on the university campus.

Data generation and analysis

To gain insight into experiences during the acculturation phase and factors influencing recruitment into the PE profession, semi-structured life story interviews were conducted with the 29 participants. A life story, from a sociological standpoint, involves generating the participant’s oral account and subjective reconstruction of their life in conversation with the researcher (Gillham, 2000; Sparkes & Templin, 1992). To support understanding the participants’ context and to build a rapport between interviewer and participant, the first author spent a day at school observing the participant teaching.

The interview questions were informed by the personal, situational and societal factors influencing the subjective warrant (Lortie, 1975; Dewar & Lawson, 1984); the factors contributing to how the profession announced itself and what the key processes were to promote self-selection or elimination; why the participant chose PE teaching as a career; their perception of their PE environment based on their own experiences in school; and the importance of academic ability in contrast to their interpersonal skills and personality traits. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

A reflective thematic analysis was undertaken by the first author, using Braun and Clarke’s (2019) guide to bringing meaning, structure and order to the data and to reveal shared patterns of experience amongst a group who have something in common. Experiences that have influenced the self-selection process and the subjective warrant for PE teaching during their acculturation phase, and socialisation processes, were focused upon with individuals at different career stages. Bourdieu’s (1978) concepts of habitus, capital, field and practice were used as a ‘thinking tool’ during data analysis to identify and explore how symbolic and cultural capital within the PE field influence interactions between in-service teachers and potential recruits, reinforcing the existing group habitus. Furthermore, this
allowed further examination of the permissiveness of the subjective warrant in terms of self-selection or
elimination into the profession. As a former PETE student, PE teacher and current PE teacher educator,
the interviewer (first author) reflected in a research diary and through conversations with the third author
on her position and her interactions with the participants, including how operating within a PE
environment felt natural and familiar to adhere to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative
Studies (COREQ) guidelines (Booth et al., 2014). COREQ guidelines allow the researcher to check the
authenticity, reliability and trustworthiness of her work within three domains; 1) research team and
reflexivity (personal characteristics and relationship with the participants, 2) study design (theoretical
framework, participant selection, sampling and methods, setting, data collection, interview guide) and 3)
analysis and findings (data analysis, coding and coders, derivation of themes, software, participant
checking, reporting and clarification of themes). This helped situate the participants’ stories in relation
to the first author’s own experiences, which supported the reflective thematic analysis. The authenticity
and trustworthiness of the analysis was aided by asking participants to review the transcript; an iterative
approach to reading and coding the transcripts whereby continually reviewing interpretations against all
the transcripts, and the involvement of the second and third authors as critical friends to review the
developing codes, and the derivation of themes (Tracy, 2010).

Results

Evidence is offered in this section to demonstrate how in-service PE teachers facilitated an informal
recruitment process informing potential recruits’ consideration of PE teaching as a career choice. The
following themes are presented, using Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, capital, field and practice as
thinking tools, to illustrate how potential recruits were selected: (1) students were accepted into the inner
sanctum who demonstrated appropriate physical, social and cultural capital for their competence, effort
and enthusiasm within the traditional curriculum; (2) this enabled them to access opportunities to test
their personal conception of occupational choice in ways that reinforced custodial pedagogical practices,
but that (3) any participants who wanted to be PE teachers but did not display the appropriate capitals to
enable their entry to the inner sanctum encountered barriers to gaining relevant information and support
about how to access PETE. In-service PE teachers act as informal gatekeepers to the profession,
therefore indicating there is a stringent, not permissive, subjective warrant during the acculturation phase.

**Acceptance into the ‘inner sanctum’ based on physical competence, effort and enthusiasm**

PE teachers contribute to recruitment into the profession (Woods et al., 2016). Our participants illustrate the extent to which their teachers influenced who the profession announced itself to, as Harriet (PST) exemplifies:

My head of sixth form’s a PE teacher…she knew I wanted to be a PE teacher, so she gave me the opportunity to do all the experience within teaching in the school and everything. My personal statement, she helped me through it so much because she was like, we’re going to get you into a QTS [Qualified Teacher Status] course, it’s going to be fine (Harriet, PST).

