Exploring Gender in Physical Education: Understanding Influence, Challenges, and Opportunities for Girls in PE.

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Lastly, I extend my gratitude to anyone who has taken the time to read this thesis. It is my sincere hope that this work sparks further dialogue, exploration, and contemplation on the multifaceted subject of PE and gender.

Abstract

Adolescent girls are increasingly opting out of Physical Education (PE), a trend raising concern. PE, being a subject where gender norms are apparent, warrants thorough investigation into the experiences of adolescent girls within this context. This thesis aimed to explore the experiences of adolescent girls in PE, in relation to their gender, employing qualitative methods. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescent girls (aged 14-16) attending a girls-only school.

Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis, four key themes emerged: the involvement of girls in PE, the involvement of boys in PE, the influence of teachers, and mental health implications. These themes were reflected on and discussed through the lenses of gender theories, supplemented by relevant research. The findings from this thesis aimed to add to the current literature, adding further evidence, and nuance to our understanding of the complex dynamics at play in adolescent girls' experiences in PE. By integrating these theoretical perspectives with empirical data, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding gender and PE.

Furthermore, the findings from this research could provide further understanding for Educational Psychologists, offering deeper comprehension of adolescent girls' experiences and suggesting avenues for enhancing support within schools to cultivate a more inclusive environment for girls in PE.

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1.0 Introduction

This thesis investigates the influence of gender on Physical Education (PE) through the exploration of adolescent girls' experiences of school-based PE. Research into experiences of PE is still in its infancy. This thesis aims to add and extend to the research of gender in PE.

In this introduction, I will provide an overview of the following key points: my role as the researcher, the historical background of PE and its relevance in the current sporting context, the specific definition of gender that will be used in this thesis, the significance of gender within the context of PE, and finally, an overview of the importance of PE itself.

1.1 Who I am as the Researcher

In this section, I reflect on the motivations behind writing this thesis, drawing on my personal experiences in PE and sports during my childhood and adolescence. Recognising that my individual background is an inherent aspect of the research process (Giardina & Laurendeau, 2013), I have chosen to intentionally convey my identity within this project.

I was the sporty girl growing up. My parents were both very active and I have fond memories of exploring a variety of sports with them at a young age. When asked what I wanted to do when I grew up, I always answered with a similar theme of being a successful athlete; an Olympian or a professional athlete. I recall this being something I was known for, I was labelled early as the sporty girl, which looking back, always made me feel like I was different from other girls.

In secondary school, I was part of every sports team, often as the captain. My school were highly successful, and I competed in a number of regional and national competitions with hockey and netball. Alongside this, outside of school, I was part of the England Karate team, competing monthly in European competitions and attending European and World Championships. I was (and still am) a short, muscular female. This was not the ideal stature for an adolescent girl in a secondary school. I was often called manly, masculine, heavy, and stocky which impacted my self-esteem, body image, and confidence in school. Even with all this, what strikes me the most, was how I felt silenced about my sporting achievements. In 2011, I became a World Champion in Karate. I had spent over two years training for it, though when I returned to school, I did not wish to talk about it. My parents always said, "You should be proud of it, if I were you I'd be shouting it from the rooftops", but I never did. If I am being honest, I hated school due to the constant looks, questions, and labelling I had. At this point, I made a decision to protect myself and I stopped taking part in PE and slowly dropped off from all aspects of school life.

It still feels challenging to write this. This thesis provides me with an opportunity to advocate the importance of the impact of gender on sport, specifically what it can be like for a girl in PE. I hope this thesis will identify factors that influence adolescent girls' experience of PE, and thus lead to changes in education to make it accessible and enjoyable for all.

1.2 Women in Sport

2023 has been record-breaking for women in sport. These are some highlights from the year: Volleyball, Football, and Cricket saw record attendance and viewings over the year, in the United States of America women's sports media coverage increased by 15% from 2022, in

rugby, a new women's international rugby union competition will be held annually and will be shown on TV. Additionally, the Women's Sports Trust found that the UK watched record levels of women's sport on TV (Ali, 2024).

Rebecca Welch was the first female to referee a premiership football game, Mary Earps, an England footballer, won the 70th BBC Sports Personality of the Year award, following her success for club and country, while confronting the sports apparel giant Nike over their refusal to produce replica women's goalkeeper shirts for the Women's World Cup, Nike eventually reversed their policy. Earps' green long-sleeve England shirt quickly sold out, setting a record for sales (Sky Sports, 2023).

Here are a couple of instances exemplifying the noteworthy accomplishments of women in sports this year. These achievements have served as a source of inspiration for many, indicative of a perceptible shift in societal perspectives, support mechanisms, and opportunities facilitating the advancement of women in sports.

1.3 Background of PE in the United Kingdom

The subject of PE has been defined as "sports and physical activities that develop a range of motor competencies, a range of rules, strategies and tactics that are important for students to understand and a range of knowledge to enable healthy participation" (Research Review Series, 2022, para 30).

PE in schools has been presented as a means of encouraging by providing the opportunity for students of all ages to be physically active (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005). Participation in PE

aims to provide a foundation for lifelong participation in sports (Kirk, 2005), whilst also providing physical health, social, cognitive and mental health benefits (Fox & Harris, 2003).

In the United Kingdom (UK), throughout history, PE has held a significant position within the educational framework. Since the implementation of mandatory education in the 19th Century, Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) has consistently played a role, often aligning with the broader national requirements. Following the establishment of the National Curriculum in 1992 (Evans & Penney, 2008), PE has become a fundamental subject, justified by its perceived benefits in improving students' health and fitness levels (Foster & Adcock, 2015; Penney & Jess, 2004).

Today, in the UK, PE is a mandatory subject in schools. The National Curriculum outlines the requirements for the subject at each key stage (Department of Education, 2013). The curriculum includes activities such as athletics, dance, gymnastics, games, and outdoor and adventurous activities, with a focus on developing physical skills, knowledge, and an understanding of health and fitness. The Department of Education (DfE) (2013) recommends that schools should offer children and young people (CYP) a minimum of two hours of high-quality PE per week. This allocation of time supports their well-being and resilience development, enabling the enhancement of skills, knowledge, and understanding across various activity domains within the PE curriculum.

In more recent times, there has been a theoretical exploration of personal development framed in the context of life skills that students may encounter and acquire through PE (Goudas, 2010). Life skills are defined as the skills that are required to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life: teamwork, goal setting, leadership, and communication skills (Bailey et al.,

2013). Bailey et al. (2013) linked these skills to the enhancement of a student's educational attainment, quality of life, and future economic prosperity. This emphasises the wider influence that acquiring life skills through PE can have on different dimensions of an individual's overall well-being and success.

1.3.1 UK Government Influence on PE

In the UK, education holds a significant position in governmental policies, and the allocation of funding for PESS has become highly politicised. With each general election, changes in government policies have resulted in a fragmented and often inconsistent approach to PESS. For example, during Tony Blair's New Labour administration, a substantial amount of funding was promised for PESS, leading to the establishment of School Sport Partnerships (SSPs). These partnerships aimed to enhance the range and quality of physical activity opportunities for CYP by providing diverse sporting options and enabling specialist coaches to develop expertise within schools (Flintoff et al., 2011).

Significantly, the success of SSP initiatives was attributed to an educational pedagogy rather than a focus solely on performance, aligning with the fundamental values of PESS (Flintoff et al., 2011). Despite the reported benefits of SSPs, PESS funding since 2010 has experienced a political U-turn following the election of Coalition and Conservative Governments, in which SSP funding ceased. Instead, PE curricula emphasise competitive team sports to improve elite success (Lindsey, 2020). The ending of funding to SSPs was highly unpopular, as many have emphasised how SSPs had met their targets (Foster, 2015). This switch to competition was to ensure that all students had the chance to enjoy sports but focused on promoting and celebrating sporting excellence. Competition, by definition, does not take into account the original meaning of com-petition, which is to "strive together" (Aggerholm, Standal, &

Hordvik, 2018, p.2) However, research has shown that often competition in sports represents a restriction to "which the coordinators promoted and developed opportunities for girls and young women" (Flintoff, 2008, p. 400) and can lead to the creation of a hierarchy of ability in which some students are constructed as inferior to others (Wilkinson, Littlefair, & Barlow-Meade, 2013).

In 2023, the UK Government received open letters from those passionate about improving CYP opportunities, experience, and learning in PE. Responding to an open letter from the Lionesses, the England Women's Football team, describing how all girls deserved more school-based PE, not just those playing to a competitive level. Focusing primarily on football, they described how all girls should be able to play football in PE lessons and they deserve to believe they can one day play for England (*School sports given huge boost to level the playing field for next generation of Lionesses,* 2023).

The government have since proposed greater funding to support girls in PE. The proposals aim to ensure that boys and girls have access to the same sports opportunities if desired, and that a minimum of two hours of PE per week is available up until the end of year 11 (Department of Education, 2023). The UK government has announced plans to invest over £600 million in the next two years to enhance PE and sports in primary schools, and an additional £57 million to establish more school sports facilities beyond regular hours, with a particular focus on disadvantaged students, girls, and those with special educational needs (SEN) (Department of Education, 2023).

To reward equality of provision for girls, this kitemark scheme, delivered by the Youth Sport Trust, recognises schools that create positive sporting experiences across all sports for students, supporting them to be active for 60 minutes a day (YST, 2019). The PE and Sport Premium is designed to help students get an active start in life by improving the quality of PE

and sports in primary schools. Headteachers can choose how best to spend this funding, considering teacher training, offering more opportunities for students to take part in competitions and widening the range of sports for both boys and girls to include football, tennis, cricket, and hockey (*PE and sport premium for primary schools*, 2022a).

The Government's acknowledgement of the importance of PE is reflected in the recent publication "New PE guidance for schools strengthens equal access to sport" (2024). This included an updated School Sport and Activity Action Plan (SSAAP) (Department of Education, 2024). The primary objective of SSAAP is to seamlessly integrate sports and physical activity into both the school day and extracurricular programs, thereby ensuring that every child has the opportunity to fulfil the recommended guidelines of engaging in moderate to vigorous physical activity for an average of 60 minutes daily (Department of Education, 2024).

To achieve this overarching goal, SSAAP (2024) outlines several key aims, including enhancing the quality of PE, promoting a minimum of 2 hours of weekly PE, ensuring equitable access to sports opportunities, increasing children's participation in school sports, and meeting curriculum expectations, particularly regarding swimming and water safety. By providing comprehensive guidance and support to schools, SSAAP aims to empower educational institutions to effectively implement strategies that align with these objectives, fostering a culture of physical activity and well-being among students across the nation (Department of Education, 2024).

This document serves as a valuable resource to assist school staff, senior leaders, and governors in evaluating and enhancing their PE and school sport offerings. It encourages stakeholders to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. (Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, it aims to promote discussions and generate innovative ideas

aimed at cultivating a positive and active school community through PE. It acknowledges the

importance of PE as a tool for enhancing student engagement, promoting holistic

development, and nurturing a supportive and inclusive school culture (Department of

Education, 2024). Through strategic planning and proactive implementation of the ideas

generated, schools can create a dynamic and enriching environment that prioritises the

physical health and well-being of all students.

1.4 The Importance of PE

Schools have been identified as important institutions for the promotion of physical activity

among CYP (Biddle & Mutrie, 2001) and PE has been recognised as the major

vehicle associated with the promotion of physical activity in the school setting (Wechsler et

al., 2000).

Ofsted (2023) produced a subject report series, in which PE was outlined as having three

interconnected forms of knowledge that encapsulate what pupils can learn and develop

through PE, school sport, and physical activity:

> 1. Motor competence: This form of knowledge involves the development of a diverse
>
> range of movements that progressively become more specialised, ensuring
>
> competency in participating in various sports and physical activities.

> 2. Rules, strategies, and tactics: This aspect of knowledge pertains to understanding
>
> the conventions and regulations governing participation in different sports and
>
> physical activities.

3. Healthy participation: This form of knowledge encompasses understanding how to engage safely and effectively in physical activity, thereby promoting confidence and competence in participation. By acquiring knowledge about safe practices, injury prevention, and the importance of physical well-being, students can make informed decisions and maintain healthy lifestyles throughout their lives.

Overall, these three forms of knowledge highlight the multifaceted nature of learning and development in PE. By cultivating these into PE, students can not only enhance their physical abilities but also develop essential life skills such as teamwork, resilience, and self-confidence.

The reduction of PE in adolescents reduces overall physical activity. This reduction is concerning due to physical and psychological consequences. The age at which PE is reduced correlates with the concern of obesity. In the UK one-third of 11–15-year-olds are obese (Baker, 2023). As the previous section highlighted, PESS was originally developed to promote healthy and active lifestyles in young people, and implicit in this assumption is the relationship between physical activity and a healthy lifestyle.

The prevalence of sedentary behaviour and physical inactivity is on the rise, with rates more than doubling in the UK over the past 25 years (Jebb, Kopelman, & Butland, 2007). This statistic holds significance as habitual physical inactivity frequently takes root during adolescence (Brooke et al., 2014).

Recommended levels of physical activity for children and adolescents is 60 minutes per day, yet only 45% of girls meet physical activity recommendations compared with 50% of boys (Overview: Physical activity and the environment, 2018). Furthermore, girls as a group

participate in less physical activity than boys (Rosselli et al., 2020). Not only is lack of physical activity a concern for physical health but there is also evidence that it is impacting adolescents' psychological health. Guo and Zhang (2022) identified that physical exercise encompasses four dimensions that foster adolescents' mental health: a sense of control, intention to engage in positive behaviours, the establishment of habitual exercise routines, and emotional regulation. More specifically middle adolescence (14-16 years) is a key age in which physical activity impacts individuals' quality of life (Kalinková et al., 2015). Murphy et al. (2022) examined adolescent girls' symptoms of anxiety and depression pre- and post-sport-based intervention. They found that participation in physical activity led to improvement in mental well-being and significant decreases in anxiety and depression. Therefore, it is important to consider how the impact of physical activity extends beyond physical health, especially during adolescence and for girls. This aspect will be explored in greater detail in 2.0 Literature Review (Chapter 2).

1.5 The Importance of PE for Educational Psychology

Research has shown that consistent engagement in sport and physical activity contributes to enhanced physical health and improved mental well-being. According to the Physical Activity Guidelines, the evidence supporting the health benefits of regular physical activity has become increasingly compelling (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023). They assert that engaging in regular physical activity is linked with various positive outcomes, including improved academic attainment, concentration, and learning abilities, as well as better mental health and maintenance of a healthier weight status (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023).

Therefore, for Educational Psychologists (EPs) understanding the importance of PE is useful in comprehensively supporting student well-being and academic success. PE not only fosters physical health but also plays a crucial role in promoting mental well-being and cognitive functioning. By recognising the holistic benefits of PE, EPs can incorporate physical activity interventions into their practices to address diverse student needs. Through targeted interventions and support, EPs can help students harness the cognitive, emotional, and social advantages associated with regular physical activity, thereby enhancing their overall educational experience and well-being.

1.5.1 Cognitive and Learning Benefits of PE

Research examining the relationship between PE and cognitive performance has found valuable insights into the potential benefits of PE. Alvarez-Bueno et al. (2017) completed a systemic review and meta-analysis. 36 studies were included in the systematic review, finding that effective PE interventions and increased physical activity improved cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities. Furthermore, García-Hermoso et al. (2021) completed a systematic review of the effects of PE finding that high-quality PE enhanced students' cognition and academic achievement and notably, increasing the duration of PE did not appear to adversely affect academic performance. Peruyero et al. (2017) researched different types of PE, finding that vigorous, high-intensity PE was better than no exercise and light intensity at increasing cognition, namely, increasing cognitive inhibitory control.

Bidzan-Bluma and Lipowska (2018) found adolescents who engaged in PE experienced a positive influence on cognitive functions. Additionally, Esteban-Cornejo et al. (2015) completed a systematic review with 20 articles. The findings indicated that cognitive performance correlates with vigorous physical activity, while academic performance is linked

to overall physical activity, particularly among girls. These findings collectively highlight the potential of PE to positively impact cognitive function and academic achievement among adolescent girls, For EPs, understanding and integrating these findings into their practice can inform interventions aimed at optimising cognitive development and academic performance among adolescent girls, thereby contributing to their holistic well-being and educational success.

1.5.2 Social and Communication Benefits of PE

Research looking into the area of social and communication skills has produced useful insights into the benefits of PE. Opstoel et al. (2020) completed a systemic review on school-aged children (6-18-year-olds) looking into different areas of social interaction. 16 studies were used explore prosocial behaviour and the influence of PE. Prosocial behaviour encompasses traits such as respect, empathy, and sympathy, Additionally, three qualitative studies integrated both PE and sports. PE has demonstrated positive associations with various forms of prosocial behaviour, including, engaging in turn-taking, listening attentively, offering congratulations, fostering interpersonal connections, adhering to rules, resolving conflicts amicably, expressing appreciation, voicing opinions, demonstrating care and empathy, building trust, showing respect towards authority figures, adapting socially, and gaining acceptance among peers.

Further research by Li and Shao (2022) supported this, finding that sport activities improved pro-social behaviour and adolescent. They explained how participation in physical activity serves as a "communication tool" (Li & Shao, 2022, p.14) and provides an environment in which students can interact with others and explore their communication skills. The results suggest that PE not only enhances social and communication competencies but also holds

potential as an intervention for students facing barriers or difficulties in these domains. This aspect is crucial for EPs to incorporate into their individualised interventions and support strategies, as it shows the significance of integrating PE-based approaches to address social and communication challenges among students. By recognising the role of PE in fostering these skills, EPs can leverage this knowledge to develop tailored interventions that promote holistic development and well-being among students.

1.5.3 Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Benefits of PE

Research into Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) has produced valuable insights into the advantages of PE. Andermo et al. (2020) systematic review found that interventions promoting physical activity within schools have been shown to alleviate anxiety, enhance resilience, boost overall well-being, and foster positive mental health among children and adolescents. Given the broader health benefits associated with physical activity, these outcomes highlight the importance of reinforcing school-based initiatives aimed at promoting increased physical activity levels. Pascoe et al. (2020) conducted a scoping review of 30 publications, revealing that the benefits of PE activities varied depending on the intensity level. PE programs incorporating a variety of intensity levels were associated with reduced symptoms of depression, while activities ranging from moderate to vigorous intensity to light intensity were linked to decreased symptoms of anxiety. Consequently, incorporating exercise into PE was suggested as a means to enhance mental health.

These findings are particularly important for EPs as they highlight the potential role of PE interventions in promoting positive mental health outcomes among children and adolescents.

1.6 PE in UK Secondary Schools

PE is a compulsory part of the curriculum for all students across the key stages, from age four to sixteen. However, in secondary school and more specifically in Key Stage (KS) 4, the minimum content changes. Between KS1 and KS3 PE must include athletics, dance, games, gymnastics and swimming, whereas in KS4 the DfE states that "pupils must have the opportunity to plan and participate in a regular, frequent and balanced programme of PE that, among other things, contributes to, and helps to sustain, a healthy and active lifestyle" (Department of Education, 2024, p.3), and there were no specific requirements as there are in earlier years (*National Curriculum,* 2013).

However, at the secondary school level, PE time is reduced by various factors. The Youth Sport Trust conducted a survey with 595 teachers from 487 schools in the UK and found that at 11 to 13 years-old students receive an average of 124 minutes of curriculum PE per week, which decreases to an average of 98 minutes at 13- to 15-year-olds. These reductions were attributed to core subjects receiving additional time and the pressures of exams. This indicates that PE is constrained by competing pressures, which can limit the time available to develop skills (*PE provision in secondary schools,* 2018).

1.7 The Concept of Gender

In the UK, the disparity in physical activity participation between genders begins as early as age five, with the gap widening significantly over time. By the age of 14, only 10% of girls meet the recommended physical activity health standards (Women in Sport, 2016). However, it is crucial to recognise that the gender imbalance in school physical activity is not solely a

concern affecting girls, nor is it an unavoidable circumstance. Instead, the low participation rates among females are a result of longstanding gendered social and structural barriers entrenched within the UK context. These barriers manifest as the traditionally dominant cultural attitude: "Society has told teenage girls that it isn't feminine to play sport" (Women in Sport, 2016, p. 12).

Before delving deeper into the topic of girls in PE, it is imperative to establish a clear definition of the concept of gender within the context of this thesis. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines gender norms as "the socially defined roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that are considered appropriate for men and women, girls and boys" (World Health Organisation, 2021, para. 1). The definitions emphasise the socially constructed nature of gender norms and how they can vary across societies. The consideration of intersectionality, defined as the multiple forms of social identity, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and more, intersect and interact with each other to shape a person's experiences of oppression and privilege (Nash, 2008).