Significantly, in-service PE teachers utilised their own ‘informal’ recruitment process from their ‘inner sanctum’ as described earlier in the paper to identify potential PE teachers. The inner sanctum was a space of symbolic capital for those with the right type and level of physical and cultural capital in games, and was a space created by PE teachers for the students who they subsequently nurtured into the professional field of PE teaching. Drawing from Brown (1999) this space has previously been recognised as rewarding and perpetuating specific behaviours.

Physical competence gave students status or capital amongst both peers and teachers. It became a building block that contributed to their sporting habitus. Some were recognised for their physical competence in one sport; Alex (PST), an early decider, recalled how his PE teacher had recognised his talents and sought him out for the older cricket teams at school:

I was doing a lot and I was county level cricket at that point, a lot of my time was doing training and stuff. He [PE teacher] came and said, “I want you to play cricket for the team”, “Right, I’ll come to nets and see what it’s like”, and I was in Year 8 [age 12-13] and I was playing Year 11 [age 15-16] cricket (Alex, PST).

David (PST) contributed substantially to a number of his school’s sports teams which meant that he was given opportunity, status and recognition from his PE teachers:
I was sort of good at everything … so that was a really good thing for me because I was involved in all the school sports teams, swimming, like going to galas, and stuff like that, so having all that opportunity (David, PST).

Likewise, Sammi (ET) noted how representing the school in competitions (a form of social capital) afforded her a ‘different relationship’ with her teacher (symbolic capital), the opportunity for status and hence to ‘fit in’:

I was in a lot of teams, I used to play netball, I used to play football, I used to do a lot of swimming, I think just representing the school, going out to fixtures and as you know, you have a different relationship with your PE teacher and it was nice, you used to go to these fixtures and that teacher really knew you really well, which was lovely (Sammi, ET).

Positive attitudes and high engagement contributed significantly to PE involvement and subsequently initial recruitment by the PE teachers. Those who played for school teams without excelling in a range of team sports were perceived as contributory team members within the PE department. Katy (NQT) did not identify herself as sporty, however, she was very involved with the activities on offer:

I wasn’t massively sporty. I was involved in netball, I'd played football at primary, but I think that was because it was all that was on offer to us at primary. Because the football teacher was an ex-player, so she kind of did the football, we went off to play matches and I've got scars on my knees still, so that was fab (Katy, NQT).

Katy (NQT) was recognised for her efforts in sporting activities and indicates the embodied nature of the sporting habitus here, that she demonstrated with her scarred knees the effort and investment she had made into games. Hannah (NQT) described herself as not especially good at many sports, but as working hard and being engaged, hence being given leadership opportunities. Therefore, demonstrating effort and enthusiasm towards PE and school sport could be exchanged for symbolic capital within the field, a high status in the eyes of her teacher. Participants with high physical competence, effort and enthusiasm within a competitive sports-based curriculum fostered meaningful relationships with their PE teachers.
through shared sporting experiences and a matching habitus. Harriet (PST) gave a detailed account of her own relationship with the PE department in her school and how it evolved over time:

I just really wanted to be doing what they were doing. I love the PE department as a whole, because the PE department is a great place…They all really enjoy what they’re doing, they’re all having a laugh and they’re all into sport, they’re all mucking about, and I think the relationship I had with my teachers as well, like I really enjoyed being there…They’re friends, because I think when you do it as an extra subject, they don’t become kind of…teachers anymore, because you spend so much time in the week with them, you just get along with them so well…One of my PE teachers was in a band, and I think the whole class went to one of his gigs, because we just got along with them as if they were mates and not teachers anymore in the end (Harriet, PST).

Within this environment, Harriet demonstrates how she transitioned from student to potential PE teacher. She liked to feel needed by the PE staff and was willing to support their everyday tasks. This acted as a rite of passage and an additional layer of socialisation into the profession. Her time within the PE department developing the group habitus was a result of the extra opportunities given to her. This also allowed her to test her conception of what was needed to join the profession. Knowing the rules of the game or ‘fitting in’, by demonstrating physical competence, effort, and enthusiasm, provides physical and cultural capital with which potential recruits in the acculturation phase gain status with their teacher, offering further opportunity to develop the teacher habitus. To gain recognition through physical competence, effort and enthusiasm, individuals embarked on a socialisation journey that shaped their sporting habitus through their engagement with the traditional curriculum.

This socialisation was not the case for all students, however, and Sammi (ET), a teacher with five+ years’ experience, noted how the traditional curriculum taught by the older staff members in the PE department limited the enthusiasm and engagement of some classmates due to its narrow focus:

Interviewer: What were the lowlights of your PE experience?
Sammi: I think the lowlights, when I was being taught by the older PE teachers because my high school, if you didn’t like hockey and netball, then you didn’t really enjoy PE because the teachers taught the sports that they liked, so we didn’t do gym, we didn’t do dance, we didn’t do swimming at school, it was just the sports in the curriculum that they enjoyed. I was lucky because I enjoyed all sports, but I can see why some people really didn’t want to do PE. (Sammi, ET)

PE teaching as a potential career choice announced itself to predominantly those who loved games. PE teachers placed importance on games and swimming – which all offer opportunities to represent the school in competitions – therefore marginalising other activities. Interestingly, all of the participants in the study referred to sports associated with the traditional curriculum when giving examples relating to their experiences of physical education; indicating that the formative experiences of PE are a reproduction of the sport as technique, heavy games - based traditional curriculum as described by Kirk (2010) and later, by Walsh (2019). The excerpt from Dora (PST) highlights the fact that the teaching of non-games was limited:

I can’t say I did much in the way of gymnastics apart from maybe year seven when I first got there, and the same with dance, everything else was kind of like hockey and then football or netball and basketball, very much team-based games (Dora, PST).

Jeanne’s (ET) comments below support this idea and gives insight into the lack of value placed on the ‘minor’ activities such as gymnastics and dance-based movement. The dismissive attitude towards activities that are not central to a games-based curriculum is evident:

It was okay if you were rubbish at trampolining because in a few weeks’ time you’d be doing basketball (Jeanne, ET).

The fact that physical competence, effort and enthusiasm in other activities were not valued further marginalised those who enjoyed them. PE teaching might not have announced itself as a career choice to those who enjoyed activities beyond those included in the traditional curriculum. Consequently, individuals may not have been provided with opportunity to develop and demonstrate their physical and cultural capital (competence, effort and enthusiasm) that would allow opportunity to build the strong and
meaningful relationships with their PE teachers, thus facilitating ease of entry into the ‘inner sanctum’.

As a consequence, arguably the subjective warrant for teaching PE is not permissive.

**Opportunities provided by teachers to students in the inner sanctum**

Relationships between PE teachers and potential recruits were strengthened during extra-curricular activities. They contributed towards the self-selection process relating to occupational choice. Lortie (1975) and Dewar and Lawson (1984) noted the importance of the interpersonal theme in teaching, and this is supported by Brown’s (1999) work on intergenerational links. The quotation below from Sammi (ET) supports this notion by illustrating the exclusivity of opportunities for the ‘sporty children’:

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We went on a PE trip as well. I think that was probably my best experience at school, it was fantastic, we went canoeing down the Ardèche. It was offered to the children who had represented the school at sport, so it was all the sporty children together, with the PE teachers, their favourite teachers, and it was really lovely (Sammi, ET)
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This supports the idea that ‘sporty children’ are given exclusive experiences over and above their peers who may not show the physical competence, effort or enthusiasm valued by their teachers.

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We went out and taught in the local primary school, like small groups of us would be taken off each week to help with PE lessons, which was good [and] I think we had to get a certain amount of hours by ourselves, so I helped coach the local tennis club, which was good fun (Sammi, ET)
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Katy (NQT) indicates how undertaking additional leadership qualifications alongside PE gave her opportunities to test her personal conception of the occupation:

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Int: So did those [sports leadership] roles actually have an impact on you making a decision to enter teacher education?
Katy (NQT): I guess so, yeah, because it taught me what it was a bit about, like taking charge of people. If I hadn’t had the opportunity to take charge of others, then I might not have enjoyed it, because I might have thought, “oh no that’s not for me”,
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whereas at the time I went “yeah this is for me and I want to carry on and do this as a career”.