The term gender is frequently oversimplified by linking masculinity to males and femininity to females, a phenomenon known as biological essentialism (Schippers, 2007). The complexity of the social world provoked theoretical consideration of gender. Butler's concept of performativity (1990) defined gender and provided a foundational definition for this thesis. Further, Foucault's (1976) work adds an additional analysis to consider tensions in gender for the individual from the social world and power structures, using a term named the 'Technologies of the Self' (TOS). Additionally, Bourdieu's field theory (1986), emphasises the complexity of the lives of young people, considering all levels of influence. Importantly, these

theories emphasised the reflective nature of ideas surrounding gender and the need to explore individual experiences.

1.7.1 Butler

Butler's concept of performativity (1990) will be used in this thesis as the definition of gender. Following this theory, gender is not a fixed or inherent trait, but rather a social construct that is repeatedly performed and enacted through various discursive practices. Gender identity is not something that individuals inherently possess, but rather something that is constructed and reinforced through repetitive acts and behaviours.

In Butler's view, gender is performative in the sense that it is produced and maintained through the performance of specific gender norms, roles, and expectations (Stoller, 2010). Through the repetition of these performances, individuals come to embody and internalise societal notions of what it means to be masculine or feminine. This process of performing gender not only shapes individual identities but also contributes to the larger social construction of gender as a whole (Stoller, 2010).

1.7.2 Foucault

Further considering the influence of society on gender, Foucault wrote about the history of society and its impacts in the present. Foucault's writing in "Power: The Essential Works of Michael Foucault (1954-1984) (Foucault, 1976) focused on the role of the physical body and action. Importantly, for considering how Foucault's work relates to the concept of gender and Bourdieu's work. Foucault's identification of power provides an understanding of the hierarchical nature of power structures within society (Foucault, 1977). This concept is particularly pertinent to understanding the gender order and the hierarchical framework of

gender, revealing that not all men uniformly benefit from masculinity, just as not all women are universally subordinated.

This thesis will consider the ToS as a framework for exploring the influences of gender. The ToS are the use of practices by individuals to "transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p.25). Therefore, ToS represent individual practices which are used to transform the body. In essence, ToS encompass individual practices directed at how one presents themselves in relation to gender,

1.7.3 Bourdieu

I have also considered Bourdieu's understanding of gender (McNay, 1999) for this thesis, as I found the framework useful in considering the individual and wider influences of gender. This theory is rooted in social reproduction and generational change. Bourdieu (1996) argues that gender is not solely a product of individual actions or preferences but is deeply embedded in social structures and institutions. Therefore, to study gender effectively, it is crucial to critically examine the societal context, both past and present, in which individuals are situated. By doing so, researchers can establish a stronger foundation for understanding the complexities of gender dynamics.

Bourdieu's writings on gender have been applied to the study of gender, education, and sport (Ingram, 2011), though these focus on masculinity, and specifically PE (Hay & Macdonald, 2010). Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the social world revolves around three interconnected components: habitus, field, and capital (Bourdieu, 1986). These elements are intimately linked and manifested through social practices. I will provide a brief overview and definition

of each concept before illustrating how these components of Bourdieu's theory interrelate with the premise and purpose of this thesis.

Via the habitus, individuals are inclined to select from a range of possible practical and behavioural options. However, Bourdieu states that these choices are not uniform across all individuals. Factors such as personal history, past experiences, and social class position shape the array of options accessible to each person (Bourdieu, 1990, 2001). I link this to systemic thinking, e.g., Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 2007) as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted influences on human development, emphasising the importance of considering various interconnected systems rather than focusing solely on individual factors. This illustrates the interconnectedness of Foucault's (1988) technologies with Bourdieu's (1986) concepts, particularly highlighting the role of the legitimate gendered body shaped by both social and physical capital.

Foucault (1982) posits that individuals must encounter different behavioural possibilities. Linking this to Bourdieu's habitus, it proposes that this confines choices and practices, restricting the range of what behaviour is accepted. Socially endorsed behaviours and bodily regimes highlight the pressure on young people to conform to prevailing expectations of masculinity and feminity. Foucault's ideas can be applied within a Bourdieu framework in this way, where gendered habitus and expectations regarding behaviour and appearance are so deeply ingrained that truths are internalised, leading to a diminished sense of agency and individualism.

Fields denote distinct domains within the social sphere distinguished by their unique sets of regulations. Participants within each field are aware of these regulations and engage in the

associated activities (Bourdieu, 1985). Crucially, each field is marked by "a more or less overt struggle over the definition of the legitimate principles of division in the field" (Bourdieu, 1985, p.34), implying that the notion of legitimacy fluctuates across fields depending on the particular rules and principles governing each one.

Bourdieu (1986) described four types of capital that influence an individual's position in a social field. The significance and value of these capital types vary between different fields, and while capital holds importance across all fields, the extent and significance differ (Huppatz, 2012). Bourdieu's original notion of capital distribution based on class and age highlights the relevance of studying young people in this thesis, focusing on them as an adolescent group. This recognition acknowledges the specific dynamics at play during the formative years and highlights the impact of class and age-related capital on their social positioning.

Though Bourdieu's work has faced criticism for presenting an androcentric view of society (Huppatz, 2012), I feel it still is an important theory as part of this thesis. This critique points out that the work excludes the experiences of modern women in Westernised societies (Krais, 2006). However, I believe it is important to recognise that Bourdieu's historical consideration of society reflects an androcentric reality, where men have traditionally held power and authority. Consequently, historical accounts often have been written from a male perspective. While this androcentric viewpoint is flawed and diminishes the accomplishments of females, it is not necessarily an inaccurate representation of how some men have historically benefited from patriarchal dominance. There is criticism directed at Bourdieu's work and the recognition of the justifications. This awareness promotes the need for future additions and adaptations to existing theories, reflecting the evolution of society toward a more modern and dynamic state. This thesis is flexible in adjusting theoretical frameworks to align with

contemporary perspectives, which is crucial for ensuring relevance and applicability in understanding the complexities of our developing social landscape.

This section has outlined the characteristics of adolescence which makes the exploration of the influence of gender in adolescence an important consideration. I have explained my understanding of gender as a social construction, drawing on Butler's (1988, 1990) concept of performativity to further allocate elements of agency and action in how young people develop their own gendered identity. This definition of gender aligns with my epistemological and ontological positioning, which will be further discussed in 3.0 Methodology (Chapter 3).

This thesis explores adolescent experiences of PE in relation to gender. The evolution of PE has historically mirrored deeply ingrained gender divisions, resulting in the segregation of PE into separate subjects for boys and girls (Kirk, 2002). Notably, PE stands out as one of the most heavily gendered subjects in schools (Berg & Lahelma, 2010). As the researcher, I have conscientiously approached the investigation of PE through a gendered lens. Throughout this thesis, I have frequently used the terms: girls and boys, men and women, largely adhering to a binary framework. This approach aligns with the current state of PE and was chosen to accurately capture the experiences of the participants. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the ongoing societal shift towards a more inclusive understanding of gender, moving away from a strictly binary perspective. I believe that further research endeavours can contribute to integrating this evolving understanding of gender into the discourse surrounding PE and the influence it has.

1.8. Girls in PE

Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that adolescent girls engage in less

physical activity compared to boys (Vescio et al., 2005; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Youth Sport Trust found that on average, boys spend more time on PE in school per week compared to girls. Secondary-aged boys report an average of 141 minutes per week, while secondary-aged girls report an average of 127 minutes per week. Furthermore, there appears to be a disparity in the reported amount of PE among girls based on age, with a downward trend in the number of minutes spent on PE. Girls in KS3 reported an average of 133 minutes per week, whereas those in KS4 reported an average of 107 minutes per week (YST, 2019).

This disparity intensifies during adolescence, particularly evident in a significant decline in girls' participation in school sports by the age of 15 (Schofield et al., 2002). Research suggests that girls are inactive and demonstrate lower involvement in PE during adolescence, possibly stemming from prior disengagement from PE (Rich, 2003; Brooks & Magnusson, 2006). According to a report, *Gender*. Sport England. (2022), which compiled insights from over 4,000 adolescent girls and boys, 43% of girls had disengaged from PE since primary school. Additionally, findings from the annual *Girls Active*. Youth Sport Trust (2023), that since 2016 indicate a declining trend in girls' enjoyment of PE, with only 64% reporting enjoyment compared to 86% of boys. Notably, enjoyment levels among girls have decreased over time; in 2016, 74% of all girls reported enjoying PE.

Research into adolescent girls disengaging in PE has highlighted some barriers for girls, which will be discussed in the following literature review chapter in greater detail. Research has identified significant psychological barriers to girls' engagement in PE, including feelings of self-consciousness, with enjoyment being a protective factor (Robbins, Pender & Kazanis, 2003). Low perceived competence among adolescent girls can deter their participation in PE, especially given its prevalence in this demographic (Ryan et al., 2003;

Inchley, Kirby, & Currie, 2011). Social factors, such as peer support and scrutiny, significantly impact girls' involvement in PE, with some peers encouraging participation while others engage in body-related criticism and bullying (Mitchell, Gray & Inchley, 2015; Dove). Environmental factors, including inappropriate PE attire, also contribute to girls' disengagement from PE, highlighting the need for further research on uniform-related issues from an intersectional perspective (Howard, 2023).

1.9 Research Rationale

Research into experiences of PE is still in its infancy. This thesis aims to add and extend to the knowledge of gender influence in PE for adolescent girls by exploring their experiences. This thesis intends to investigate various aspects of the participants' PE experiences about what has influenced them. This includes exploring whether the participants have encountered societal gender expectations and how they intersect with their experiences

1.9.1 Research Question

The research question (RQ) I will address in this thesis is:

RQ1: What are the experiences of Physical Education for adolescent girls in relation to gender norms?

This RQ aims to provide a more in-depth exploration of students' experience of PE in relation to the influence of gender. The RQ is designed to allow participants to share their experiences. Gender is the primary lens through which young people's experiences of PE will be explored

in this thesis. The RQs aim to give students a voice with the hope that a greater acknowledgement and reflection can occur following a greater understanding of students' experiences.

The impact of this thesis will likely occur at each level of EP work. The primary aim of this thesis for EPs is to provide scope for them to consider gender in their work. It aims to allow EPs to link theory and practice with the findings from this thesis, in a way that is accessible and useful for them. It will contribute to the current literature, incorporating a new participant group and geographical area.

I will discuss how EPs can apply the findings from this thesis into their work, as a suggestion for EPs when relevant in their work. At the individual level, this thesis relates to EPs current work with individual students in schools. EPs are required to support with the four areas of SEN (cognition and learning, communication and integration, SEMH, and physical and sensory needs). This introduction has highlighted the benefits of PE on those four areas. EPs can incorporate this thesis to consider their work with adolescent girls, with further reflection on the influence of gender. This will enable greater reflections for EPs, understanding CYPs viewpoints and use this information to help generate formulations, subsequently thus enabling EPs, when working with individual adolescent females, to have greater insight.

At the group level, this thesis has the potential to enhance comprehension by exploring perspectives and obstacles related to PE, ultimately aiming to design interventions and projects that promote the re-engagement of adolescent girls in PE. A systematic review of interventions found five of 21 studies reported favourable interventions for adolescent girls and recommended further research into what makes an effective physical activity intervention

(Camacho-Miñano et al., 2011). Dishman et al., (2004) found self-efficacy mediated the impact of PE interventions. EPs could support schools to utilise PE time more effectively with support from evidence-based practice.

At the systemic level, EPs using their enhanced understanding of the influence of gender in PE for adolescent girls, can provide systemic support where necessary in their work. Furthermore, this deeper understanding from the thesis may help support EPs to support schools with their understanding of the influence, and then to break down any barriers and enhance opportunities for adolescent girls in PE.

2.0 Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to establish the current research focusing on adolescent girls experiences of PE in the UK. This sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the influences impacting girls and their experiences to develop a clearer insight into the situation.

This literature review aims to systematically identify and analyse relevant evidence whilst being guided by 'Making an argument' principles (Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2022). The systemic method of a literature review addresses specific criteria, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the research question. Employing explicit and systematic methods throughout the review process helps minimise bias, ensuring a thorough analysis of articles and all available evidence, which in turn contributes to the generation of reliable findings and supports informed decision-making (Moher et al., 2009). Therefore, this review aims to hold these methods in mind whilst also considering how there is an emphasis that crafting an argument involves active interpretation and analysis rather than mere description or summarisation of data (Braun et al., 2022). Therefore, this review integrates traditional systemic values with a proactive stance towards data interpretation, aiming to construct coherent and persuasive arguments based on the analysed evidence.

The literature review question: *What are the experiences of adolescent girls participating in PE in the UK?*

Following a scoping review to isolate key terms, a literature search was undertaken on 18th July 2023, covering two prominent psychology and educational databases (PSYCHINFO and

ERIC). A second search was completed 15th January 2024, to ensure recent research was

included. These two databases were used as they were relevant to my topic area and

encompass educational psychology, as suggested by Siddaway, Woods, and Hedges (2019).

Table 1 shows the search terms below:

Table 1: Mapping and Search Terms

Subject mapping terms	Keyword search terms	Rationale
1. Physical Education	OR PE OR school sport	This review intended to find studies that were specific to Physical Education.
AND 2. Adolescence	OR adolescen* OR teenage*OR key stage 4 OR KS4	
AND 3. girls	OR female* OR girl*	
AND 4. UK	OR England OR Wales OR Scotland OR Northern Ireland	Terms for each of the UK countries were included so that the full scope of articles was considered

Each of the 4 subject heading search terms were combined with the equivalent keyword

search terms using OR. Siddaway, Woods, and Hedges (2019) stated that when completing a

literature review, and especially when conducting a narrative review, it was important to

consider different terminology. This led me to consider synonyms of my mapping terms,

singular and plural forms, broader and narrower terms, and different spellings. The four

search terms were then combined with AND. This method led to 113 papers (PsychINFO)

and 42 papers (ERIC). I used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and

Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) flowchart in the retrieval and selection process (Moher et al. 2009)

(see Figure 1).

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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Records identified through  │
│ database searching          │
│                             │
│ PsychINFO n=113             │
│ ERIC n=42                   │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
│ Titles and abstracts screened│        │ Full-text articles excluded with │
│ Full-text articles assessed  │ ─────▶  │ reasons (n=108)                  │
│ for eligibility              │         │                                  │
│ (n=120)                      │         │ Participants n=31                │
└─────────────────────────────┘         │ Research design n=18             │
              │                          │ Location n=8                     │
              ▼                          │ Duplications n=9                 │
┌─────────────────────────────┐         │ Not focused on PE n= 42          │
│ Studies included in literature│        │                                  │
│ review.                      │         └──────────────────────────────────┘
│ (n=12)                       │
└─────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 1: Literature Review Flowchart

The results from the 2 databases were compared so that duplicates could be removed, and

then the inclusion and exclusion criteria (See Table 2) were applied to the full-text articles.

Though Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest utilising narrative text, the qualitative studies and mixed-methods study included in this research provided data primarily in text form.

Table 2: Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria in Literature Review

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
1. Research design Studies were included if they were empirical and had an experimental or quasi-experimental survey design.	Studies were excluded if they were opinion pieces or position papers which were not reporting results of an empirical study.	The review aimed to find research into practice not solely theory.
2. Location Studies were included if they described practice taking place in the UK	Studies were excluded if the practice was described as outside the UK.	Research evidence was sought that was directly related to UK educational contexts.
3. Participants Studies were accepted in participants were adolescent girls	Studies were excluded if participants were male or of a different age group. Also if participants were from other professional groups e.g. teachers, sports coaches, headteachers.	The review aimed to look solely at the experiences of adolescent girls.
4. Publication date	Studies were excluded if they did not appear in a	The quality of studies will already have been checked if

Studies were included	peer-reviewed journal in the last 25 years.	published in a journal. 30 years should give a wide scope to include all relevant research.
5. Focus on PE	Studies were excluded if they focused on physical activity outside of PE; e.g. extra-curricular sports, sports clubs outside of school	The focus of the literature review is specifically on barriers to PE, not to physical activity.

This elimination process produced a final 12 papers for the literature review.

Table 3: Final papers for Literature Review

Paper number	Paper Reference
1.	Azzarito, L., & Hill, J. (2013). Girls looking for a 'second home': Bodies, difference and places of inclusion. *Physical education and sport pedagogy*, *18*(4), 351-375.
2.	Cockburn, C., & Clarke, G. (2002). "Everybody's looking at you!": Girls negotiating the "femininity deficit" they incur in physical education. In *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 25, No. 6, pp. 651-665). Pergamon.

3.   Goodyear, V. A., Casey, A., & Kirk, D. (2014). Hiding behind the camera: Social learning within the cooperative learning model to engage girls in physical education. *Sport, education and society*, *19*(6), 712-734.

4.   James, M., Todd, C., Scott, S., Stratton, G., McCoubrey, S., Christian, D., ... & Brophy, S. (2018). Teenage recommendations to improve physical activity for their age group: a qualitative study. *BMC Public Health*, *18*(1), 1-9.

5.   Jones, R. J., Polman, R. C., & Peters, D. M. (2009). Physical self-perceptions of adolescents in Years 8, 9 and 10 in independent schools, state comprehensive schools and specialist sport colleges in England. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *14*(2), 109-124.

6.   Kirby, J., Levin, K. A., & Inchley, J. (2012). Associations between the school environment and adolescent girls' physical activity. *Health education research*, *27*(1), 101-114.

7.   Metcalfe, S. (2018). Adolescent constructions of gendered identities: The role of sport and (physical) education. *Sport, Education and Society*, *23*(7), 681-693.

8.   Niven, A., Henretty, J., & Fawkner, S. (2014). 'It's too crowded' A qualitative study of the physical environment factors that adolescent girls perceive to be important and influential on their PE experience. *European Physical Education Review*, *20*(3), 335-348.

9.   Smith, A., Green, K., & Thurston, M. (2009). 'Activity choice' and physical education in England and Wales. *Sport, Education and Society*, *14*(2), 203-222.

10.   Stride, A., & Flintoff, A. (2017). 'I don't want my parents' respect going down the drain': South Asian, Muslim young women negotiating family and physical activity. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, *8*(1), 3-17.

11.   Vaughan, J., Boduszek, D., & Rodriguez, A. (2015). Factors influencing subject selection in upper secondary education (Key Stage 4) for males and females in England. *Current Issues in Personality Psychology*, *3*(3), 166-174.

12.   Whitehead, S., & Biddle, S. (2008). Adolescent girls' perceptions of physical activity: A focus group study. *European physical education review*, *14*(2), 243-262.

2.1 Introduction to Literature Review

A growing body of literature is currently investigating the experiences of participation in PE among adolescents (Coleman et al., 2008). Consistent findings from longitudinal studies illustrate a pronounced decrease in participation in PE and levels of physical activity (PA) during adolescence (Aaron et al., 2002). Notably, girls exhibit lower rates of PA participation, reporting less engagement in PA compared to boys throughout their teenage years (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). This decline in activity levels among adolescent girls is

most conspicuous during the transition from primary to secondary school (Collins et al.,
2010).

Over the past few decades, research has demonstrated that girls do not actively participate in
PE within the school setting as much as boys, leading to a significant number of relatively
inactive girls within PE classes (Rich 2004; Brooks & Magnusson, 2006). These girls are
frequently recognised in the literature as "less physically active" (Jones et al., 2009, p.12), or
"disengaged" (Azzarito & Hill, 2013, p.6). More recently, the focus has shifted from merely
recognising girls' disengagement to exploring strategies to overcome this disengagement
from PE (Oliver & Lalik, 2001; Oliver et al, 2009; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010; Fisette,
2011).

This literature review will summarise the existing body of research, outlining the consistent
trend in adolescence, and a significant decline in participation in PE, particularly among girls.
In order to complete the literature review, this section will detail the findings of the research
question, followed with critical appraisal of the aims, methodology, sample, analysis, theory,
and reflexivity.

2.2 Themes in the Literature Review

This literature review identified several themes, which will be discussed individually. These
themes were discerned following the methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022),
employing a deductive approach rooted in the research question posed in the literature
review.

The literature outlines that the challenge of involving girls in PE is multifaceted. Within the same class, girls may exhibit varying preferences for activities, and their motivations or perceived obstacles to participating in physical activity can be diverse. One main theme was self-perception, discussed as an internal occurrence for girls regarding their wish to involve themselves in PE. Other themes were more focused on external influences, including masculinity in PE, choice of activity, the purpose of PE, and the awareness of culture and ethnicity.

2.2.1 Self-Perception

The predominant theme in the literature revolved around the self-perception of adolescent girls when considering PE. Jones et al. (2009) described self-perception as an aspect of a person that plays a pivotal role in determining their level of self-esteem. Moreover, the perception of one's physical self emerges as a crucial component of overall self-perception, with implications for health, well-being, achievement, and health behaviours.