Schemes such as Junior Sports Leader Awards, Community Sports Leaders Awards and Junior School Sport Coordinators were designed to widen participation in schools generally. Children that passed the first stringent subjective warrant were often selected to be given the training and try out their new skills supporting teachers and coaches in sporting activities. Katy’s (NQT) conception of what PE would entail is based on sports coaching and a mastery climate. This introduction to the organisational phase not only provides an arena for potential recruits to test themselves, but also introduces them to the custodial orientations that are common. They can reinforce the traditional beliefs held from the apprenticeship of observation. This extended into the perceived requirements for entering PETE including needing National Governing Body coaching qualifications. The need for these not only reinforced the mastery climate needed for sport, but also complemented the need for Green’s (2002) ‘traditional curriculum’ that positioned sport as central to PE and justified the use of a more custodial orientation. Within the traditional curriculum a traditional pedagogical approach is witnessed and a custodial orientation is dominant. The intergenerational and interdependent links ensure its survival through recycling old ideas that are perceived to be effective yet can contribute to marginalising those who do not have physical capital in the right activities. Tori’s (PST) reflection encapsulates a few of the concerns raised in this theme:

My PE teacher, well, he was pretty horrible but he was all right to us because I played for the school so he liked me, so I got away with more than most. But I never did dance, never did gym, they were what the girls did so we went out and played football and rugby, possibly hockey … it was never mixed classes, it was always boys were outside … it seemed like we didn’t do anything rather than football and rugby, I don’t even remember playing hockey in Year 10 [age 14-15] … I can remember doing tennis in the sports hall, once! The weather must have been really bad that day because any other time, we never stayed in (Tori, PST)
Tori (PST) recalled the lack of variety, beyond games, offered during his own schooling and later while on a PETE teaching placement. The perspective of custodial-orientated participants who were put into a high ‘set’ and selected for school teams (Dewar and Lawson, 1984) was that anything less than full engagement and physical competence was frustrating. Daniel was both given responsibility for teams and ‘in an elite class for PE’, meaning that ‘I always got to play … rather than having to reign yourself in because everyone else wasn’t so good’ (Daniel, PST). Frustration was also aimed at the teachers who spent time focusing on less competent or enthusiastic students. Abbie said that ‘as a keen PE student I hated having to put up with those that didn’t want to be there... because your physical education is being stunted by other people’. Many participants who expressed this sort of belief were early deciders, who received opportunities to recreate a custodial orientation by delivering school sport coaching sessions using what they perceived as good teaching practice.

However, some participants noted the ‘shock’ (Sammi, ET) they had received when entering the profession and seeing that they ‘didn’t realise’ (Katy, NQT) the organisational skills and academic knowledge required to be successful as a PE teacher. Their habitus had developed around PE teaching as involving ‘having fun in sport’ (Doris, NQT) or supporting children ‘learning new skills’ (Sammi, ET); that a good teacher was one who had enthusiasm (Michael, NQT), could ‘motivate people to get fit and have fun’ (David, PST), or build relationships and engage in ‘positive banter’ (Jeanne, ET) with young people. Potential recruits’ beliefs filtered the careers information given by their teachers, therefore they believed that it would be easy to enter the profession if they have been accepted into the field and had received supportive messages that reinforced their want to enter the profession. The academic requirements needed to enter the profession in the 21st century have been underestimated by the participants. PSTs used their own apprenticeship of observation and lived experiences to build their perceptions of what personal traits are needed to become a successful PE teacher. This includes personal traits that can be used to provide interrelatedness with the children they teach, engagement in sporting activities, and success in a mastery climate. The measures for success include how popular they are as well as an instant feedback loop from the children being taught. Feelings of acceptance within the role of a teacher are instilled through positive verbal feedback from children, parents and professionals in the sporting field.
Outside the inner sanctum: Mismatched habitus and self-selection for PE teaching

A minority of participants did not hold a meaningful relationship with their PE teacher for reasons such as personality clash and a mismatch of habitus when beliefs surrounding good teaching practice differed. Holly, a late decider, expressed how she observed her teacher:

If anything, it was the influence of my PE teacher because she was so terrible, that I wanted to go out there and change things and make things better (Holly, PST).

This ‘apprenticeship of observation’ motivated her to enter the profession to improve what she had witnessed and promote an inclusive environment (Stran & Curtner-Smith, 2009; Curtner-Smith, 2016). Although sometimes students fit the criteria set by the PE teachers in the field, they don’t always have a matching habitus, which can eliminate them from the initial ‘selection’. Holly (PST) was one of these students. She loved sport and physical activity and took advantage of every opportunity given to her. However, she did not have a good relationship with her PE teacher and relied on outside activities for her enjoyment in sport. Her occupational socialisation was through sport as opposed to through PE.

Sammi (ET) who was an early decider, highlighted the negative attitude of the ‘older’ PE teachers towards less physically competent children than herself. Her account suggests that the body type of some of her friends marginalised them in PE:

[Some friends] didn’t enjoy it and a couple of the teachers at our school, if you weren’t the right build and you weren’t sporty, they were like “Oh I’m not going to bother.” We had a couple of older PE teachers at school and they really did do that unfortunately, which is such a shame, it is really mean. That’s what inspired me to want to teach and to take the children like that under my wing and say that sport can be fun for everyone (Sammi, ET).

Socialisation into the profession without fitting in with the teacher with whom the student has the most contact can make career entry problematic. Information to pursue a career in the profession is not open to everyone and limited to students who have been hand-picked by the existing teachers. Opportunities are provided by PE teachers to the students who demonstrate the attributes that are valued within the field.
Crucially, careers advice for entering PE teaching via school careers advice services and outside agencies was very limited, therefore, PE teachers are the main source of information. As a result, participants claimed that it was hard to obtain information because school careers advice services gave limited advice regarding future careers in PE.

My careers advisor had absolutely no clue. I needed more information; I should have been better informed at school (Holly, late decider, PST).

Although Harold, (PST) an early decider, recalled that there was information available regarding other careers, but not for teaching PE in school via the careers services. This was unexpected because government guidelines promote high quality and comprehensive careers advice on a range of options for all students. Information about PE teaching is not readily available outside of the profession itself. In the absence of careers advice on PE teaching, only those who received advice from their PE teachers themselves accessed PETE early. In other words they were predominantly early deciders (Belka et al., 1991). For the late decider participants in the study and those who did not hold a matching habitus, this posed a problem if they were unable to get information from their teachers. Abbey (PST), a late decider, noted that she ‘just wasn’t knowledged’ in entering Physical Education Teacher Education and had to ‘ring the department of education a lot’. Joshua (PST), also a late decider, highlighted the fact that he ‘never got advice’ about becoming a PE teacher and what courses to pursue. Additionally, Grace (PST), a late decider, stated that her local job centre only had information for security guards and hairdressers; ‘nothing sport related’. Emma (ET) and a late decider, supported this when discussing her experience. She had to wait until university to get the information she needed. The findings indicated that late deciders pathway into the profession without the support of their PE teachers was far more challenging than those who were already part of the inner sanctum.

Discussion and conclusion

By using Bourdieu’s (1979, 1984) concepts of habitus, field and practice as a ‘thinking tool’ to examine the findings, this study illuminates how the profession actively recruits within the boundaries of its own field, and how PE social spaces outside of the classroom influence the subjective warrant for entering the profession. The perceived requirements for teaching PE are built upon the PE teachers’ habitus which
has been developed through sustained and repetitive practices within multiple social fields (Brown et al., 2016). The group habitus plays a significant role in defining the informal recruitment criteria that informs the self-selection/self-elimination process for individuals choosing physical education teaching as a career choice. This study identifies that effort, enthusiasm and physical competence within the traditional curriculum represent symbolic and cultural capital that individuals can exchange for acceptance into the inner sanctum within the PE field. Furthermore, individuals who modelled the group habitus more closely were drawn closer towards it’s centre; thus achieving a sense of belonging before entering PETE. Whilst acceptance into the inner sanctum has been explored in PSTs (Rossi et al, 2014), this study extends this further by emphasising how existing teacher beliefs and the group habitus play an active role in the recruitment process during the acculturation phase. Previously, recruitment during this phase had been considered passive (Richards et al, 2019).

Demonstrating effort, enthusiasm and physical competence within the traditional curriculum provides the template for building strong relationships between potential recruits and their PE teachers, and provides a welcome invitation into PE social spaces such as the PE office. If the habitus between teachers and potential recruits aligns, then positive and meaningful relationships are formed (Lisahunter, Smith & Emerald, 2015). Potential recruits identified with their PE teacher(s) rather than other subject teachers or general teaching characteristics, and relied on PE teachers for affirmation. Teachers themselves vet potential recruits dependent on their dispositions matching those already prevalent in the PE field. Selected potential recruits are rewarded for these attributes by their PE teachers providing them with extra-curricular opportunities and access to the PE office to test their conception of the requirements to enter the profession, and provide information that will nurture them in preparation for entering PETE. Having similar interests and attributes contributed to a potential recruit’s sense of belonging long before entering the profession, as opposed to starting in the PST or professional phase (Sirna et al., 2010).