Jones et al. (2009), James et al. (2018), and Smith et al. (2009) outlined how these girls placed significant emphasis on various aspects of their self-concept, including their appearance, confidence, physicality, and self-confidence. Vaughan et al. (2015) also demonstrated a connection between these self-perceptions and external influences, particularly the impact of factors such as social media and prevailing gender norms. These external factors played a pivotal role in shaping and influencing how adolescent girls perceived themselves within the context of PE.

The literature outlines the challenges adolescent girls face in their PE classes due to their internal self-perception. Vaughan et al. (2015) administered an Academic Self-Perception

(ASP) questionnaire and completed individual interviews finding that boys exhibit higher self-perception not only in academic classes but also in PE, whereas girls, who are not as physically active, tend to score lower in various aspects related to physical self-perception.

In an exploration of identities, subjectivities, and their interrelation with engagement, Goodyear et al. (2014) explored engagement in PE with an eight lesson Cooperative Learning programme. Data collection included the teacher's reflective journal, and post-lesson teacher analysis tool (Dyson & Rubin, 2003). Their findings suggest that girls who adopt a 'sporty' identity engage in PE and describe it as both fun and enjoyable due to their high levels of physical competence. Whitehead and Biddle (2008) further explored girls' perceptions of physical activity in focus groups. Their thematic analysis highlighted the influence of peer comments in PE, with friendship groups frequently making remarks about girls, such as assigning nicknames. Additionally, girls expressed concerns about weight gain, leading to temporary and unhealthy motivation for physical activity.

Overall, self-perception seems paramount within the realm of PE for adolescent girls. These girls place significant emphasis on various facets of their self-concept, influenced by external factors such as social media (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008) and prevailing gender norms (Metcalfe, 2018). The challenges they encounter in PE classes, as outlined in the research, stem from internal self-perceptions and are exacerbated by societal influences (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). Issues like peer comments, concerns about appearance, and societal expectations contribute to lower physical self-perception scores for girls, contrasting with higher scores observed in boys (Jones et al. 2009). Furthermore, unhealthy motivations for physical activity may arise from these concerns (Metcalfe, 2018).

Notably, Stride and Flintoff (2017) described how adopting a "sporty' identity" (p.22) appears to positively impact engagement, with girls expressing enjoyment in PE due to heightened levels of physical competence. This nuanced understanding of self-perception and its external influences is crucial for developing strategies to enhance the PE experience for adolescent girls.

More specifically, appearance has been argued as an important facet of self-perception, and it has been extensively explored in the literature. Appearance seems to play a pivotal role in shaping self-esteem, and this connection holds true across all stages of childhood (Jones et al., 2009). Furthermore, during adolescence, a person's physical appearance and competence have been argued to have a significant impact on how they perceive and navigate other aspects of life, such as social and emotional domains (Harter, 1990).

Building on this, adolescence emerges as a crucial phase in self-development, where the encounters and attitudes during this period significantly shape future behaviours and social interactions (Jones et al., 2009). Relating this to PE, James et al. (2018) suggested that girls often prefer solitary exercise to avoid fixating on their appearance, particularly concerns about sweating. Niven et al. (2014) found that swimming was difficult for girls as they had "self-presentation concerns about wearing swimwear in the presence of boys" (p.5). A vital aspect is fostering physical self-esteem in adolescent girls. Furthermore, Jones et al. (2009) used two questionnaires, named the Children and Youth Physical Perception Profile and Children and Youth Perceived Importance Profile, finding that exercise serves as an effective tool for enhancing self-esteem among children and adolescents.

Cockburn and Clarke (2002) noted that the physical demands of activities such as getting sweaty and muddy run counter to the expectations of adolescent girl culture. The concept of a

"femininity deficit" (p.655) as described seems to revolve around the idea that societal expectations of appearance within teenage feminine culture create a disparity or deficit for girls. This deficit arises from the pressure to conform to certain standards of appearance that are deemed acceptable or desirable within their peer groups and by society at large.

The concept of a "femininity deficit" (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002, p.655) as described seems to revolve around the idea that societal expectations of appearance within teenage feminine culture create a disparity or deficit for girls. This deficit arises from the pressure to conform to certain standards of appearance that are deemed acceptable or desirable within their peer groups and by society at large. The conflict arises when these standards clash with the expectations or norms imposed by authority figures such as teachers, as well as the perceptions and expectations of boys. Girls may find themselves torn between adhering to the standards of appearance within their peer group and meeting the expectations of those around them. Furthermore, it highlights the need for further understanding of these expectations and the impact they have on girls' sense of self-worth, autonomy, and well-being.

Society often instils the idea that engaging in sports is a way of proving, heightening, and focusing on one's masculinity. Metcalfe (2018) outlined how "the social construction of masculinity is strongly associated with maleness, and is characterised by sporting prowess, musculature, physical dominance, and confidence" (Gerdin, 2016, p.683). Consequently, girls may fear facing discrimination when they challenge this norm and involve themselves in sports that are not traditionally associated with femininity (Stride & Flintoff, 2017; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002).

Azzarito and Hill (2013) described how girls decide to insert themselves into and/or withdraw from a space depending on how they view and how they believe others view their bodies in these spaces. For instance, Garrett (2004) has argued that in the space of

PE, girls can feel significantly more "vulnerable to being measured and evaluated in terms of their outward signs and bodily shape" (p. 224). In summary, the literature extensively explores the significance of appearance in self-perception during adolescence, a crucial phase in shaping future behaviours and social interactions. Appearance holds a pivotal role in shaping self-esteem across all childhood stages, influencing how individuals perceive and navigate various life domains during adolescence. Within the context of PE, studies reveal that adolescent girls often prefer solitary exercise to mitigate concerns about appearance, such as sweating. Swimming, for example, poses challenges due to self-presentation concerns. Fostering physical self-esteem in adolescent girls is crucial, as exercise is identified as an effective tool for enhancing self-esteem. However, societal expectations and gender norms contribute to a "femininity deficit" (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002, p.655) when girls engage in physically demanding activities, potentially leading to discrimination and harassment. In PE settings, girls may feel vulnerable to external evaluations based on their outward signs and bodily shape, reinforcing the complexities of self-perception in the context of physical activity.

2.2.2 Gender Norms

The link between gender norms and self-perception was outlined by Azzarito and Hill (2013) as they discuss how adolescence is often marked by a heightened awareness of the body as an integral aspect of self-identity. Within this context, gendered spaces that promote a limited conception of the ideal female body further accentuate the societal expectations for girls to adhere to established gender norms. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of self-consciousness among girls (Heilman, 2001). The studies explored and integrated gender

norms into their research, each offering a distinct perspective, all of which are elaborated upon below.

Whitehead and Biddle (2008) discuss the perception of femininity in the context of PE and sports. Focus groups in this research suggested that the conventional feminine image is often incongruent with the expectations of sports participation. Consequently, they suggested girls may engage in PE to a limited extent, with a reluctance to break a sweat or display aggression, to conform to traditional notions of femininity (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008).

Metcalfe (2018) observed that adolescent girls often found themselves compelled to conform to certain behavioural expectations and norms imposed by societal perceptions. This pressure was believed to lead to females acting and presenting themselves in a certain way to fit with their gender. This observation aligns with Connell's (1987) concept of emphasised femininity, where females are expected to adhere to traditional gender roles and girls attempt to construct an identity acceptable within the existing gender order. They may often strive to create an identity that aligns with the prevailing gender norms, but this endeavour can put them in a challenging position (Azzarito & Hill, 2013). Girls may face the choice of resisting these norms, either by opposing the group's expectations or grappling with internal conflicts. In doing so, it could be seen that they encounter awareness of societal pressures and find themselves constrained by them.

Cockburn and Clarke (2002) discuss Connell's concept of "othering" (p.652) as it relates to females. This notion emphasises the considerable societal pressure on girls to conform to the expectations of emphasised femininity. Such pressures can significantly limit their participation in PE. Whitehead and Biddle (2008) researched adolescent girls using focus

groups, and the thematic analysis found that social norms and societal influences impacted girls' participation. They suggested that adolescent girls are often highly impressionable and feel a strong desire to conform to established norms, which can further contribute to the challenges girls face in engaging in PE (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008).

Vaughan et al. (2015) explained how, for adolescent girls, these gender norms are perpetuated through interactions within the environment. Students are commonly influenced by gender stereotypes, which can deter them from certain activities, such as PE. This complicates engagement in PE, as it often requires an approach associated with traditional masculinity (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). There is a narrative in the literature that this is something that an adolescent girl cannot achieve, especially in the eyes of others. Hills (2006) highlights the issue of girls not being perceived as physically competitive, which leads to them being excluded or feeling excluded from team sports and how this perception of physical competitiveness can create a barrier to their participation in such activities.

In summary, the literature explores the intricate relationship between gender norms and self-perception during adolescence, a phase marked by heightened body awareness and societal expectations. Gendered spaces, such as PE, contribute to self-consciousness among girls. Additionally, the literature highlights the narrative that girls are often perceived as lacking physical competitiveness, leading to their exclusion from team sports, based on their gender. Overall, these findings shed light on the complex challenges girls encounter in navigating self-perception within the confines of societal gender norms, significantly impacting their participation in physical activities such as PE.

2.2.3 Masculinity in PE

According to Vaughan et al. (2015), there is a link between masculinity and PE resulting in a bias in favour of boys. Their quantitative study, using two questionnaires (Attitudes Towards School and Academic Self-Perception) were included. They collated this data with demographic measures and the Children's Sex Role Inventory (CSRI) (Boldizar, 1991), students who score higher on the masculinity sub-scale of the CSRI are significantly more likely to "select physical education/sport subjects compared to creative and performance subjects" (p.171). Metcalfe (2018) emphasised that PE and sports are predominantly associated with boys, and a strong sporting physique plays a pivotal role in fostering a successful masculine identity. They highlighted that this situation may create challenges for girls who may not conform to the conventional expectations of PE (Metcalfe, 2018).

Hills (2006) highlights the phenomenon where girls often suppress or downplay their sporting abilities, even if they are actively involved in sports outside of the school environment. This behaviour is driven by a desire to conform to prevailing gender norms within PE classes and maintain a specific discourse about what constitutes an appropriate form of female physicality. Girls who choose to challenge this status quo face an additional hurdle, as they must not only excel in sports but also confront societal expectations and actively represent themselves as athletes outside of traditional gender roles.

Metcalfe (2018) also noted that these expectations extend to males, who are likewise burdened by the societal demand for them to embody traditional masculinity. One participant said that "I'm aware [of gender] sometimes, but mostly it's just background noise" (p.688). This highlights how gender norms are often downplayed or seen as natural by young people and how Gender-related influences are pervasive throughout the lives of young people,

although these influences often operate in the background and may not always be consciously acknowledged.

The literature presents a pervasive link between masculinity and PE, favouring boys. The association of PE and sports predominantly with boys, coupled with the emphasis on a robust sporting physique for a successful masculine identity, poses potential challenges for girls to conform to social norms.

2.2.4 Environment Surrounding PE

Stride and Flintoff (2017) emphasise the crucial role of family support in enabling physical activity opportunities for young women, a finding that aligns with previous research (Azzarito & Hill, 2013). The study outlines the significance of creating PE settings that are inclusive of the diverse identities of adolescent girls, recognising their right to participate in physical activities. However, it also reveals that there is often debate about what constitutes an appropriate space for such activities. Benn et al. (2011) acknowledged that for physical activity providers and educators still need to take a proactive approach, they must collaborate with the girls they serve to acknowledge and accommodate differences.

2.2.5 Choice of Activity for PE

The literature highlights adolescent girls derive enjoyment from having a choice in their PE lessons. James et al. (2018) used focus groups with adolescent girls, in which they expressed a preference for PE when it was student-led rather than teacher-led. This approach increased their motivation to participate in PE, primarily because it granted them more autonomy and

the opportunity to voice their preferences regarding the activities. Jones et al. (2009) further indicate that girls valued having their opinions considered during PE lessons. They felt that there was insufficient communication and collaboration between them and the teaching staff concerning the selection of PE activities (James et al., 2018). This lack of consultation led to a disconnect between school-based PE and the leisure or sports activities that girls enjoyed outside of the school environment, making it more challenging for adolescent girls to engage in PE. On the other hand, Whitehead and Biddle (2008) described positive communication between girls and teachers. In their focus groups, participants explained how some girls successfully reached agreements with their PE teachers to wear leggings or tracksuit trousers instead of short game skirts.

Smith et al. (2009) observed the advantages of expanded options for sporting and physical activities in Year 11, contrasting it with their previous years in PE. They concluded that having a broader selection of activities tended to enhance overall enjoyment. "It would become a good deal more enjoyable, and, as a consequence, more attractive to 15-16-year-olds" (Smith et al., 2009, p.14).

The availability of sports and activity choices in PE has a positive impact on the engagement of adolescent girls. However, the literature also revealed a gender disparity in available choices, with girls having fewer options compared to boys (Smith et al, 2009; Hills, 2006). Smith et al. (2009) noted an overrepresentation of sports favouring boys, like football and rugby, which were exclusively male sports at the time. As girls could not partake in these activities, their choices were further limited.

The limitations on options seemed to have a more pronounced impact on the girls in the literature. Comments from many adolescent girls resonated with findings from other studies

(Jones et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2009; Metcalfe, 2018), indicating that girls were noticeably dissatisfied with what they perceived as an overemphasis on a small number of traditional team sports in PE (Stride & Flintoff, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, Niven et al (2014) found that even if the choice was there for the girls, other factors would deter them from joining in. For example, "we also get the choice of football but not very many girls take it because half the boys go and they get really competitive" (Niven et al., 2014, p5).

Furthermore, it is not just the choice of sport but also the underlying purpose of the PE lesson that matters for girls' engagement. Jones et al. (2009) emphasised that an excessive focus on competition and peer comparison in PE was a barrier. Instead, the research indicates that unstructured, informal, and light-hearted fun activities are more likely to engage adolescent girls (Kirby et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2009; James et al., 2018).

The research discussed here presents the importance of offering choices, unstructured activities, and a variety of options in PE to better engage adolescent girls, as a rigid, competitive approach can be a deterrent. Addressing the gender disparities in available activities is also important for inclusive and equitable PE.

2.2.6 Purpose of PE for Girls

Goodyear et al. (2014) stated that the goal of PE is to enable young individuals to embrace an active lifestyle. Consequently, PE should serve as an environment where students are inspired to engage in physical activity (Haerens et al., 2011), and an effective PE program ensures that every student actively participates, (Dyson & Strachan, 2000). The literature focused on the issue of motivation among adolescent girls in the context of PE, with many of them struggling to see its purpose. According to James et al. (2018), two key factors for girls'

participation in PE are enjoyment and a clear understanding of the purpose of PE. The research suggests that designing PE lessons with the primary aim of providing fun rather than solely focusing on winning, burning calories, or practicing specific skills, can enhance girls' engagement (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008)

Whitehead and Biddle's (2008) findings suggest that many of the benefits offered by traditional PE were short-term and did not provide a compelling purpose for sustained engagement in PE and physical activity into adulthood. Hobbs et al. (2015) identified that some adolescent girls fell short of the anticipated level of achievement in PE, primarily attributing this to the structure of the lessons. These girls encountered challenges in grasping the purpose of activities and struggled with self-regulation in participation. This lack of comprehension and self-regulation posed obstacles to their performance and engagement in PE.

Furthermore, adolescent girls often prioritise other aspects of their school life, such as friendships, relationships, and their image, which do not easily integrate into conventional PE lessons (Metcalfe, 2018). However, PE lessons tend to be predominantly competition-based and lack opportunities for creativity or the expression of femininity, thus not aligning with the broader priorities of adolescent girls (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Additionally, Smith et al. (2009) observed that girls prioritise their friendships in the context of PE. The inclination to interact with friends often takes precedence over personal preferences, leading them to forego certain activities in PE to maintain social bonds. Supporting this, Goodyear et al. (2014) found that girls particularly enjoy the social aspects of learning in PE, emphasising collaboration and cooperation within the broader PE practice.

Goodyear et al. (2014) discovered that the conventional approach and objectives of PE lacked motivation and effectiveness for adolescent girls. Consequently, they redirected the focus of PE from mere physical activity to cognitive and social outcomes. "By temporarily removing the physical aspect of learning, the girls' engagement in lessons improved and they later began to participate and engage in the physical domain of learning" (p.28). By employing a student-centred approach, granting students more responsibility, and emphasising the social aspect of learning, the "non-sporty students engaged with the role" (Goodyear et al., 2014, p.23) when given some responsibility in PE (Goodyear et al., 2014).

2.2.7 Intersectionality and PE

Intersectionality is a concept that originated in critical theory and feminism (Crenshaw, 1989). It describes how various social categories, such as race, gender, class, and other forms of identity, intersect and interact with each other, creating unique and complex systems of privilege and oppression. In the context of the literature review, there has been a growing exploration of additional categories alongside gender, in relation to PE and these will be further discussed here.

Azzarito and Hill (2013) brought attention to the situation in the UK, revealing that South Asian girls are identified as the ethnic group least likely to consistently participate in sports. This categorisation places them at risk of adopting inactive lifestyles, reflecting a perception associating their bodies with femininity and inactivity. Stride and Flintoff (2017) elaborate on the ongoing debate surrounding the diverse and sometimes contradictory expectations regarding the behaviour of young Muslim women's bodies in specific contexts. This debate

presents the varied approaches through which visual, spatial, and ethical aspects come into play and are managed.

In a comprehensive study across schools in different regions, Smith et al. (2009) found variations associated with social class. "It appeared that those schools located in largely lower-working/working-class neighbourhoods offered less choice of activities for their 15- and 16-year-olds" (p.18). This lack of options was particularly pronounced for females, with a more significant impact observed in deprived areas.

These highlighted studies on sports participation among specific demographic groups, provide a valuable starting point for intersectionality research. By delving into the intricate interplay of factors such as ethnicity, gender, and social class, these studies highlight the need for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges individuals face in engaging in sports. Recognising the multifaceted nature of these experiences is crucial for developing inclusive strategies and policies that address the diverse intersections of privilege and disadvantage within the realm of physical activity and sports participation. Further exploration of intersectionality in this context can contribute significantly to fostering more equitable and accessible opportunities for individuals across various social identities.

2.2.8 Practicalities of PE

The literature showed that the practical aspects of PE posed challenges for girls, including issues related to changing facilities and uniform. Whitehead and Biddle (2008) emphasised the role of social media in shaping these dynamics and concerns with the practicalities of PE. Whitehead and Biddle (2008) found many adolescent girls aspire to emulate social media

influencers, leading them to scrutinise their body image as they inevitably draw comparisons with their peers. In the context of PE, this heightened self-consciousness can make the act of changing uncomfortable. The facilities for girls to change in were felt to be inappropriate, with only small group showers, small changing rooms, as well as limited time to change (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Niven et al. (2014) discovered that several participants expressed dissatisfaction with their changing facilities, noting that this dissatisfaction adversely affected their behaviour in PE and their inclination to participate. Furthermore, with girls acutely aware of others' gazes on their bodies, the lack of privacy in changing rooms was unpopular with the girls (Niven et al., 2014). This unease extends to leaving the changing room and donning their PE kit during class.

According to Cockburn and Clarke (2002), the prescribed PE uniform for girls was unflattering, unfeminine, and unfashionable. This issue is closely tied to the emphasis that adolescent girls place on their self-image, influenced by social media and peer pressure. "People are judging what you're wearing… if you have not got your hair done right… you're not good enough" (Niven et al., 2014, p.9). Moreover, the provided PE attire was inadequate in terms of protection and suitability. Skorts were too short, often revealing underwear during physical activities, leading to discomfort and embarrassment for the girls (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002).

Given the awareness among adolescent girls about their self-image and their desire for self-expression, they found it frustrating that their feminine expressions were prohibited in PE. Girls were forbidden from wearing jewellery, maintaining long nails, or using makeup (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). These regulations, at the time, restricted girls from expressing their femininity through their appearance.

The literature highlights significant challenges that adolescent girls face in the practical aspects of PE, particularly concerning changing facilities, uniforms, and restrictive regulations. The emphasis on body image and the desire to emulate social media influencers contribute to heightened self-consciousness during changing, further exacerbated by inadequate and uncomfortable facilities. Furthermore, the lack of privacy, unfashionable attire, and restrictions on self-expression contribute to discomfort, embarrassment, and frustration among adolescent girls. These challenges not only impact their behaviour in PE but also limit their ability to express their femininity through appearance. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive environment that encourages girls' participation and promotes a positive relationship with PE.

2.3 Critical Discussion of the Literature

This section of the literature review aims to discuss the overarching strengths and limitations of the research papers under consideration. This analysis will encompass an examination of various aspects of the methodology, including the chosen location, theoretical framework, level of reflectivity, and the perceived value of the research.