This study highlights the stringency of the subjective warrant for teaching 21st century PE; contradicting Lortie’s (1975) notion that the subjective warrant for teaching is permissive. Previous research has recognised the acculturation phase as the most influential of the three phases (Hutchinson, 1993) with the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975) being a major contributory factor for entering the profession, meaning that PE teachers can have a positive influence in recruiting the next
generation (Richards & Templin, 2014; Woods et al., 2016). However, PE teachers also act as gatekeepers to the profession; informally setting the criteria that informs one’s self-elimination or self-selection into the profession based on the existing group habitus. The participants’ PE experiences all relate to the sport as technique, traditional curricula and highlight the marginalisation of non–games based activities not associated with the traditional curricula such as gymnastics and dance. The stringency of the subjective warrant contributes towards Ferry’s (2018) notion of PE having a homogenous population. Overall, this population is resistant to change given that their formative, valued PE experiences and self-selection /elimination is based on their effort, enthusiasm and physical competence within the traditional curriculum. Their acceptance of the group habitus limits their need to promote change. Furthermore, late deciders who did not self-select during the acculturation phase had a far more challenging path in gaining careers advice and support to enter PETE. Early deciders with a habitus mismatch also struggled to gain information.

This study further offer insights into the journeys of early and late deciders into teaching PE (Belka et al., 1991; Curtner-Smith, 2016; Sage, 1989). Both early and late deciders who did not foster meaningful relationships with PE teachers relied on coaches in sports clubs, the children they taught, and feedback from children’s parents for affirmation that they had the right qualities to become a PE teacher. These recruits were more likely to be late deciders.

A lack of meaningful relationship had different causes: the first was due to having competence, effort and enthusiasm in activities outside of the traditional curriculum, and therefore not fostering a habitus that was perceived as a ‘best fit’ by their PE teacher(s). Additionally, the consequence of this was that potential recruits were not socialised through PE. Hannah (NQT), an early decider, recognised the marginalisation within the class in her own PE experiences, and entered the profession to promote change. She herself was not identified by her PE teacher as a potential recruit and she was socialised through working with children in recreational sports. The participants in this study alluded to the pedagogies and philosophies they align to in their teaching. Participants who varied from the group habitus fostered within PE were most likely to promote change.
Limitations

The study was limited to teacher participants already in or graduated from PETE. Further studies could give consideration to those who did not choose PE teaching as a career choice and might give more insight into the self-elimination process; particularly in relation to the in-service teachers’ informal recruitment criteria based on the existing group habitus. The participants were predominantly from the same university in the UK. An international perspective would give further insight into PE teacher recruitment worldwide. Additionally, due to male participants withdrawing from the study or not wishing to be filmed teaching for the latter parts of the larger study, the participants recruited were predominantly female. Further studies could focus on expanding on this by recruiting a wider range of participants.

Recommendations

The traditional curriculum and custodial pedagogies are likely to continue if recruitment is driven and influenced from within the field, limiting the impact of PETE in stimulating change; particularly if the practices and values influencing the habitus significantly contribute to the recruitment of the next generation of PE teachers. Diversifying who enters the profession has potential to change the group habitus. To overcome the stringency of the subjective warrant within PE recruitment, information for PETE courses needs to be more readily available and appeal to a wider audience, casting a wider net to include those whose strengths might not necessarily align with the traditional curriculum. Teacher educators need to have a strong presence beyond the fields of PE and higher education to help target individuals who may have self-eliminated during the acculturation phase, disseminating messages that PE has a broad curriculum beyond skill/drill focused team games. Lessons could be taken from other countries. For example, moves to make the recruitment process more rigorous in South Korea by including a formal teacher examination post degree had positive effects on teacher identity and professional attitudes towards teaching PE (Kim & Tak, 2021). Given PE teaching is competitive in the UK, this approach could support the recruitment of individuals who foster more favourable attitudes towards change and diversify recruits that might not necessarily align with the group habitus. Careers services in schools and outside agencies need to be better informed so that potential recruits are not dependent on meaningful relationships with an existing PE teacher for information about PE careers. Late deciders have challenges gaining information to enter PETE; further studies specifically focusing on
the journeys of late deciders into the profession could prove to be valuable as this particular group
demonstrate the habitus mismatch that has potential to create much needed change.

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