The literature review incorporated papers that used a varied array of research approaches, spanning qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. This methodological diversity contributed to a wide array of research findings. Quantitative research (Vaughan et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2009; Kirby et al., 2012) typically featured larger participant samples, thus offering a broader perspective on opinions and experiences. However, they often lacked the nuanced detail and depth characteristic of smaller-scale qualitative studies, which allowed for

a more thorough analysis of participants' experiences. Qualitative (Azzarito & Hill, 2013; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Goodyear et al., 2014; James et al. 2018; Niven et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Stride & Flintoff, 2017; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008), and mixed-methods research (Metcalfe, 2018). Consequently, in the subsequent section, the qualitative and quantitative studies will be addressed separately.

2.3.1 Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Studies

There were eight qualitative studies and one mixed-method study included in the literature review, which was guided by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for the qualitative studies (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). This led to the considerations of clear aims, methodology, sample, reflectivity, analysis, and value of research, all of which will be discussed here.

2.3.1.1 Aims

Having a clear aim for a research study is vital, as well as having a clear statement in the write-up, so the reader has a clear idea. All qualitative studies contained a clear and specific aim, though these were presented in different ways.

Smith et al. (2009) provided a comprehensive summary of their study, encapsulating all elements involved; however, it appeared somewhat unclear whether there was a distinct primary or secondary aim explicitly outlined. Similarly, Metcalfe (2018) and Stride and Flintoff (2017) followed a similar approach, summarising previous literature and presenting key ideas, but the primary aim remained somewhat ambiguous.

In contrast, the remaining studies demonstrated clarity by articulating specific aims, along with the intention behind both primary and subsequent aims of the research (Azzarito & Hill, 2013; Cockburn and Clarke, 2002; Goodyear et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2009; Niven et al., 2014). This clarity not only facilitated a better understanding of the research objectives but also provided valuable insights into the methodological considerations, thereby enhancing the overall assessment of the study's significance and relevance.

2.3.1.2 Methodology

When considering the methodology of qualitative research, it is important to consider whether the methodology is appropriate, and able to address the aims, whilst staying ethical and rigorous (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018).

Participant recruitment was facilitated via the personal networks of researchers, primarily comprised of school staff. This approach was rationalised in certain studies due to the researchers' affiliation with educational institutions, while for others, it was chosen for its convenience. This allows access to the target population, namely, adolescent girls. Furthermore, this enables a smoother recruitment process. However, it is important to consider the bias of relying on researchers' contacts. This may cause a lack of diversity or representation.

Interviews conducted by Azzarito and Hill (2013), Cockburn and Clarke (2002), and Metcalfe (2018) were able to provide a high level of detail, clarify complex responses, and delve deeper into participants' perspectives and experiences, aligning with a constructivist

epistemology through their decision to use individual interviews. However, there is the limitation of bias within interviews. This includes both social desirability bias from the participants and interview bias, in which the interviewers' visible social graces (Burnham, 2018) may influence the process and the interpretation of questions and data. Despite these limitations, individual interviews are still valuable for exploring participant perspectives and attitudes in-depth. The researchers considered their methodology and expressed individual interviews were the most appropriate data collection method for their research.

In contrast, focus groups, in studies by James et al. (2018), Niven et al. (2014), Smith et al. (2009), Stride and Flintoff (2017), and Whitehead and Biddle (2008), offer the advantage of group dynamics, enabling exploration of shared experiences, social norms, and interaction among participants, leaning towards a more constructionist epistemology by considering the nuances occurring between individuals and group dynamics. While individual interviews excel in capturing nuanced personal insights, focus groups facilitate the exploration of collective viewpoints and the dynamics of social interaction, providing a richer understanding of the phenomena under study. However, Whitehead and Biddle (2008) outlined how their focus group was not without limitations as there was a minority of participants who were quieter and found it hard to navigate the group dynamics to express themselves. Despite, these limitations, focus groups are still valuable for exploring group dynamics and generating insights into shared experiences and perspectives. They allow researchers to delve into the complexities of social interaction and collective meaning-making.

This emphasises the value of incorporating both interview and focus group data collection methodologies within this literature review as it enables a comprehensive understanding, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Additionally,

Goodyear et al. (2014) and Stride and Flintoff (2017) incorporated both interviews and focus groups, harnessing the details of individual interviews alongside the benefits of group dynamics.

Thematic analysis was used in the majority of the qualitative research (Goodyear et al., 2014; James et al., 2018; Metcalfe, 2018; Niven et al, 2014), though discourse analysis was used by Azzarito and Hill (2013). Thematic analysis emerged as the predominant analytical method in this literature review, initially marked by its exploratory nature. Over time, it has evolved to strike a balance between standardisation and flexibility, gaining popularity for its structured yet adaptable approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

All studies explained their process in detail, which was important for trustworthiness, as thematic analysis can be completed in a variety of ways. Cockburn and Clarke (2002) and Smith et al. (2009) did not explicitly define their chosen type of analysis. Though Smith et al. (2009) explained the process in detail, so the reader could follow the analytic journey. This was followed by all studies presenting their studies as themes, taking each theme, in turn, to describe, discuss, and provide examples of each using exerts from their participants.

Research into gender and PE appears to be primarily exploratory, reflecting the early stages of investigation in this area. Exploratory research serves as a catalyst for future inquiry, stimulating further exploration and understanding of the topic. This literature review establishes a foundational understanding of the research landscape, paving the way for subsequent studies.

Vaughan et al. (2015) advocate for future research to replicate findings to enhance their validity. Additionally, Niven et al. (2014) recommend further exploration to obtain more nuanced perspectives on the themes identified in this literature review.

2.3.1.3 Reflexivity

In a qualitative inquiry, the researcher is viewed as an instrument of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I felt that Niven et al. (2014) outlined their position clearly and transparently, providing a description of their training, experience with the participants, and previous qualitative research experience. They provided this information so that the reader could interpret the researchers' understanding of the data (Elliott et al., 1999) (as cited in Niven, 2014, p. 338). Goodyear et al. (2014) also described previous work that the researcher completed as they were the participant's PE teacher, as well as acknowledging others included in the study throughout.

Furthermore, Stride and Flintoff (2017) recognised the influence of race, noting, "As a White, non-Muslim researcher, I recognised some of the difficulties in gaining access to Muslim communities" (p. 11). This acknowledgement provides insight into the rationale behind selecting a school-based setting as a feasible entry point for their study. Additionally, James et al. (2018) provided insights into their reflective thoughts and decision-making process regarding their research methodology. They outlined several key strategies, including having the assistant researcher establish rapport with participants beforehand, utilising school staff to facilitate focus groups for familiarity, and incorporating a feedback mechanism to ensure accurate comprehension of the gathered data. These deliberate choices not only enhanced the

trustworthiness of their study but also offered transparency to the reader, providing a clear understanding of the steps taken in their research methodology.

However, the remaining qualitative studies did not state the consideration between the researcher and participants in their write-up, therefore lowering the transparency and trustworthiness of the research process. This omission leaves the reader without valuable insights into the dynamics of the researcher and participants. Transparency regarding the researcher's role, background, and biases is important in qualitative research, as it enables readers to evaluate the credibility and reliability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Furthermore, such transparency aids in understanding the methodological justifications, enhancing the credibility and rigour of the research.

2.3.1.4 Value of the Research

The qualitative studies discussed in this literature review offer valuable insights into the experiences of adolescent girls in PE. These studies have given voice to the participants and, through a variety of methodologies, have highlighted both individual and group experiences. Moreover, the research indicates a need for further exploration in this area (Metcalfe, 2018; Niven et al., 2014), aiming to deepen our understanding of these experiences while also prompting reflections on the purpose of PE (Goodyear et al., 2014) and advocating for policy changes.

These policy adjustments encompass considerations such as the provision of women-only spaces (Azzarito & Hill, 2013), the challenge of public perceptions and actions (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002), and a more nuanced examination of gender differences in experiences, suggesting that blanket rules may require additional scrutiny (Goodyear et al., 2014).

2.3.2 Quantitative Studies

Three quantitative studies and one mixed-methods study were included in this literature review, which were analysed using the quantitative and mixed-method studies were guided by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Checklist for Prevalence Studies (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2017) and by the Evaluation Tool of Quantitative Research Studies (Long et al., 2002). This led to considerations on the sample, methodology, analysis, and implications for future research, all of which will be discussed here.

2.3.2.1 Sample

The number of participants in the studies ranged from slightly above 100 participants (Vaughan et al., 2015) to close to 2000 participants (Kirby et al., 2012). Kirby et al. (2012) did not describe their statistical power in their study, so though their participant numbers are high, the importance of the research findings is less clear.

Three studies, carried out by Jones et al. (2009), Metcalfe et al. (2018), and Vaughan et al. (2012), enlisted participants solely from three nearby schools. Jones et al. (2009) involved 605 participants, Metcalfe et al. (2018) had 332, and Vaughan et al. (2012) included 110 participants. Despite generating significant data, these studies were limited to a narrow geographic region. Although the number of participants was notable, the conclusions drawn may not accurately reflect the broader population of the UK. It is crucial to recognise the limitations in generalising these findings beyond the specific context of the local area. Despite the robustness of the data collected, caution is warranted when extending conclusions to broader populations due to potential variations in demographic, cultural, and

socioeconomic factors across different UK regions. Nonetheless, the extensive data obtained within this restricted setting provides valuable insights into local trends and dynamics, serving as a foundation for future research on a larger scale.

In contrast, Kirby et al. (2012) used a national representative sample across Scotland. Data was collected from self-administered questionnaires from Scottish secondary school girls (*n* = 1978) and headteachers (*n* = 123). Therefore, their findings offer a broader perspective that may be more applicable across a population, with a diverse range of demographics and geographical regions. The inclusion of a nationally representative sample allows for insights into variations across different regions of the UK, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors at play. This approach facilitates a more nuanced analysis of demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic influences on the phenomena under investigation. Consequently, while studies conducted within local schools offer valuable insights at a micro-level, nationally representative studies such as Kirby et al. (2012) contribute significantly to our understanding of broader trends and patterns within the UK populations.

2.3.2.2 Methodology

Each research paper used different questionnaires to collect data. Kirby et al. (2012) used data from previous health and behaviour in school-aged children survey. Using a broad survey has its drawbacks for this literature review as the detail in the data is not specific to the topic here, namely, the influence of gender on PE for adolescent girls.

Metcalfe (2018) utilised a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative measures via questionnaires to explore various dimensions such as perceptions of PE attitudes towards

femininity, and enjoyment of PE. Notably, participants' openness to subsequent qualitative interviews was also assessed. This quantitative phase served as a foundational step, paving the way for their qualitative inquiry. Although the discussion acknowledged the quantitative results, the focus shifted towards the richness of qualitative insights. The write-up highlighted how the quantitative interviews acted as an initial exploration, guiding the subsequent qualitative investigation. Hence, it can be inferred that the quantitative component served as a foundation for the qualitative work.

On the other hand, alternative studies have opted to use previously published questionnaires. Jones et al. (2009), for instance, employed two questionnaires sourced from Whitehead (1995): the 36-point Children and Youth Physical Self-Perception Profile and the 36-point Children and Youth Physical Perceived Importance Profile. These instruments have enjoyed widespread adoption in subsequent research on self-perceptions among adolescents in the UK (Biddle & Wang, 2003) and globally (Bharwaj, 2012; Gleason, 2013; Chow, 2002). Similarly, Vaughan et al. (2015) used a more recent questionnaire developed by McCoach (2002), known as the Attitude Toward School and Academic Self-Perception. This questionnaire, derived from the School Attitudes Assessment Survey, has also been extensively employed in research concerning student attitudes towards school in both UK and international contexts (Beavers, 2014; Suldo, Shaffer & Shaunessy, 2008; Arslan & Allen, 2022).

While Metcalfe's (2018) approach of employing a mixed-methods strategy with a focus on developing qualitative insights provides depth and richness to the understanding of gender dynamics in PE, the utilisation of previously validated questionnaires in other studies offers the advantage of consistency and comparability across different research contexts. However,

reliance solely on established questionnaires may limit the scope of inquiry and fail to capture nuances specific to the study population or context. Therefore, it is useful to have both approaches to ensure the most comprehensive and insightful investigation possible.

2.3.2.3 Analysis

The analysis of the quantitative data in this literature was seen as appropriate and outlined well for the reader. The response rate was adequate and allowed for statistical analysis. Jones et al. (2009) articulated their objective of assessing discrepancies in data concerning gender, school type, and year group. To accomplish this, they employed univariate one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), which uncovered a significant interaction. Consequently, post-hoc comparisons were carried out using the Fisher LSD test.

Kirby et al. (2012) similarly employed ANOVA to analyse the data concerning schools, education authority, and school type. However, these factors did not yield significant results, thus precluding any post-hoc comparisons. Subsequent analysis involved adjusting for the age of the pupil, whereby parameter estimates and 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) were computed. To mitigate multicollinearity, multiple models were constructed, incorporating both backwards and forward step-wise regressions, which included only explanatory variables identified in the univariate analyses. As Kirby et al. (2012) reported non-significant results for certain factors, this limits the generalisability of their findings.

Vaughan et al. (2015) directed their primary analysis towards examining the correlation between students' attitudes towards school, their academic self-perception, and their masculinity and femininity scores derived from the questionnaire, while also controlling for gender. The findings indicated that there were no significant predictors observed when

comparing the category of 'humanities' with 'creative and performance subjects'. Not finding significant predictors suggests potential limitations in the variables considered or sample size. Vaughan et al, (2015) highlighted that "decisions relating to the classification of school subjects into specified categories for statistical analysis may also be considered a limitation of the study" (p.172), suggesting that the variables for analysis were a concern. However, they justified this decision to "promote discriminatory power" (p.172).

All studies were seen to use appropriate quantitative analysis techniques to examine their respective research questions, as well as articulating their objectives. The studies ensured that there was statistical rigour by adjusting for confounding variables, conducting post-hoc comparisons where appropriate, and being overall able to demonstrate a comprehensive approach to data analysis.

2.3.3. Location

The papers in the literature review were searched to encompass the UK. The majority of the studies occurred in the North of England (Metcalfe, 2018; Smith et al., 2009), some specifically in Yorkshire (Jones et al., 2009; Stride & Flintoff, 2017; Vaughan et al., 2015), others occurred in the Midlands (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Azzarito & Hill, 2019), the south of England (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002), one in Wales (James et al., 2018), and two in Scotland (Kirby et al., 2012; Niven et al., 2014). Goodyear et al. (2014) were no more specific than saying their study occurred in schools in the UK. There is noticeable geographical variation within England in terms of research focus, with a greater emphasis on the North and less attention given to other nations in the UK. Additionally, the studies predominantly took place in rural areas rather than urban centres.

2.3.4 Theory

Within the literature, Hills (2006) and Metcalfe (2018) research studies presented Bourdieu's field theory of gender (1985). Their research was designed with a deductive approach, as these studies developed a hypothesis from the theory, and collected data to test those hypotheses. There are advantages to theory-driven research, as it enables researchers to establish causal relationships and investigate specific facets of a theory. In this case, it facilitates the exploration of gender-related aspects and their relationship or impact on sports, particularly in the context of PE. There is also space for quantitative integration, with Kirby et al. (2012) and Jones et al. (2009) studies which have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of gender in PE. However, there are some drawbacks, deductive approaches are limited to existing theories, however in new areas of research, it does not lend itself to explorative research to welcome new theories or understand phenomena without preconceived ideas. Furthermore, there are challenges with interpretation. Researchers may still face interpretation challenges, especially when trying to reconcile data with existing theory. Sometimes, findings do not neatly fit within the initial theoretical framework, leading to potential bias or misinterpretation.

Inductive research is a valuable approach in psychology and other fields, especially when researchers aim to explore, discover, and generate new theories or understand complex phenomena. It encourages flexibility and creativity but comes with challenges related to subjectivity, lack of structure, and resource requirements. The choice between inductive and deductive research depends on the research goals, the nature of the topic, and the available resources. Researchers often employ a mixed-methods approach to combine the strengths of both inductive and deductive methods in a single study. Furthermore, there is abductive

reasoning. Whilst psychological researchers use various methods and strategies in their inquiries, including the aforementioned inductive and deductive reasoning, a lesser-known category is abductive methods, which are characterised by their abductive nature (Haig, 2023). While researchers often employ explanatory reasoning, there is a lack of readily available abductive methods in psychology.

However, while these studies demonstrated commendable reflexivity by addressing the researcher-participant relationship in their methodology, it is noteworthy that such instances were relatively scarce in the broader literature review. The acknowledgement of these factors is helpful, as it allows readers to gauge the potential impact of the researcher's presence on the data collection process and the interpretation of findings. The strengths of this reflexive approach lie in its potential to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors shaping the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Therefore, future studies in the field may benefit from incorporating more explicit reflections on the researcher-participant relationship to strengthen the methodological rigor and enrich the interpretative depth of their findings.

2.4 Chapter Summary

This literature review has highlighted the importance of in-depth, qualitative research to provide detailed and meaningful accounts of girls' experiences in PE. Through the identification of key themes such as self-perception, gender norms, and the environment surrounding PE, it becomes evident that adolescent girls encounter various limitations within this context. The diversity of these themes highlights the importance of maintaining an open-minded approach in future research, as additional themes may emerge. Stride and Flintoff

(2017) summarised girls' experiences by reflecting on the "complex interplay of multiple influences and discourses on their physicality. Parents, siblings, friends, extended family, and wider community members intersect with religion, physical activity, gender and different cultural beliefs to create challenges and opportunities for them to be physically active" (p. 23).

The overall impression gathered from the literature review suggests that the experiences of adolescent girls in PE tend to be unfavourable, marked by challenges such as self-perception, emotional difficulties, social situations, and practical obstacles. The literature frequently delves into strategies aimed at enhancing the PE experiences of adolescent girls, considering the constraints outlined in the research. In summary, the literature converges on the imperative to develop effective strategies to foster greater engagement in PE, particularly among adolescent girls.

3.0 Methodology

"Student voice is about more than just listening to students; it is about listening to students with the intent of responding to what we hear" (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010, p.177). CYP voices "need to not only be heard, but also engaged with" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 251). In broader society, and notably within research on PE, there is a growing acknowledgement that young people are authorities on their own experiences and should be actively consulted (Clark & Moss, 2011).

This chapter will address the methodology designed for this research project by delving into the philosophical and research questions to examine the influence of gender on adolescent girls' experiences of PE. Importantly, the design of the research methodology is frequently guided by the specific research question at hand and consequently, methods can be seen as techniques tailored to the particular research problem (Moses & Knutsen, 2019).

As previously outlined, my personal experience of PE as a student and athlete significantly influenced my motivation for this research. I cannot disassociate from these experiences, therefore I carefully considered how to design my research methodology with full awareness of this personal influence. Bourdieu (1996) advocated reflexivity to achieve understanding between the researcher and participant. Throughout the process of completing this thesis, I have been aware that my own experiences, prejudices, or beliefs could influence my research.

Research literature has promoted reflexivity as a means to foster understanding between the researcher and participants (Bourdieu, 1996; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout the writing process, I remained conscious of the potential impact of my own experiences, biases, or

beliefs on participant responses. Acknowledging that my own experience is an inherent part of the research process (Giardina & Laurendeau, 2013), I recognised the crucial role of interpretation in exploring and advancing knowledge on socially constructed norms and behaviours.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) emphasise the significance of reflexivity within the sociological craft, highlighting the necessity for researchers to develop a keen sensitivity to the underlying dynamics at play, as manifested through their cultivated research habitus. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), my experiences have shaped my research habitus, influencing the way in which am comfortable conducting research with young people in school settings. Consequently, with a shared understanding between my experiences and those of the young people I researched, I continued to revisit my primary aim of the thesis and sought to interpret their experiences meaningfully. This approach aligns with Bourdieu's (1996) call for reflexivity and a nuanced, context-aware exploration of social phenomena.

This research project is rooted in the aim of providing young people with a platform to express themselves, delving into their lived experiences, and ensuring that their voices are listened to and heard. Within this chapter, I will explain my philosophical stance on this research project, outline the methods of data collection, and detail the analysis approach, all of which were carefully considered to align with this overarching aim.

3.1 Research Positioning

3.1.1 Relativist Ontology

This research derives from a relativist ontological perspective. It takes the philosophical position that facts depend on the viewpoint of the observer. Scientific laws and rules are created by people to fit their view of reality. This perspective suggests that what is considered real, or the nature of reality can vary among individuals, groups, or cultures. Relativist ontology challenges the notion of a single, objective reality that exists independently of human perception and interpretation (Ormston et al., 2014).

Relativist ontology, illustrated through the idea of multiple realities, contends that there can be various, equally valid interpretations of reality. It acknowledges that different individuals or groups may perceive and understand the world in distinctive ways (Raskin, 2001). In the context of my research, I have employed this approach to consider the experiences of the girls as their own, exploring their unique interpretations of their personal experiences.

Central to this perspective is the rejection of a universal truth or objective reality that applies universally to all people, places, and times. Instead, Hugly and Sayward (1987) explained how relativist ontology acknowledges that truth and reality are relative to one's viewpoint or context. It is important to emphasise that this research adopts a relativist ontology perspective, which does not inherently imply that all viewpoints are equally valid. Instead, it outlines the significance of respecting and understanding diverse perspectives, recognising that certain viewpoints may be better informed, evidence-based, or more consistent than others (Hugly & Sayward, 1987). This perspective encourages a nuanced approach that appreciates the diversity of interpretations.

3.1.2 Constructivist Epistemology

Per this ontological position, this research aims to position itself to use a constructivist epistemology. Constructivist epistemology posits that knowledge is not something that is uncovered or directly observed in an entirely objective and independent external reality. It highlights the significant role played by human perception, interpretation, and cognitive processes in the acquisition of knowledge and the development of one's understanding of the world (Ruskin, 2001).

The goal of constructivist-based research is to develop an understanding of ethical and moral dilemmas (Denzin, et al., 2006). In this research, the ethical dilemma would relate to the influence of gender on PE for adolescent girls. This research methodology aims to conceptualise this position by asking for individual perspectives (adolescent girls) on what has gone into the group (the PE class).

Constructivist epistemology, guided by key principles, posits that knowledge is inherently subjective and context-dependent, shaped by an individual's prior experiences, beliefs, cultural background, and social interactions. This research adopts this view, believing that learners take an active role in their educational journey, engaging with new information and experiences to construct understanding through reflection, interpretation, and critical thinking.

This epistemological perspective also embraces the idea that there can be multiple interpretations or perspectives on a given phenomenon, rejecting the notion of knowledge as absolute truth, and recognising it as a collection of viewpoints influenced by individual and

social contexts. With this epistemological position, participants' experience in this research cannot be distinguished from reality, rather participants' experience is the reality. It is important to note that, therefore there can be multiple realities as there can be multiple interpretations of an experience (Lee, 2012).

In summary, constructivist epistemology questions the idea of an objective, external reality that exists apart from the observer's perspective. Instead, it emphasises the active involvement of individuals in shaping their understanding of the world, frequently through social interactions and individual experiences. By adopting a constructivist epistemological lens, the study acknowledges the fluid and subjective nature of reality, acknowledging that the meanings attributed to PE experiences are not fixed but rather emerge from the ongoing interactions between individuals and their social contexts.

3.2 Research Design

The research design required numerous steps to decide upon location, participant group, and whether to conduct focus groups or interviews, and data analysis. In this section, I outline the research design, outlining my decisions and justifications and linking back to the original research question.

Ethical approval was granted by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Quality Assurance & Enhancement on 4th August 2023 (See Appendix 1: Ethical Approval).

3.2.1 Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is intended to generate knowledge grounded in human experience (Sandelowski, 2004). Modern qualitative research involves detailed exploration of text, rather than specific psychological characteristics. Qualitative research methods are also commonly used for preliminary stages of research, aiming to contribute to the literature. When considering the aims of this research, the exploratory nature, and the relativist positioning, qualitative methodology was seen to be the best suited (Robson, 2024). Qualitative methodology aims to focus on the richness of the data whereas quantitative loses this rich detail during analysis, therefore as this research aims to explore experiences and understand the perspectives of the participants, the decision was that qualitative methodology would be more appropriate and allow for a more richly descriptive data and results.

Howitt and Cramer (2017) conducted an evaluation of qualitative versus quantitative methodology, emphasising the capacity of qualitative research to capture the individual's subjective perspective. The methodological literature indicates a preference for qualitative approaches when research in a specific area is limited and when the research question pertains to language (Howitt & Cramer, 2017). Therefore, their analysis suggested that this research project would align well with a qualitative methodology.

To confirm that qualitative methodology would be the choice. for this research project, I considered the aims of the research. The aim of this research is to explore the experience of adolescent girls' PE in relation to gender. In the development of this research project, there was a deliberate choice to not include hypothesis testing. As Howett and Cramer (2017) have observed, qualitative research methods typically reject the practice of hypothesis testing,

opting instead for an approach where theories emerge organically through close analysis of the data. This approach was judged to be particularly suitable for this research project when compared with a quantitative methodology.

3.2.2 Participants

This research was conducted with eight participants from a single-sex school. I considered that special arrangements would need to be in place to protect participants from harm. Both the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) and the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) were adhered to in this research, and the research was undertaken with the aim of avoiding potential risks to psychological well-being, mental health, personal values, or dignity. That said, there were ethical challenges involved when interviewing children who might have been less resilient than adults when discussing a sensitive topic (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2012).

I also considered how consent should be obtained. Dual consent was essential for participants under the age of 16. See Appendix 2: Consent/assent forms. In addition, consent was attained from the young people to share demographic details. Assent was granted through gatekeepers (Headteacher and Head of PE and Sport).

The participants were in Years 10 and 11, aged 14-16. This age group was chosen to adhere to the focus of adolescence in the thesis. Adolescence, the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, is often characterised by a perceived increase in independence (Corbin, Pangrazi, & Le Masurier, 2004). As highlighted in Chapter 1, the later stage of

adolescence, typically around 14–16 years old, marks a critical period associated with a decline in physical activity levels (Schofield et al., 2002).

Additional characterists of the participants were not requested in the consent form. The participants' gender was obtained as an initial question during the interview to comprehend both their gender and their perception of gender. This aspect was kept in mind throughout the interview. Data on race and ethnicity were not collected; however, it is noteworthy that there were no white participants.

3.2.3 School Site

The research was conducted within one school setting. It was a girls-only voluntary aided school which served as a diverse catchment area in typically less-privileged locations. As of the 2022-2023 academic year, there were 1274 students, 27.8% of whom were eligible for pupil premium. The schools' aim was to aspire to address the comprehensive needs of every individual and empower each person to reach their maximum potential through their curriculum and community initiatives.

The reason for conducting research within schools originated from recognising the connection between the primary location for PE and the common presence of CYPs participating in PE activities. The search for a school site began with the decision to pick a location to reflect diversity. I accessed schools through PE staff in inner London boroughs by leveraging my current network of contacts, specifically by reaching out to PE teachers with whom I have worked in the past. To accomplish this, I contacted PE staff to inquire if there is a network of PE staff in the area. By connecting with PE staff members in the borough, I

hoped to communicate the research opportunity to them in a meeting. Subsequently, I received an email address to a Partnership Development Manager/School Games Organiser whom I spoke with regarding this project. They were willing to pass it on to their connections in the local area, from which a Head of PE reached out to me. Following an email exchange, I was able to confirm that I could complete my interviews in her school, with permission from the headteacher.

PE in the school was a compulsory subject, and students had two hours of PE one week and one hour in the second week. The class was not based on sets or achievement levels, and both GCSE PE students and non-GCSE PE students attended the same lessons.

Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the research's purpose, methods, and intended uses, along with an explanation of their involvement, potential risks, and benefits. This recruitment process involved a conversation with the PE teacher, who introduced the research to students during their form time. Recruitment began as students volunteered by raising their hands. The PE teacher noted her surprise that the volunteers were not all sporty, and the eight participants displayed a variety of interest and enjoyment in PE. To comply with these guidelines, all participants and their parents received an information letter detailing the research's principles and procedures involving the young person. Parental consent was obtained through an opt-out method, with the additional consent of the headteacher. This approach ensured transparency and compliance with ethical guidelines in obtaining informed consent.

3.2.4 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this research project. I was immediately drawn to this type of interview due to the conversational characteristics it has. Quinn (2005) characterised interviewing as an effective method for uncovering clues to individuals' personal and cultural meanings that might be challenging to discern through other means.

I compared structured and semi-structured interviews and felt that semi-structured was more suited to the research as it allows an open structure, in which rich and detailed answers can occur. Magnusson and Marecek (2015) defined semi-structured interviews as an invitation for the participant to "tell stories about experiences, relate memories, and offer reflections and opinions" (p.49). The research questions were explored using a semi-structured individual interview method to gather qualitative data. Individual interviews have been chosen over focus groups for suitability and practicality. Kaplowitz and Hoehn (2001) found that individuals were more comfortable volunteering controversial information unknown to researchers during individual interviews rather than in a focus group. As this research project is aiming to explore individual experiences, an interview setting is more appropriate allowing the participant to share their PE experience. Practically, focus groups require more participants, are more difficult to schedule, and typically take twice as much time to conduct (Guest et al., 2017).

When preparing for the interviews, I created a semi-structured interview schedule Magnusson and Marecek (2015) advised that this should be broken down into researchable questions, topics, and items (see Appendix 3: Interview Schedule). When delving into a sensitive and potentially fluid concept like gender, I felt flexible and subjective methods became necessary

to facilitate individual exploration of personal experiences (Blaikie, 2007). Though semi-structured interviews aim to be conversational, the input should still be one-sided (Howitt & Cramer, 2017). The interview schedule was created as a guide, including a list of questions which should be covered. Included in this are prompts and follow-up questions which may be appropriate, depending on the interviewee's previous answers. The questions listed were created following extensive reading and research into this topic area of adolescence in PE, gender norms, and intersectionality. The order of the questioning was carefully considered, ensuring it was logical thus enabling a conversational-like structure.

As much as I aimed to develop a conversational structure, I also aimed to adhere to the general rules of interviews outlined by Magnusson and Marecek (2015) e.g., "interview items should ask only one question at a time… the interview items should be phrased as open-ended invitations…take care to learn what words and terms are acceptable among members of the community" (p.53-54).

I organised my interview schedule into four parts:

1) introductory questions about PE in school

2) questions about specific experiences in PE in primary and secondary school

3) influences in PE

4) the practicalities of PE.

The same schedule was presented to all participants. The introductory questions were a time I gave myself as the interviewer to build rapport with the participant and create a supportive environment for the participant to feel comfortable and safe. (See Interview Schedule: Appendix 3).

3.2.4.1 Ethical Considerations of the Interview

In accordance with the six key principles outlined by the ESRC ethical framework, I will discuss the steps taken to achieve informed consent, protection from harm, confidentiality and anonymity, participant free will, and my position and reflexivity.

I considered the ethics of the interview itself. As a TEP, and the lead researcher, I had experience working with and talking to CYPs to elicit their views, emotions, and experiences within their school life. Punch (2002) presented a range of issues that could arise specifically when interviewing children and warned that researchers risked invalidating their projects if they did not carefully consider how this changed the research process. Punch (2002) highlighted that it was important for the interviewer to have adequate training in interviewing children. I had attended specific research sessions focusing on interviews.

Whilst considering ethics, I incorporated reflection on the Social Graces (Burnham, 2018) and with that the power dynamics within the interview-interview relationship, especially as my participants were school-aged students (David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001). Ensuring that the interviews remained a respectful, non-distressing experience was a primary concern. It was paramount that I created a safe and supportive environment for participants sharing sensitive accounts. I took deliberate steps to facilitate a setting where the participants' voices could be heard and their experiences shared authentically, without the fear of conforming to social expectations or desirability. This approach aimed to maintain the integrity of participants' narratives and uphold their agency in the research process. It was important that I ensured that the participant's voice was heard, and their experience was shared in an authentic manner, rather than the participant reducing the potential for social desirability.

To create a safe and open environment, my commitment was unwavering in ensuring that participants did not encounter harm or distress. Given the personal nature of certain interview questions, there was a potential for the young people to feel upset. To proactively address this concern, the purpose of the interview was transparently explained to participants, and they were forewarned about the expected topics to be covered, specifically focusing on gender and their experiences. At this juncture, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw their participation, with a clear understanding that they could do so at any point if they wished. This approach was designed to prioritise the well-being and comfort of the participants throughout the research. It is noteworthy that no individuals chose to withdraw their participation or declined to continue after receiving information about the interview content. This suggests that the proactive measures taken to explain the purpose, topics, and the option to withdraw contributed to a comfortable and respectful research environment for the participants.

I employed the Social Graces (Burnham, 2018) as a tool for self-reflection, deliberately selecting specific visible social graces to concentrate on. I deemed these particular graces to be pertinent to my role as the researcher, emphasising their significance in shaping my interactions. Gender felt quite powerful in this position. Being a female talking to girls felt like a strength, as it potentially created a sense of relatability and empathy, fostering a more open and comfortable environment for communication. This alignment in gender identity could enhance the quality of data collection, allowing for deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Additionally, it might contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the social dynamics at play, acknowledging the potential impact of shared gender experiences on the research process.

I considered the Positioning Theory (Van Langenhove, 2010) in relation to the interview process. This theory offers insight into how individuals present and position themselves in social contexts. Block (2017) described how interviews should be embraced as social occurrences, which include layers of human experience. Positioning theory can be used as a tool for understanding the dynamics unfolding within interview interactions (Langenhove & Harré). Power dynamics were something I considered here. I felt it was important to consider how I and the interviewee were positioning ourselves. I was reflecting on how social roles I established from the beginning impact how the interviewee may perceive and respond to me throughout the interview. This awareness allowed me to recognise my influence to a greater extent and be attuned to positioning. I aimed to create a collaborative environment by taking the time to reflect upon this.

As an adult, researcher, and trainee psychologist in an adult-child interview, I felt that there were already power dynamics in play. I reflected on the concept of identity construction within positioning theory (Deppermann, 2015), which describes how one presents their identity to align with societal and contextual norms. I deliberated over how I wished to present myself for the interviews. I had not met the interviewees previously, so I thought about how to make myself as welcoming and warm as possible. I considered what to wear as a researcher. Anticipating that participants would be in PE kit during the interview conducted within their PE lesson, I aimed to avoid creating a significant power dynamic by opting for a more casual attire, steering clear of a formal 'work outfit' or a 'teacher' appearance. Therefore, I chose to dress in everyday clothes as I did not want to exaggerate the power dynamics. Furthermore, during the introduction I used casual language and mirrored their language when appropriate. I again did this to soften the power dynamics.

I sensed that rapport was established in the early interactions, particularly during the initial stage of the interview where clarifying questions related to PE were discussed. Subsequently, I observed a notable increase in the participants' willingness to open up and share their experiences and provided depth in their experience and thoughts towards gender and the impact it has on PE.

Furthermore, I made sure they were aware of the school's safeguarding policy and staff leads. A plan was in place in case safeguarding concerns required reporting. Some discomfort during interviews might have been unavoidable, but these emotions had to be met respectfully, as well as the participants' desire to share their experiences. Participants needed to afford an approach that was appropriate to their age.

The interviews took place during PE lessons in a PE teacher's office within the sports facilities at the school. Interviews lasted between 35-50 minutes (average = 41.1 minutes, standard deviation = 5.19) and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I made notes on my own experiences from the interview process post-interview and during the transcription process, making observations about my feelings and reactions to the participant's experiences. These notes allowed me to explore my tensions in the process individually and in research supervision.

Confidentiality and anonymity were discussed at the start of the interview. It was acknowledged that with interviews this can be difficult to achieve, due to the recording. I offered each participant to use a pseudonym of their choice and assured them their names would not be used in the write-up.

I found that all the interviews were stimulating and offered deep, rich, and thought-provoking information, though every interview was interrupted by someone else entering the room. This at times distracted and interrupted my thought process, which in the moment I did not feel impacted the interview at all, whilst transcribing I noticed a shift in my questioning and that the interruption brought a stop to the thought and discussion that was present and pushed me to the next question. I commonly asked the participants to expand on their opinions using questions such as "How did you feel about…" or "How come that happened in that way…". I made a conscious effort to not use "why". This was primarily based on my previous experience as a listening volunteer for a nightline service in my undergraduate degree. I investigated the theory of this as well finding that Coakley and White (1992) caution against employing "why" follow-up questions with young people, suggesting that it may be inappropriate and potentially problematic to ask them to expand on their ideas. 'Why" was often found to cause distress for young people during interviews (Coakley & White, 1992).

In summary, the interviews conducted provided valuable and thought-provoking insights, despite being occasionally interrupted by outside distractions. While initially feeling unaffected by these interruptions, upon transcribing, the impact on the flow of thought and discussion became apparent.

3.3 Data Analysis

Based on my critical reflection on thematic analysis (TA), it was chosen for this research project. Nowell et al. (2017) described TA as a qualitative approach to analysing data, wherein researchers review a dataset (e.g., interview transcripts). The primary objective is to

recognise meaningful patterns throughout the data, leading to the identification of themes. An integral aspect of TA is the active engagement of reflectivity, wherein the researcher's subjective experience plays a pivotal role in extracting meaning from the data. Howitt (2017) suggested that the roots of TA are not as clear as in other types of qualitative analysis. TA is thought to have emerged in the 1950s in response to a need for a qualitative form of content analysis. Howitt and Cramer (2017) highlighted the absence of a standardised approach to TA. Recognising this, I deemed it crucial to explore various applications of TA to determine which would be most suitable for this thesis.

3.3.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

TA in its basic form is the analysis of textual material in order to indicate major themes within. It enables the researcher to pinpoint a range of themes instead of merely focusing on the overall topic of the text. I have taken the time to discuss each step of my analysis to be as transparent as possible as there are several different approaches, philosophical assumptions, and procedural practices (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). I have provided a detailed explanation of my decision-making process and analytical methodology to ensure transparency regarding my methodological stance.

The analysis of qualitative interview data will use Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022), chosen specifically for its emphasis on the researcher's role and reflexivity. Braun and Clarke (2022) defined it as "a method for developing, analysing, and interpreting across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding and develop themes" (p.4).

This analytical approach acknowledges that researchers must actively make decisions during the analysis process and intentionally engage in the identification of themes (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). I, as the researcher, will adhere to the six stages of RTA, while reflecting on their involvement in the process. This reflection includes considerations of how they actively shape the analytical outcomes and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019). RTA serves as a methodological framework for exploring qualitative data to address both broad and specific research inquiries related to individuals' experiences, perspectives, and depictions of a particular phenomenon.

I have chosen RTA over other methods of qualitative analysis due to its reflexive and flexible nature. Qualitative content analysis was considered as it is understood to be similar and often confused with TA. It was rejected on the basis that the method was developed from a quantitative foundation which did not fit well with the aims and justification of the explorative qualitative research project. Grounded theory analysis was considered; however, this was developed to provide empirical evidence, which is not the purpose of this proposed explorative thesis. Though TA was chosen over Discourse Analysis (DA), DA can also fit with this ontological and epistemological viewpoint, due to its flexibility. Braun and Clarke (2021) also stated that if the research is not fully based on the effects of language TA would be more appropriate than DA, leading me to conclude that I would use RTA.

3.3.1.1 Theoretical Approach

I found it crucial to maintain awareness of my ontological and epistemological stances during the analysis, as advised by Braun and Clarke (2021). While RTA may not be rooted in a pre-established theory, it also cannot be considered entirely devoid of theoretical underpinnings.

Braun and Clarke (2021) clarified that TA can never be carried out in a theoretical vacuum, as researchers invariably make assumptions about the meaning and significance of the data they are working with.

Applying this to my research, I had to consider whether the participants answers were communicating individual experiences and/or social discourse, as well as my influence and interpretation of this. With my relativist ontology in mind, participants responses could be seen to be separate from reality; instead, they constitute the very essence of reality. It is worth emphasising that under this perspective, numerous realities can exist, as there are multiple possible interpretations of any given experience, which was kept in mind whilst conducting RTA.

It is pertinent to highlight the theories introduced in the introductory chapter, as even though my analysis is rooted in data, these theories are a part of my project. I have chosen an 'experiential orientation' rather than a 'critical orientation'. Braun and Clarke (2021) defined experiential orientation as approaches that "focus on meaning and experience, exploring what people think, do, and feel" (p. 159). This choice highlights the importance of understanding participants' perspectives and experiences in depth.

3.3.1.2 Six Stages of Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase method will be described in this context as a linear process, but it is important to note that in practice, it is an iterative and reflexive approach that evolves over time, necessitating continuous movement back and forth between its phases

(Nowell et al., 2017). The table below outlines the six stages of RTA. The following section

will elaborate on each stage, providing detailed descriptions and reflections on the process.

Table 1: The six stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

Phase	Name	Procedure
Phase 1	Familiarisation	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading.
Phase 2	Coding	Create specific and detailed segments, with an analytical take
Phase 3	Generating initial themes	Collate codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each theme
Phase 4	Developing and reviewing themes	Assess the initial theme against the full data set. Generate a thematic map.
Phase 5	Refining, defining, and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine specifics for each theme and generating a clear name for each one.
Phase 6	Writing up	Selecting appropriate extracts, discussion of analysis, and relating it back to the literature to produce a report.

The first stage of familiarisation began as I was able to become actively involved in the data,

through interviewing the participants. This stimulated preliminary ideas about how the data

will begin to be coded. I read and re-read the transcripts which I had transcribed myself as the

literature suggested (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was key for the familiarisation process and

for a worthwhile analysis. I felt this was key when thinking back to the aims of the research and wishing to represent the experiences of the participants well.

In the second stage, I proceeded with the initial coding, considering the research objectives and the coding process by contemplating two approaches as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022): the data-led approach and the theory-led approach. Given the research's emphasis on data characteristics, the data-led approach proved more suitable compared to the theory-led approach, which typically involves deriving initial codes from existing literature.

Descriptive codes, as defined by Cope (2005) as those reflecting patterns, were developed from the interview transcripts. These descriptive codes included terms like 'relax', 'mental health' and 'confidence.' Having established a coding system, the next step involved identifying patterns among the descriptive codes, marking the progression into the third stage of analysis. Further description will be provided in 4.0 Findings (Chapter 4).

The third stage was where I searched for themes. The themes had to be created by joining the codes together. This process involved abundant trial and refinement and there were different numbers of codes that created different themes. In some instances, singular codes felt appropriate to become themes in their own right. Throughout this step I found myself having to check back with the original dataset so that the data associated with each theme related back to the text. For example, I was able to identify relationships between 'mental health' and 'relax' by focusing on the codes in relation to the transcripts. Further description will be provided in 4.0 Findings (Chapter 4).

In the fourth stage, which involved reviewing the themes, I initially encountered challenges in identifying four or five distinct themes that could be further developed into discussion chapters. The difficulty arose from the perception that the data seemed interconnected, making it challenging to neatly categorise into separate and individual themes. In aiding this effort, I consistently kept my research focus on PE experiences in relation to gender. This approach allowed me to formulate themes as distinct concepts, aligning with the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2021). They recommended considering the "central organising concept" (p. 35) for each theme, which refers to the core focus or idea that the theme encapsulates.

By stage five, I had created themes though I was aware of the flexibility that was required to review them. I began by reflecting on these against the original data. Testing this data involved questioning whether there was enough data to support a theme, whether a theme needed to be split up, or whether new themes would be more appropriate. This was supported by visual mapping of themes, creating subthemes, themes, and overarching themes. I was aware that I did not wish to create too many subthemes, as advised by Trainor and Bundon (2020) as this reduces the analytic depth. I also considered the relationship between the themes with the wider context of my research. The sixth stage of RTA involved utilising themes for discussion, incorporating relevant extracts and theory. This content will be presented 4.0 Findings (Chapter 4).

3.4 Ethics

3.4.1 Trustworthiness

As a researcher, my primary objective for this project was fundamentally to apply the knowledge acquired to practical applications. Trustworthiness serves as a means by which a researcher can persuade themselves and the readers of the significance of their research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance the concept of trustworthiness, this research project followed a set of criteria to ensure the quality and rigour of qualitative research, as suggested by Nowell et al. (2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) created this criterion of; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability which parallel the quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability. These will be discussed as individual concepts with application to this research project.

3.4.1.1 Credibility

Nowell et al. (2017) highlighted the importance for qualitative researchers to bolster the credibility of their research by thoroughly documenting and transparently presenting their analysis methods. The detailed exposition of my methodology contributes to credibility by aligning the research aims of the project with its design.

3.4.1.2 Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research pertains specifically to the applicability of findings from one case to another, rather than seeking broad generalisability (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

This research has explicitly clarified its focus on a specific group of participants within a particular location, exploring their experiences. Consequently, the potential transferability of the findings to other settings may be limited. However, the chosen methodology aimed at ethically exploring girls' experiences in PE while considering the influence of gender. I am confident that the thesis successfully delved into this aspect using interviews and RTA.

Furthermore, due to time constraints within the thesis and practical considerations in participant recruitment, all participants met the required demographic criteria. Although they were from the same school, they were instrumental in generating data that effectively addressed my research question. The intention of the thesis was not to capture perspectives from diverse areas but to gather in-depth insights.

3.4.1.3 Dependability

Nowell et al. (2017) outlined how prolonged engagement in research improved dependability as well as peer review. Involving experts in my field helps to identify methodological concerns and improve the thesis's dependability. I was able to do this with the support of my university. After receiving feedback on my original research design, I attended research cluster groups held by my university, in which ideas were shared to enhance and improve my project. Following this, I was able to listen to ideas from peers and professionals, to then go to study and read to further structure my research design.

Engaging experts in my field played a pivotal role in identifying potential methodological concerns and bolstering the overall dependability of my thesis. With the valuable support of my university, I was offered feedback on my initial research design. This was in conjunction

with research cluster groups, where ideas were exchanged, and strategies were developed to refine and enhance my research project. Subsequently, I actively sought input from both peers and my research supervisor, which, in turn, guided my further reading and contributed to the more robust structuring of my research design. This collaborative and iterative approach served to strengthen the dependability of this research.

Furthermore, Tobin and Begley (2004) encouraged researchers to incorporate reflectivity, by keeping a critical account of the research process. I maintained awareness of my own biases and preconceptions. I documented these using a research diary, and considered with discussion with my research supervisor, how these factors may have influenced the research process. This reflection and ability to address researcher subjectivity enabled a stronger dependability. Furthermore, his research had consistent data collection, including the same equipment for recording interviews, transcribing, and analysing the data.

3.4.1.4 Confirmability

Finally, confirmability in research pertains to ensuring that the researcher's interpretations and findings are undeniably rooted in the data. To establish confirmability, the researcher must transparently demonstrate how they arrived at their conclusions and interpretations (Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), confirmability is attained when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. As recommended by Koch (1994), researchers should incorporate markers throughout their study that elucidate the rationale behind their theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices. This practice enables others to comprehend the reasoning behind decision-making processes in the research. I hope that I have been able to present these adequately across the thesis write-up

and in the appendices and that I have attained credibility, transferability, and dependability,

in order to allow for confirmability in this research.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methods and underpinning methodology which were

followed during this research, in doing so, I have articulated the rationale for the methods

used and the way in which they are suited to my research. My use of qualitative research with

14-16-year-old girls has provided a wealth of data. I have provided an outline of the

procedure and described the decision-making process alongside. Underlying my

methodological decisions is a commitment to actively listen to the experiences of girls in PE

in relation to gender.

4.0 Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the research project. The research question was introduced in Chapter 1:

RQ1. What are the experiences of Physical Education for adolescent girls in relation to gender?

This chapter also aims to recognise that young people's experiences and specifically to this thesis, adolescent girls, are complex in nature, and therefore, each section of this chapter, though centred on a specific theme, should not be considered in isolation.

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2019) recommendations for RTA, my goal is to present the themes derived from RTA, clarifying the method alongside visual aids, and linking with the previous 3.0 Methodology chapter (Chapter 3). This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive insight into my process as the researcher in deriving themes from the primary qualitative data obtained during individual semi-structured interviews, all in service of addressing the research inquiry. I will present excerpts from the interviews that correspond to subthemes, enhancing comprehension of how these subthemes emerged, followed by the process of amalgamating subthemes into overarching themes. Throughout, I will offer reflections and interpretations to enrich understanding.

Using an inductive approach, I conducted an analysis of interview data through RTA to identify codes and develop themes, as described in the previous 3.0 Methodology chapter (Chapter 3). Preferring manual processes, I used handwritten notes and colour-coded Excel spreadsheets, aligning with my personal style. After my initial coding, I felt my codes were

overwhelming and lacking clarity and that I had coded too much without meaning. I looked

back to Clarke and Braun's (2013) guidance, which stated that codes should "capture the

essence of what it is about that bit of data that interests you" (p.120). I then refined my codes,

simplifying them. This process involved looking back at my research question and staying

boundaried with this (see Appendix 4: Code Examples). Once I completed this, I began to

cluster my codes with written notes, making sure there were no duplicates.

This approach facilitated the initial conceptualisation of themes, visually on a mind map as

well as using written codes. I found using a mind map and the movement of codes into

potential themes to help begin my theme development (refer to Appendix 5: Codes and

Theme Development and Appendix 6: Mind Map 1). As I continued the task of naming and

defining my initial themes (see Appendix 7: Mind Map 2), I felt these themes connected to

each other too much and the overlap was too strong for all themes to stand alone. I revisited

the literature for guidance. Braun and Clarke (2022) advised that themes involve more than

description, rather that they tell you more about the data. This approach led me to constantly

revisit and refine the themes, aiming to identify the most plausible explanations for the

observed data. By actively seeking connections between the themes and considering various

hypotheses, I cultivated a more fluid and interconnected structure. Additionally, I dedicated

time to reassessing the research question, employing both inductive and deductive

approaches to coding. Initially exploring the data inductively, I later integrated deductive

reasoning to further solidify the themes, ensuring coherence and rigour in my analysis

(Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). I created diagrams using codes, and subthemes, and then

finally to develop themes (see Appendix 8: Theme Development Diagrams). Following this, I

drew a final mind map, (refer to Appendix 9: Mind Map 3). This mind map contained the

finalised four themes with a few links in between shown, which will be discussed throughout the findings and discussion where relevant.

The resulting representation represents the culmination of these efforts, presenting the experiences of adolescent girls in a manner that minimises repetition and overlaps in interpretation. Four themes emerged from the data, relating to adolescent girls' experiences of PE in relation to gender. Table 5 presents these themes and their definitions. The definitions were created by considering the subthemes, to encapsulate all relevant aspects.

Table 5: Themes

	Name	Definition
Theme 1	Involvement of Girls	The impact that the presence of girls can have on other girls' PE experience.
Theme 2	Involvement of Boys	The impact that the presence of boys can have on girls' PE experience.
Theme 3	Teacher Influence	The impact that a teacher has on a girl's experience in PE.
Theme 4	Mental Health	The significance and positive impact that PE has on girls' mental well-being during their participation in PE.

In this chapter, each theme will be presented with the voices of the participants taking precedence, with a focus on presenting a table of subthemes and examples to illustrate how each theme was derived from the collected data from examples and subthemes. The examples

are extracts from the interview transcripts. These examples, extracted from the interview transcripts, will feature anonymised initials of the participants, and will be presented with an illustrative style of reporting, focusing on the "rich, detailed, interpretive account of the theme – tells a story about your theme, and their meaning and significant without focusing on the particularities of the data extracts" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.135).

4.1 Theme 1: Involvement of Girls

Termed the 'Involvement of Girls,' this theme encompasses the multifaceted influence that female peers have over the PE encounters of other girls within PE. This theme created a discussion about how girls interact together within the PE environment, exploring dynamics such as peer support, competition, social comparison, and solidarity. It sheds light on the ways in which girls' interactions shape their perceptions of physical activity, self-confidence, and social relationships within the context of PE. Additionally, it prompts examination of the role of female peers in fostering a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and empowerment among adolescent girls, thereby influencing their overall engagement and enjoyment in PE. The definition 'The impact that the presence of girls can have on other girls' PE experience.' was crafted to encompass four subthemes, leading to the finalised theme.

Six subthemes provided the foundation for defining and constructing this primary theme, as outlined in Table 6, which offers detailed descriptions of these subthemes. Initially, they were aggregated through an initial inductive coding process.

Table 6: Subthemes and Descriptions from Theme 1

Subtheme	Description
Developing Friendships	The process of girls becoming acquainted and nurturing meaningful connections with one another during PE lessons.
Maintaining Friendships	The ongoing effort and commitment to sustain and nurture relationships with friends in PE.
Support From Girls	The encouragement, assistance, and solidarity provided by peers during PE.
Desire for More Girls to be Involved	The wish for increased participation and engagement of girls individuals in a PE. This encompasses efforts to promote inclusivity, diversity, and equal opportunities for girls.

Quotes from subthemes can be viewed in Appendix 10: Theme 1 Examples.

4.1.1 Developing Friendships

In my interviews with eight girls, all of them raised their friendships in relation to their experiences in PE. Several mentioned that PE was an opportunity to gain new friendships and enjoy socialising with peers. The prospect of spending time with friends emerged as a motivating factor for their participation in PE activities. As the girls spoke of PE, they shared how they saw it as a time to make new friendships, notably within the girls-only PE class. "*I remember, I made my first friend when I joined, I had like no friends and I had my first friend in PE.*" (RR). In PE, forming friendships not only fulfils social needs but also provides access to valuable social networks and support systems. "*I think my favourite part is, I want to say the teamwork, being with everyone and being social with everyone. The social interaction.*" (RR). For the girls who initially had no friends or felt isolated, making connections in PE

represents a form of social acquisition, enabling them to integrate into social networks within the school environment.

This subtheme highlighted the positive impact of having other girls involved in PE, facilitating the establishment and nurturing of friendships. It shows the role of peer support and camaraderie among girls during PE activities, fostering an environment conducive to building meaningful connections and rapport. The presence of other girls contributes to a sense of belonging, mutual encouragement, and shared experiences, thereby enhancing the overall social dynamics and enjoyment of PE.

4.1.2 Maintaining Friendships

Once friendships have been established, girls see PE as the opportune time to socialise. It was often compared to other lessons in school and how the rules were somewhat more relaxed and flexible. "*PE because it's not as, like, strict as, like, sit in a class and talk about work. And it's like, very, like more relaxed than that.*" (RR). Further "I *get to interact more with my friends, talk to them more which I like."* (AA). This was seen as a positive and motivating aspect of PE. I sensed that having other girls in PE that they were friends with increased motivation and desire to be involved in PE.

Maintaining friendships not only enhanced the enjoyment of PE as expressed by my participant *"being with my friends makes it more enjoyable that way"* (WAF), but also extended beyond the confines of the PE classroom. This sentiment was echoed by another participant who highlighted the reciprocal support among friends both during and outside of PE, stating, "*I think the friends that I hang around with in PE and just outside of PE, like,*

they've helped me and I've helped them" (TS). These quotes show the multifaceted role of friendships in PE, emphasising their positive influence not only on the overall experience of the lesson but also on the broader social and emotional well-being of students.

This subtheme of maintaining friendships illustrates how the connections formed in PE settings can extend beyond the confines of the classroom, serving as vital sources of mutual support and personal growth for adolescents. These friendships, nurtured through shared experiences in PE, contribute significantly to enriching the overall school experience. Moreover, the involvement of girls in PE plays a pivotal role in facilitating these friendships, providing a supportive and inclusive environment where girls can bond, collaborate, and thrive together.

4.1.3 Support From Girls

During the interviews, the girls spoke with me about the support they received from other girls. This was spoken about in reference to there not being boys present, rather than in a mixed gendered setting. They frequently articulated how their experience in PE was enhanced when exclusively among girls, as exemplified by one participant's remark, "*I feel like the being an all-girls environment its better, it motivates me a bit more*" (AA). In this setting, the presence of only girls appeared to foster an environment where mutual support among peers was heightened.

> "*I think I am used to it and you get more support, and it's like, the friendly competition with other girls doing other stuff and it makes you want to try it out.*" (NAE).

This quotation suggests that within a girls-only PE setting, the supportive atmosphere cultivated among girls enables them to feel more comfortable and encouraged to explore new activities. It shows how the absence of boys can create a space where girls feel less pressured to conform to gender stereotypes or expectations, allowing them to be more vulnerable and open to trying new things.

As one participant expressed, "*I got more support from the girls compared to the boys*" (NAE), highlighting the difference in the girls-only experience. This observation presents a distinct pattern of supportive behaviour exhibited by girls, insofar that they are *"happy to get involved because of how encouraging everyone is"*(RR), which contrasts with the dynamics often observed in mixed-gender PE setting, which will be discussed with the following theme.

However, one girl shared how it is not a simple as girls always being supportive. *"If there is like something that you do team verses team and a team loses and the other team wins they will start being like yeh that's why you lose and start making comments."* (AE). This provided me with an understanding that girls are indeed capable of being supportive, yet there exists a nuanced dynamic where support can wane in certain competitive contexts. Despite the overarching theme of support, there is a propensity for some girls to exhibit unsupportive behaviours, particularly in scenarios of competition where the dynamics of winning and losing come into play.

The enjoyment experienced in girls-only PE environments extends beyond the simple fact of the girls being present; it is rooted in the inherent support girls offer one another within such settings.

> *"Yeh I guess you can relate a lot more about stuff, when maturing as we go up, like in the years and stuff, so then it's like nice to have people that like sports and can relate because it's fun and makes it more enjoyable." (AA).*

This quote describes how having the opportunity to engage in PE alongside other girls provides a supportive environment where they can relate to and empathise with one another's experiences. This shared understanding fosters a sense of solidarity and mutual encouragement, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation or insecurity that may arise during this time. Moreover, peer support in PE can serve as a valuable source of validation and empowerment for girls, reinforcing positive attitudes towards physical activity and promoting a sense of belonging.

This subtheme demonstrates how the participation of girls in PE fosters a supportive environment, particularly evident in discussions about the support received from fellow girls in a girls-only PE setting. It shows the significance of peer support and solidarity among girls during PE, creating a space where they feel understood, encouraged, and empowered.

4.1.4 Desire for More Girls to be Involved

During the interviews, girls expressed a desire for greater female participation in physical activity, primarily because there were no other girls present or engaged in PE. As one girl expressed "*I would feel like the only girl in sort of clubs and things like that. No other girls.*" (AA). This suggested a desire for an increased number of girls to participate.

> *"I'm the only other girl that would be there like they would like talk to anyone, they would just sit there by themselves. So I will try to speak but it's like, they don't want to talk to anyone. They just want to get the competition done or go back to their friends." (RIA).*

There was further frustration expressed by one girl, who specifically related the issue to her gender.

> "*Sometimes it's a bit awkward, because obviously they talk about whatever they want to talk about. And then you would just be like standing if there's no other girls in the group, you might not be able to feel as comfortable talking to them. Because I think sometimes not just like there's a barrier of gender. And I think it might just be that oh, because she's a girl we can't talk to her about this.*" (AE).

This discomfort stems not only from the gender divide but also from perceived barriers to communication imposed by stereotypes and expectations. Despite gaining knowledge, skills, and experience from PE girls may still find themselves uncomfortable in male-dominated spaces. These experiences shed light on the broader social dynamics at play within sports culture, where gender norms and expectations shape interactions and opportunities for participation. The girls' frustrations show the importance of creating inclusive environments regardless of gender.

This subtheme highlights the crucial role of girls' involvement in sports and physical activities, emphasising the importance of increasing female participation to support and uplift existing girls who enjoy sports. It presents the notion that having more girls involved creates a supportive network that benefits all participants. By increasing the representation of girls in sports there is an opportunity to foster a culture of inclusivity, empowerment, and encouragement, ultimately enhancing the overall experience and enjoyment for girls in PE.

These four subthemes were grouped together to create the theme of Involvement of Girls. This theme will be further explored in the following discussion chapter focusing on

interpretations drawn, connections to relevant theoretical frameworks, and considerations of power dynamics inherent within these interactions.

4.2 Theme 2: Involvement of Boys

Termed as the 'Involvement of Boys,' this theme encompasses the impact that the presence of boys can have on girls' PE experiences. This theme prompts consideration of the various influences that male peers exert on the PE experience of adolescent girls, including awareness of the male perspective, discomfort during mixed-gender PE activities, and the competitive atmosphere that arises. It delves into how girls' interactions with boys in PE shape their overall experience, reflecting on aspects such as self-perception, confidence, and social dynamics within the PE environment.

The emergence of this theme stemmed from the insights gathered during participant interviews following the analytic process. It is essential to recognise that the data informing this theme reflects participants' recollections of past experiences in primary school, where they were in mixed-gender settings. This context is crucial for understanding the interplay between past and present experiences.

I deliberated on the inclusion of this theme and its pertinence by revisiting the data and carefully reviewing the transcripts. Despite the focus of the interviews being on past experiences, the adolescent girls articulated how these experiences continue to influence their current PE experience. Consequently, I deemed this theme as relevant as any other in this research, as it provides valuable insights into the ongoing impact of past experiences on present realities.

Three subthemes led to the definition and creation of this theme 'Involvement of Boys',
please see Table 7 for descriptions of these themes.

Table 7: Subthemes and Descriptions from Theme 2

Subtheme	Description
Boys Voice	Influence and prominence of boys' perspectives, opinions, and actions within the PE environment.
Favouritism	Instances of preferential treatment or bias towards boys and its effects on the experiences of girls.
Changing into a PE Kit	The process of changing into PE attire for girls in the presence of girls.

Quotes from subthemes can be viewed in Appendix 11: Theme 2 Examples.

4.2.1 Boys Voice

During the interviews and subsequent analysis phases of this research project, I found myself
noticeably taken aback by the seamless manner in which adolescent girls were able to recount
instances and comments the boys made to them in the context of PE. For instance, quotes
such as "*just the boys saying no, stop talking..."* (TS), "*like oh girl you care too much about
this*" (AA), and "*Like they laughed.*" (NAE) were readily recalled and shared during the
interviews.

The ease with which these negative interactions were recalled shows their importance in understanding the complex dynamics of gender interactions within PE settings. It sheds light on the pervasive nature of gender-based discrimination and highlights the need for interventions to create more inclusive and supportive environments for all students, regardless of gender.

> "*We're playing football and then I missed a goal. And the boys were like she can't score she can't score, but the girls are being really supportive. Like saying it's okay and there's always a next time and stuff like that. And I think with boys, they hold it and they continue using it. Like each time you do something, and then go back to it. And then it feels quite negative in a sense.*" (AE).

This quote exemplifies the influence of boys' voices within the context of PE. The remarks recounted by AE reveal the multifaceted impact of boys' behaviour on girls' experiences. Furthermore, the girls' contrasting response, characterised by supportiveness and encouragement described in the previous theme, highlights the difference in behaviour between genders within the same activity. While the girls offered reassurance and positive reinforcement, the boys' comments were described as persistently negative, with a tendency to dwell on mistakes and shortcomings.

The conviction amongst boys that they surpass girls often results in girls doubting their own abilities. One girl described how the belief that boys had made her feel "*Like that you are not good enough, like you aren't as strong as the boys, you don't have the skills or the confidence. Oh, you aren't committed enough. I feel like we have heard that quite often*". (TS). Overcoming such criticism requires significant effort for girls, yet even a minor setback can easily undermine their confidence.

> *"If a girl is actually trying to participate in sport and a boy just comes along and says ahh you aren't good at it, they just aren't going to believe in themselves"* (AA).

This quote shows the considerable influence wielded by boys' voices and the importance of their presence in girls' participation in PE. It suggests that boys possess significant power to influence girls' perceptions of themselves and to undermine their confidence.

The impact of boys in PE has indeed been presented as negative within this subtheme, with girls recounting instances of discouragement and disparagement from their male counterparts. These experiences show the challenges some girls face in navigating PE. However, amidst these negative narratives, the quote from NAE sheds light on the diversity of experiences among girls regarding interactions with boys in PE. "Personally I don't mind playing sports with boys but I know other girls would." (NAE). While some girls may find playing sports with boys enjoyable or even preferable, acknowledging that others may feel differently shows the complexity of these interactions. This variability suggests that individual preferences, past experiences, and social dynamics all play roles in shaping how interactions with boys in PE are perceived and experienced by adolescent girls. Thus, understanding this spectrum of experiences is crucial for educators and policymakers seeking to foster inclusive and supportive environments within PE settings.

The emergence of a predominantly negative subtheme regarding boys' voices, as by the girls' narratives in the interviews is interesting due to recounted experiences with boys in PE originated from primary school, indicating that the influence of these interactions continues to reverberate with the girls well beyond their initial encounters. This persistence suggests that the impressions and effects of these early experiences have enduring significance, shaping the girls' perceptions and attitudes towards PE.

4.2.2 Favouritism

The subtheme of favouritism emerged as a theme through the girls' descriptions of how simply having boys present in PE led to the girls being treated as inferior. Building upon the perceived power imbalances in PE, which are highlighted by the behaviour exhibited by boys, it is evident that such imbalances are not solely perpetuated by the boys themselves. External entities also contribute to this disparity through favouritism. In this thesis, girls reflected on the observation that boys were consistently favoured over girls, receiving greater praise, and being selected more frequently by coaches and PE teachers.

> "*When it was time to go competition, the coach would always like choose the boys first, then like a few girls who were really good, there was a lot of competition*" (RIA).

This favouritism reinforces and exacerbates the existing power differentials within the PE environment, further marginalising girls and reinforcing gender-based inequalities. Girls discussed how they noticed that boys received more praise than girls within PE. This was more than an observation, as the discussions I had led to emotive language and a will for equal opportunity and equal treatment within PE.

> "*It kind of makes me feel upset and a bit angry, because we're all human, at the end of the day, we are all equal and we're all doing the same thing will have the same, like abilities, and why are you raising some, another gender more than the different gender? Like it should be equal.*" (AE).

This quote highlights the emotional impact of favouritism on adolescent girls in PE, evoking feelings of upset and anger. The notion of equality is emphasised within this quote and by others whom I interviewed, underscoring the belief by girls that all individuals should be treated equally regardless of gender. AE questions why one gender is elevated above another

in a setting where everyone should have equal opportunities and abilities. By expressing a desire for fairness and equality, she suggests that favouritism undermines the inherent humanity and worth of all individuals. Additionally, the phrase "being human" implies a sense of universal dignity and equality, further emphasising the injustice of unequal treatment based on gender. Overall, the quote conveys the distressing effects of favouritism in PE, portraying it as a systemic issue that diminishes the well-being and sense of worth of those affected.

This subtheme highlights the detrimental effects of boys' involvement in PE, where girls experience themselves as inferior and face unequal treatment compared to their male counterparts. It emphasises the dynamics wherein girls experience a sense of inadequacy and receive less favourable treatment solely due to the presence and dominance of boys. This imbalance in participation and treatment can contribute to feelings of exclusion, marginalisation, and diminished self-esteem among girls in PE.

4.2.3 Changing into PE Kit

I feel it is important to again mention that the girls in this research only participated in mixed-gender PE in primary school, therefore these examples relate to their primary school experience. There is no current legislation around safe PE-changing practices in primary schools; it is up to individual schools to write their own guidelines. The NSPCC (Factsheet for Schools, 2018) recommended that when feasible, opt for designated girls-only changing rooms or areas. In cases where separate facilities are not available and boys and girls must change together, consider using screens to create distinct areas. Additionally, mixed gender changing areas become less suitable as children grow older, particularly as they reach

different stages of physical maturity. Therefore, staff should be mindful of students who mature earlier or later than their peers. Starting from Year 2, boys and girls should change separately whenever possible.

Two girls recalled their experience of changing in a mixed setting. *"It was a mixed school. So we had to, like get changed in one room, the boys and the girls. So like, I'll kind of like to change that."* (NAE). "*Our teachers will make us get dressed in the same class with the boys, which was really awkward, like having the hide by the table and stuff.*" (AV). These quotes suggest that the girls found it uncomfortable and inconvenient to change in a mixed-setting environment. The shared sentiment of feeling awkward and the need to hide during the changing process indicates that the experience was not conducive to a positive learning environment. Such discomfort can not only affect students' confidence and self-esteem but also impact their overall engagement in physical activities and their perception of school as a safe and supportive space.

> *Yeah. Cuz you have to split boys in one room and girls in the other room. And some of the boys would sneak in the rooms and that. I didn't have time for that."* (TS).

However, the second quote from TS emphasises that simply separating boys and girls into different changing rooms may not be sufficient to address the issue. TS's experience reveals that some boys may disregard the separation and intrude into the girls' changing areas, compromising their sense of safety and privacy. This highlights the need for more proactive measures and vigilant supervision by teachers to uphold a safe and comfortable environment for girls during changing times.

This subtheme reveals that boys' involvement extends beyond the physical activity itself and encompasses practical aspects such as changing for PE. It shows the importance of considering how girls feel in the presence of boys, particularly in situations like changing, highlighting the need for sensitivity and awareness of girls' comfort and privacy in such contexts.

4.3 Theme 3: Teacher Influence

This theme, labelled as 'Teacher Influence invites discussion into the influence of an adult on adolescent girls' experiences, someone in a position of power, and the dynamics of authority, mentorship, and guidance within the PE setting. It explores how a teacher's behaviour, teaching style, communication, and support can shape girls' perceptions, attitudes, and participation in PE.

Three subthemes led to the definition and creation of this theme 'Teacher influence', please see Table 8 for descriptions of these themes. Deductive coding processes included thought on power structures, as Foucault wrote, and the subjectivity of social relations (Fisher & Dennehy, 2015).

Table 8: Subthemes and Descriptions from Theme 3

Subtheme	Description
Teacher Gender Bias	The PE teachers demonstrate differential treatment, attitudes, or expectations towards students based on their gender in PE.
Positive Teacher Influence	The beneficial impact that PE teachers have on their students' academic, social, and emotional development.
Teacher Understanding of Girls	PE teachers' comprehension and awareness of the unique needs, perspectives, and experiences of girls in PE.

Quotes from subthemes can be viewed in Appendix 12: Theme 3 Examples.

4.3.1 Teacher Gender Bias

Exploring instances of bias towards boys can provide valuable insight into the complexities of gender dynamics within PE settings. By examining how teachers may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or prioritise certain students based on gender, we can gain a deeper understanding of the broader implications for student engagement, motivation, and overall experiences in PE.

> "*When it was time to go competition, the coach would always like choose the boys first, then like a few girls who were really good, there was a lot of competition.*" (RIA).

Following her experience in PE, RIA described how the teacher displayed differential treatment towards boys and girls, even beyond PE sessions. This was evident during a sports day event where students volunteered to assist.

> "H*e made me and all the other girls do you like the laptop stuff and I just like log stuff for the laptop. And the boys were like getting involved in activities and we asked if we can like swap it and oh, no, we should stay on the laptop.*" (RIA).

RIA's account reveals how gender bias extends beyond the confines of the PE classroom, permeating other aspects of participation in sports-related activities. Despite being in a voluntary role during a sports day event, RIA observed differential treatment between boys and girls. She described how the teacher assigned boys to active roles in activities while relegating girls to tasks like logging data on laptops. When girls expressed a desire to switch roles, they were denied the opportunity, reinforcing the notion of unequal treatment based on gender.

Another quote from an adolescent girl described how her previous male PE teacher showed bias towards the male students, "*The man he was like, he favoured the boys more than girls*" (AA). I considered how this gender bias plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of girls in PE, as evidenced by AA's observation regarding favouritism towards boys. AA's remark highlights how gender biases, often ingrained through societal norms and cultural conditioning, can influence the behaviour of teachers in educational settings.

This subtheme shows the significant impact of teacher bias on girls in PE, potentially reinforcing gender bias within the educational context. It highlights how teachers' preconceived notions, attitudes, and expectations towards female students can shape their experiences and opportunities in PE settings. Consequently, such biases can contribute to perpetuating stereotypes, limiting girls' participation, confidence, and enjoyment in PE, and reinforcing broader societal norms regarding gender roles and abilities in PE.

4.3.2 Positive Teacher Experience

The role of teachers in shaping the PE experience for adolescent girls cannot be overstated. Participants in this thesis were passionate in speaking about how a PE teacher can influence experiences and can be pivotal in encouraging girls to participate and remain engaged in PE.

> "*I mean, I think if you have the right PE teacher, I feel like you'll enjoy the subject much, much more. I feel like, if you have like a teacher that doesn't really like care, just there to get paid. You know I won't really like it, but if they actually like have the passion to do the subject, then I feel like you enjoy it more. You can feel it from them that they're actually willing to teach you*." (TS).

This quote highlights the significant influence that passionate and supportive PE teachers can have on students' experiences and motivation to participate in PE. When girls feel that their teachers genuinely care about the subject and are invested in their growth and development, it can greatly enhance their enjoyment and engagement in PE.

Having a teacher who is enthusiastic and passionate about PE can create a positive learning environment where students feel encouraged to push themselves and explore their abilities. Conversely, when teachers lack enthusiasm or simply go through the motions, it can dampen students' enthusiasm for the subject and hinder their willingness to participate.

> "*I know, there's times where I just wanted to stop. But then I have like that motivation from teachers and people around me to continue to go, because I'm good at it. And yeah, I just started to find the love I have for the sport and PE.*" (AE).

Furthermore, the support and motivation provided by teachers and peers can be instrumental in helping students persevere through challenges and setbacks. When students receive encouragement and recognition for their efforts, they are more likely to persist and develop a deeper appreciation for the sport and physical activity.

This subtheme highlights a positive aspect of teacher influence in PE. It emphasises the significant impact that positive interactions and experiences with PE teachers can have on girls. Developing a strong rapport with a supportive and encouraging PE teacher can be highly influential, in shaping girls' attitudes, confidence, and engagement in PE. Such positive experiences not only foster a sense of belonging and enjoyment but also contribute to girls' overall well-being and motivation to participate in PE and maintain an active lifestyle. Thus, the positive influence of PE teachers plays a crucial role in empowering girls and promoting their long-term involvement in physical activity.

4.3.3 Teacher Understanding of Girls

Increasingly, it is widely acknowledged that the nature of the relationship between students and their teachers is important in fostering motivation and engagement in PE learning. This relationship's quality is perceived to lay the foundation of students' confidence, fostering a positive self-concept, and motivating them towards PE. The following chapter will discuss the confidence and mental well-being of adolescent girls more specifically.

From the interviews, the girls' displayed a keen awareness of the importance of teacher involvement in creating an inclusive atmosphere. They delved into discussions on how PE teachers could play a pivotal role in promoting equality within PE settings. One girl articulated how "*the teachers, like in mixed schools, especially, they should bring awareness like to stop like, saying not nice things to them*" (AA), explaining the necessity for teachers, particularly, to actively raise awareness and intervene when negative comments or

behaviours are directed towards girls. She emphasised the significance of PE teachers in cultivating respect and sensitivity among students.

Moreover, another girl highlighted the agency of PE teachers in shaping inclusivity by advocating the integration of boys and girls in activities. "*PE teachers do have a say in that. Like they could either choose to like, intermingle the boys and girls*" (AV), suggesting that such actions could contribute to breaking down barriers and fostering a more cooperative and supportive environment.

This subtheme shows the desire among girls for teachers to possess a deeper understanding of their experiences in PE. Girls express a wish for teachers to understand their challenges, concerns, and needs, enabling them to serve as allies and advocates in enhancing girls' PE experiences. By gaining insight into the unique perspectives and barriers faced by girls, teachers can offer more effective support, guidance, and resources tailored to their individual needs.

4.4 Theme 4: Mental Health

This exploration of the theme labelled 'Mental Health' encompasses the importance that can have on girls' PE experience. This theme invited discussion of the intricate influences on girls' mental health within the PE context, including stress management, self-esteem, and emotional regulation.

The development of the theme 'Mental Health' was guided by four distinct subthemes, which are detailed in Table 9. By considering the broader social context and power structures, the

analysis explored the pressures and influences that contribute to mental health challenges, and the potential implications for individuals within these contexts.

Table 9: Subthemes and Descriptions from Theme 4

Sub Theme	Description
Relaxation	Activities aimed at reducing stress, anxiety, or tension in the context of PE, all of which contribute to promoting mental well-being during PE sessions for adolescent girls.
Awareness of Mental Health	The understanding and acknowledgement of one's own emotions during PE. It involves being familiar with how activities, interactions, and environments affect mental health and well-being.
Bias towards boys	A tendency in PE that favours activities traditionally associated with boys and the impact that has on the girl's mental health and overall well-being.
Social Media	The digital platforms and online communication channels through which girls interact, share content and engage in virtual communities.

Quotes from subthemes can be viewed in Appendix 13: Theme 4 Examples.

4.4.1 Relaxation

This theme emerges prominently amidst discussions surrounding the experience of relaxation during PE sessions. In the discourse surrounding PE, a notable trend surfaced where many girls articulated their perception of PE as a valuable opportunity for relaxation. This

intriguing revelation not only sheds light on the multifaceted nature of mental health but also highlights the potential significance of physical activity in fostering emotional well-being. By delving into the nuanced perspectives and experiences of individuals within the PE environment, valuable insights into the intricate interplay between physical activity and mental wellness can be gained.

> "*Everybody's voices heard and equal like you can just have fun to mess around…it's nice to mess around and it's a nice environment to be in.*"
> (TS).

This quote emphasises the connection between the participation of girls and the creation of a supportive, girls-only environment in PE. In such an environment, girls experience a sense of ease and freedom, without the pressures or expectations that may arise in the presence of boys. This observation prompted my reflection on how girls' relaxation in PE contributes to their enjoyment, highlighting that this is not solely dependent on physical ability or fitness, but also on mental well-being. It shows the significance of fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment in PE, where girls feel comfortable, valued, and able to fully engage in physical activity for the benefit of their overall health and happiness.

Furthermore, the emphasis on mental health over physical ability or fitness highlights the importance of holistic well-being in PE. Rather than solely focusing on physical performance, this approach recognises the interconnectedness of mental and physical health and highlights the role of supportive environments in fostering both.

During the interviews, the girls articulated their perception of PE as an opportunity to relax thus alleviating the stress during the school day. *I just use it as like a time for me to relax more than like to do PE*" (AV). They drew comparisons between PE and conventional classroom-based lessons. As I listened to their accounts, they expressed a positive sentiment

regarding PE's role in facilitating relaxation. Nonetheless, it appeared that they recognised

relaxation as a secondary function of PE, despite preferring it to be the primary purpose.

I feel whilst PE is framed in the way in which these girls described, there is an opportunity

for girls to continue their involvement in PE if it acts as a support mechanism for their

studies. "*Could be like a stress reliever, especially when in year 11.*" (AV). This quote

highlights how she has felt able to relieve stress during her PE classes, she has felt able to

relieve stress during her PE class.

Further students discussed in more detail how meditation in PE had supported them during

the term in which exams were coming up and stress levels heightened.

> "*Meditation, which, especially during the end of the year, because we had
> our mocks, and I think it really helped me relax a lot, because in other
> lessons, you still have to learn stuff and gets stressful. But in meditation, I
> could just like, sit down, relax, and just think about stuff, like less stressful
> stuff, if you know, I mean, so yeah.*" (WAF).

This quote highlights how girls can use PE to help manage their mental health, particularly

during periods like exams. During conversations, participants highlighted the benefits of PE

in supporting their performance in other subjects. One student, identified *"just like having*

that downtime can help you perform better in like other classes." (RR). This

acknowledgement suggests the understanding that engaging in PE not only promotes physical

health but also contributes to overall academic well-being.

This subtheme highlights a notable connection between mental health and PE among

adolescent girls. The emphasis on relaxation within PE activities suggests its importance for

promoting mental well-being among girls. Recognising this significance, I associated this

observation with mental health, recognising relaxation as a crucial aspect of PE for

adolescent girls. It presents the idea that PE can serve as not only a means of physical fitness but also as a platform for fostering relaxation, stress relief, and emotional well-being among adolescent girls.

4.4.2 Awareness of Mental Health

Participant interviews revealed a profound awareness among students regarding the significance of mental health for their overall well-being. Many participants expressed insightful reflections on how PE serves as a space where they can prioritise and focus on their mental health. Their comments highlight PE lessons not only as an outlet for physical activity but also as a conducive environment for mental well-being. Participants recognised the transformative impact of PE on their mental health, with some acknowledging tangible improvements through regular engagement in physical activity.

The notion of PE as a safe space for mental health introspection resonates deeply within these reflections. Participants highlighted the unique environment provided by PE, which enabled them to focus inwardly and attend to their mental well-being whilst coping with the challenges and pressures of academia.

> *"Throughout the different aspects on what you can learn and not only as PE for school, but for your wellbeing and your mental health is when you can use it in different parts of your life in your day-to-day activities that you do."* (TS).

Furthermore, participants' observations upon reflection brought the subtle yet profound ways in which PE positively influences their mental health over time. The cumulative effect of consistent participation in PE emerges as a catalyst for enhancing mental resilience, coping mechanisms, and overall psychological well-being. Such realisations not only validate the

importance of integrating mental health considerations into PE curricula but also advocate for

the recognition of PE as a valuable tool for promoting holistic wellness among students.

> *"I feel, I think PE, in school like, not only help with your physical state, but with like your mental because if you're having a bad day it might be that lesson where you could just forget about everything."* (WAF).

This quote expresses the understanding that PE extends beyond mere physical exercise; it

also plays a vital role in enhancing mental health. The speaker acknowledges that PE

provides a valuable opportunity to momentarily escape from the stresses and challenges of

daily life. This recognition highlights the multifaceted benefits of PE, as it serves as a space

where individuals can temporarily set aside their worries and focus on physical activity,

thereby promoting mental relaxation and rejuvenation.

This subtheme shows the girls' awareness of mental health and their recognition of the

potential role that PE can play in supporting it. It highlights their understanding of the link

between physical activity and mental well-being, indicating a proactive approach towards

their own mental health. The girls acknowledge PE as a valuable opportunity to address

stress, anxiety, or other mental health concerns by providing a space for relaxation,

distraction, and positive engagement.

4.4.3 Bias Towards Boys

Despite the evident benefits for girls' mental health, participants also highlighted significant

challenges stemming from perceived biases within PE. A reoccurring thought among

participants was the perception of a gender bias favouring boys in sport, which had

detrimental effects on their self-esteem and confidence. *"Sport is more, people might see*

sport more for like boys" (AE). This bias led to feelings of insignificance, demotivation, and lack of inspiration among female students, especially looking into the future.

> *"Yeh I feel like if I were to do football, I might not see that as a career as in my mind it's a man's thing, I wouldn't be picked and I wouldn't get famous like a man."* (AV).

The insights shared by the girls highlighted the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes within the context of PE. Through their reflections, it becomes apparent that the curriculum often places disproportionate emphasis on male-dominated sports and activities, inadvertently perpetuating societal norms that prioritise masculine athleticism while marginalising feminine participation. Consequently, girls begin to internalise these messages, resulting in diminished self-worth and confidence in their athletic abilities.

During this research project, it became evident that the girls frequently attempted to rationalise the bias they perceived, striving to comprehend and justify the discrepancies they observed and experienced.

> *"I think it might just be because people don't look at girls as much as they do boys, like even though like football, you don't see as many people at the female football game as you do at the men's football game."* (AE).

This quote highlights the girls' efforts to make sense of the gender bias they encountered, highlighting their awareness of societal attitudes and their impact on perceptions of female participation in sports.

This subtheme highlights the discomfort felt by the girls regarding the bias favouring boys in PE and sports in general. This bias significantly affects their mental health, leading to decreased motivation for PE, diminished confidence, and a sense of inferiority compared to boys in the realm of sports.

4.4.4 Social Media

Upon analysis, it became evident that social media significantly affects the confidence of these girls, particularly in the domains of sports and PE. "*You see boys in sport every single day whereas in women's, unless I am actually looking for it I won't find it. Like there is an influence from social media in general" (TS).* As previously discussed in the bias towards boys subtheme, this lack of representation can impact girls' mental health, making them feel inferior and less motivated to take part in sporting activities.

Not only is there limited representation, but the representation causes further pressure on girls. The pervasive presence of social media introduces pressures and comparisons that can undermine their self-esteem and sense of accomplishment in pursuits of physical activity.

> "I *think a lot of media and things, where people say, oh you know these are the girls who are sporty. I think there was a lot of the sporty girls are the unattractive girls. In media, you are more expected to not like PE, you have that influence that if you do you are undesirable and unattractive."* (RR).

This quote delves into the complex interplay between media representations, societal expectations, and self-image, particularly for adolescent girls. In relation to PE, the classes can be a battleground for these societal expectations. Girls may feel pressure to conform to traditional notions of femininity and attractiveness rather than embracing their athleticism. This quote highlights how media representations and societal expectations intersect to shape girls' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. It shows the importance of critically examining these influences and empowering girls to define their identities on their own terms.

This subtheme of social media intersects with the theme of mental health as it reveals the impact of digital platforms on adolescents' psychological well-being. Social media exposes adolescents to various stressors such as social comparison, which can negatively impact their self-esteem, mood, and overall mental health.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter offers a thorough exploration of the findings obtained from the research project, delving into four main themes in depth. Additionally, it includes references to subthemes to transparently present the analytic process. By providing this detailed overview, this chapter provided into the complexity of the research process and the nuanced insights uncovered through RTA.

The following discussion will focus on each key theme individually, in turn. The discussion will be enriched with theoretical insights and interpretations, exploring the relationship between gender and experiences in PE.

5.0 Discussion

This discussion chapter builds upon the findings of the four identified themes. This research project has explored adolescent girls' experiences of PE in relation to gender. Through a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with 14–16-year-old girls from one girls-only school in East London, England. The main themes from the analysis were Involvement of Girls, Involvement of Boys, Teacher Influence, and Mental Health. These themes all showed that there are gender influences, challenges, and opportunities for girls in PE.

This chapter will discuss each theme individually, acknowledging their interconnected nature. It will provide an exploration of each theme, starting with a discussion of the experiences at the individual level, followed by an analysis of the influence of gender, and concluding with a discussion of societal influences, with consideration to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 2007). Subsequently, a comprehensive discussion of the thesis will follow, which will include a summary of key findings, practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research directions.

5.1 Involvement of Girls

This theme focused on girls' encounters with PE, exploring the impact of their interactions with other girls within the PE setting. The findings from the participant interviews noted the importance of gaining and maintaining friendships and explored how girls' bond over shared experiences in their PE class and feel more comfortable as other girls understand and can relate to their experiences. The discussion then shifted to how girls perceive differences

between themselves and boys, expressing a desire for increased female participation in PE lessons and that there would be less avoidance behaviour during the PE lessons.

5.1.1 Experiences at the Individual Level

The girls' experiences of making new friendships within the girls-only PE can be understood through Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2016). Habitus refers to the internalised behaviours that individuals acquire through socialisation within their social context. In this case, the girls' habitus includes their understanding of gender and expectations within the context of PE. This sentiment aligns with research by Cockburn and Clarke (2002), who found that there was a fear of discrimination, harassment, and humiliation in mixed-gender settings. By participating in a girls-only PE class, they may feel more comfortable and less constrained by traditional gender roles, allowing them to feel more at ease.

The girls' perception of PE as an opportune time for socialising reflects a deeper understanding when viewed through the lens of Foucault's concept of ToS (Metcalfe, 2018). In this context, PE serves as a space where the relaxed and flexible rules, in comparison to other academic lessons, provide an opportunity for self-regulation and self-expression for the girls. Metcalfe's application of Foucault's concept suggests that within the framework of PE, the girls engage in practices that not only contribute to their physical well-being but also shape their identities and social interactions. Through activities in PE, such as team sports or cooperative exercises, the girls navigate social dynamics, negotiate roles, and develop interpersonal skills, all of which are essential aspects of their self-construction.

Moreover, Goodyear et al. (2014) highlight the importance of friendships within PE by integrating the Cooperative Learning Model (Dyson et al., 2004). This model emphasises the

significance of social interaction alongside academic objectives, asserting that young people learn within and about physically active lifestyles through social engagement. By fostering cooperative relationships and teamwork, PE becomes a space where the girls not only bond with their peers but also learn valuable lessons in collaboration, communication, and empathy. The combination of Foucault's notion of ToS and the Cooperative Learning Model (Dyson et al., 2004) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted role of PE in shaping girls' social experiences, self-perceptions, and interpersonal skills within the educational setting.

This perspective emphasises the independence and self-determination of girls as they navigate the challenges of participating in PE during adolescence. This applies Foucault's theory on the nature of power in society (Dore, 2009), as it highlights the significance of creating environments that empower girls to take charge of their experiences. Foucault's notion of power suggests that it does not work solely with explicit structures, but also through subtle influences within social norms. In the context of PE, this implies that girls navigate not only the explicit rules and expectations of the activity but also the implicit norms and power dynamics that shape their experiences (Metcalfe, 2018). It highlights the significance of creating environments that empower girls to assert agency over their PE experiences, recognising and challenging the underlying power dynamics that may constrain their choices and opportunities.

The girls' perspectives shed light on the significance of peer support in PE, particularly during the phase of adolescence (Kirby et al., 2012). These changes include hormonal fluctuations, physical growth spurts, and the onset of menstruation, which can profoundly impact girls' experiences and perceptions of their bodies. Adolescence, as highlighted in the introduction, is the most significant decline in girls' participation in PE (Gender. Sport

England, 2022; Girls Active. Youth Sport Trust, 2023). Given this trend, there is a need to explore strategies to address this issue and provide support to encourage girls' ongoing engagement in PE.

5.1.2 Influence of Gender

Foucault's technology of the self provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the girls actively shape their experiences and subjectivities within the context of PE (Walseth, Aartun, & Engelsrud, 2017). In many societies, girls are socialised to prioritise cooperation, empathy, and relational connections, while boys are often encouraged to demonstrate competitiveness, dominance, and independence (Hibbard & Buhrmester, 2010). Gendered expectations shape not only individual behaviours but also interpersonal dynamics within various social contexts, including PE. This gendered socialisation process is further reinforced by Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, wherein institutions like schools play a role in regulating and normalising behaviour based on societal norms (Kelly, 2019). In the context of PE, these gendered expectations may influence the girls in this research, shaping their behaviours, attitudes, and interactions within the PE environment.

Upon reflecting on these dynamics, I began to contemplate why interactions within a girls-only environment might feel different, particularly when faced with criticism from peers, as described by participants in this thesis. This line of inquiry led me to revisit Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital (Huang, 2019). Bourdieu posits that individuals are shaped by their social environment and upbringing. Within a girls-only environment, girls may still operate within a social field shaped by hierarchies and power dynamics, albeit distinct from

those present in mixed-gender settings. The criticism from a peer, therefore, may be perceived differently depending on the individual's position within this social hierarchy.

Building on the experiences shared by participants in this research, there emerged a desire for greater female participation not only in PE but also in sports more broadly. It appeared that the more enjoyment the girls derived from PE, the higher their likelihood of engaging in extracurricular sports or joining clubs outside of school. However, a significant challenge arose from the interviews in this research, that there were fewer girls opting to pursue these activities. In 2022, a survey asked more than 3,000 girls and young women aged 7 to 21 about their experiences of sport and PE. 21% of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 say they understood some sports are only available for boys. This highlights the importance of addressing gender biases and promoting inclusive opportunities for female participation in sports and physical activities (GAS, 2022).

Bourdieu's theory of fields helps us understand how power operates within social spaces, such as sports settings (Gorely et al., 2016). In this context, the male-dominated environment represents a field where certain norms and power structures are established, reinforcing the dominance of masculinity. Despite the presence of another girl, the entrenched power dynamics within the field yield a feeling of exclusion for the girls. "Power differentials in these societies are based on the dominant/subordinate relationships between the genders, between the social classes, between ethnicities, and so forth" (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002, p. 652). The influence of the male majority shapes the rules and dynamics of interaction, posing challenges for girls to fully engage and enjoy their participation.

5.1.3 Societal Influence

Butler's concept of performative gender offers insights into how gender norms are enacted and reproduced through repeated actions and social practices (McKinlay, 2010). In the context of sports, the expectation of masculinity as the normative standard may lead to the demotion of female participants, regardless of their actual presence (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). The performative nature of gender means that even when girls are present in sports settings, their experiences are often shaped by the dominant masculine discourse, leading to feelings of alienation and avoidance. These experiences can create distractions or dynamics that hinder their ability to fully engage in the activity. In the findings, the participants were hoping that more girls were involved in PE and sports more generally, though observed that it was dominated by boys. I reflected on this, considering that girls may feel pressure to conform to stereotypical notions of femininity or masculinity, impacting their confidence and sense of agency in PE.

Moreover, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital can shed light on the significance of friendship within the PE context (Huang. 2019). Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, and social connections that individuals possess, which can be advantageous in social interactions and navigating social structures (Huang, 2019). In PE, forming friendships not only fulfils social needs but also provides access to valuable social networks and support systems. For the girls who initially had no friends or felt isolated, making connections in PE represents a form of cultural capital acquisition, enabling them to integrate into social networks within the school environment.

Moreover, Bourdieu (1996) highlights the impact of gendered social structures on individuals' experiences and opportunities within society. In PE the formation of friendships can be significantly influenced by gender dynamics and societal expectations. In this thesis, girls emphasised the importance of making and being with friends in PE. A survey conducted in 2023, encompassing 25,000 young people aged seven to eighteen, revealed that the primary motivators for girls to engage in sport, physical activity, and PE were having fun and being with friends (Youth Sport Trust, 2023). This shows the crucial role of social connections and peer relationships among girls in shaping their participation in PE, further highlighting the pervasive influence of gender dynamics within this educational context.

Together, Bourdieu's theory of fields and Butler's concept of performative gender shed light on the complex interplay of power dynamics and gender norms within sports environments. These theoretical frameworks help us understand why the mere presence of another girl may not be sufficient to overcome the influence of the male majority and facilitate meaningful participation and enjoyment for female athletes.

The findings from the participants in this thesis highlight the challenge for girls of joining their own identity and interests with the expectations and norms associated with sports culture. Despite their proficiency in sports and shared experiences with girls in PE, girls struggle to establish connections and find common ground with boys in sports settings. This difficulty can be seen as a form of resistance to the prevailing norms and expectations that govern interactions and social dynamics within male-dominated sports environments. Fink (2016) described the male-dominated nature of sports, characterised by beliefs in male superiority, reinforcement of patriarchy, and prevalence of sexist attitudes. Hence, for girls, navigating these environments poses a challenge.

5.1.4 Summary of Theme – Involvement of Girls

This theme has delved into the pivotal role of girls' interactions and relationships within the context of PE, highlighting its profound implications for gender dynamics. Theoretical frameworks, such as Foucault's (1988) ToS describe how girls individually present themselves in the PE environment with other girls. Further, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital expand the thinking to the influences from society (Huang, 2019) and along with Butler's notion of performative gender provide valuable insights into the significance of friendship within the PE context (McKinlay, 2010).

By understanding how these theories intersect to shape girls' experiences and subjectivities within PE, educators and professionals gain insight into the influential role that girls can have on each other in this environment. Recognising this influence presents an opportunity to further nurture and support these relationships, ultimately fostering the development of friendships, peer support networks, and expanded opportunities in both PE and sports.

It is evident that girls value the social aspects of PE, viewing it as a space where they can interact with their peers in a less structured and more relaxed manner compared to traditional classroom settings. Furthermore, the desire expressed by the girls for more girls to participate in clubs highlights the importance they place on fostering inclusive environments where they can engage in shared activities and interests.

5.2 Involvement of Boys

This theme discusses girls' reflections on their experiences of PE when there have been boys present. As previously stated, the girls interviewed were currently attending a girls-only school, so their accounts were based on previous primary school PE experiences.

5.2.1 Experiences at the Individual Level

The girls' effortless recollection of these experiences highlights the influence on their overall PE experiences and ongoing perceptions. The ease with which these incidents were recalled and referenced suggests their enduring influence, emphasising their significance in shaping attitudes towards PE. Vu et al. (2006) conducted focus groups with 13 girls and 11 boys, revealing that "girls thought that the taunting, name-calling, and teasing from boys were important reasons they were not more physically active" (p. 9). This observation aligns with Butler's gender theory (1990) which emphasises the performative nature of gender and how societal expectations and norms contribute to the construction of gender identity (Stoller, 2010). In the context of PE, findings from girls in this thesis show how the experiences of taunting and teasing from boys reflect the reinforcement of gender norms and stereotypes, which can limit their participation and engagement in physical activities.

The tendency for adolescent girls to avoid participation in PE has been shown in research. Niven et al. (2014) emphasised that adolescent girls are often identified as a critical demographic to target for increasing levels of physical activity, as they consistently demonstrate lower activity levels compared to boys, with their participation declining further as they age. Furthermore, Metcalfe (2018) highlighted that "for young women, sport

continues to be viewed as incongruent to the representation of a 'successful' feminine identity" (p. 691), indicating societal perceptions that contribute to girls' avoidance of PE.

Instances like these contribute to a broader narrative surrounding girls' dissatisfaction with PE. James et al. (2018) observed that if girls do not find PE enjoyable, they are more inclined to opt out of participation. Additionally, Vaughan et al. (2015) discovered that girls are generally less likely to choose PE during adolescence, making any further disengagement from PE particularly detrimental for girls. This research highlights the widespread dissatisfaction among girls with PE, and experiences of unfair treatment or unequal opportunities, as shown by participants in this thesis. The disparity in treatment based on gender not only perpetuates feelings of inequity but also fosters long-term disengagement among girls in PE settings.

5.2.2 Influence of Gender

Building upon the perceived power imbalances in PE, which are highlighted by the behaviour exhibited by boys, it is evident that such imbalances are not solely perpetuated by the boys themselves. External entities also contribute to this disparity through favouritism. In this thesis, girls reflected on the observation that boys were consistently favoured over girls, receiving greater praise, and being selected more frequently by coaches. This favouritism reinforces and exacerbates the existing power differentials within the PE environment, further marginalising girls and reinforcing gender-based inequalities. Expanding upon the observed power imbalances in PE it becomes apparent that these imbalances are not only perpetuated by the behaviour of boys, as described previously, but are also reinforced by external forces. In the context of PE, the favouritism towards boys reflects and reinforces societal norms

surrounding masculinity, where boys are often privileged and encouraged to assert

dominance in a competitive environment (Vescio et al., 2005). This privileging of boys over

girls in PE aligns with Butler's idea of gender performativity, where certain behaviours

associated with masculinity are valued and rewarded while those associated with femininity

are marginalised (Stoller, 2010).

Moreover, Butler emphasises the role of repetition and normalisation in the construction of

gender identities (Hey, 2006). In PE, the repeated pattern of favouritism towards boys serves

to normalise and perpetuate the notion that boys are inherently more skilled or deserving of

recognition in physical activities, while girls are relegated to secondary roles. This

normalisation of gendered behaviour within the PE setting reinforces existing power

imbalances and contributes to the maintenance of gender hierarchies.

The findings in this theme highlighted how boys' adherence to performative gender norms,

reinforced by Bourdieu's field theory of social context, perpetuates a cycle where girls

internalise feelings of inadequacy (Metcalfe, 2018). Boys' belief in their superiority over girls

in sports serves as a manifestation of performative gender norms, where masculinity is

equated with athleticism and dominance (Chimot & Louveau, 2010). This creates a

hierarchical dynamic within the field of sports, in which girls are positioned as inferior.

When girls are subjected to criticism from boys regarding their athletic abilities, it not only

reflects the power dynamics at play within this field but also reinforces gender-based

stereotypes. This constant reinforcement of perceived inferiority can decrease girls' self-

confidence, making it difficult for them to challenge these norms and assert themselves

within the PE class. Metcalfe (2018) described how "these experiences in PE can be detrimental to an individual's sense of self-esteem and confidence in their embodied gendered identity" (p.59). There seem intersecting influences of performative gender norms and field theory in shaping girls' experiences and perceptions in sports, highlighting the urgent need to dismantle these systemic barriers to promote gender equity and empower girls in athletic pursuits.

Participants in this thesis spoke of comments made by boys during PE classes, which not only had a demotivating effect on the girls but also prompted them to question their belonging in PE. These observations highlight the need for greater awareness and intervention to address gender-based discrimination and create a more supportive and equitable environment for all students. Creating mini allies: Women in Sport campaign (2024) offers schools a valuable starting point for addressing the cultural barriers hindering girls' access to PE. This campaign emphasises the importance of engaging male allies in efforts to promote gender equality and encourage girls' participation in sports.

5.2.3 Societal Influence

Girls' avoidance of PE, as described by the participants in this thesis highlights broader societal norms regarding gender and reinforces the notion of a hierarchical power dynamic within PE settings. The girls' experiences of demotivation and frustration serve as a poignant reminder of the challenges they face in navigating male-dominated spaces and the importance of fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity within PE. Bettis and Adams (2005) highlighted how girls will withdraw from a space depending on how they view and how they

believe others view them in a space. Therefore, it is extremely important to consider how boys' voices are impacting girls and shaping their experiences in PE.

In the findings, participants recounted how favouritism towards boys and a belief in their superiority over girls led to a lack of confidence among girls themselves (Metcalfe, 2018). This dynamic reflects Bourdieu's field theory (Huppatz, 2012a), highlighting how social spaces like PE lessons constitute fields where power dynamics and hierarchical structures shape individuals' perceptions. Boys may dominate the PE field, exerting influence over norms and expectations, causing girls to internalise these gendered power dynamics and resulting in feelings of inferiority and diminished self-confidence in participating in further physical activity beyond PE. Furthermore, Foucault's (1988) emphasis on the variability of gender challenges fixed gender identities, emphasising the socially constructed nature of gender, which further complicates girls' experiences in navigating these power dynamics within PE settings.

This is why initiatives such as This Girl Can (2023) are of paramount importance. This Girl Can is a campaign launched by Sport England, aimed at encouraging and empowering women of all ages and backgrounds to participate in sports and physical activities. When women have stood up against societal expectations and reclaimed agency over their bodies and abilities, they challenge existing power dynamics and redefine societal norms. This Girl Can (2023) served as a powerful movement, empowering girls and women to embrace their strengths, defy stereotypes, and assert their presence in traditionally male-dominated spaces, including sports and physical activities. Through such initiatives, girls are encouraged to develop confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging, ultimately contributing to the broader movement towards gender equality and empowerment.

The interconnected themes of competitiveness and favouritism in the reflections of girls on their PE experiences with boys are reminiscent of Foucault's analysis of power dynamics in society. Foucault's exploration of power highlights how power operates not only through overt domination but also through subtle mechanisms that shape social relations and hierarchies (Munro, 2003).

In the context of PE, the favouritism towards boys as presented in the findings, represents a form of power that privileges one gender over another, perpetuating a hierarchy where boys are given precedence. This allocation of resources and opportunities based on gender reflects the normalisation of gendered power dynamics within the educational system. The Creating Mini Allies: Women in Sport campaign (2024) suggests that schools can reflect upon the insights and resources provided to foster a supportive and inclusive environment where both male and female students are encouraged to participate in PE. By raising awareness among students, teachers, and parents about the significance of gender equality in sports, schools can work towards breaking down stereotypes and promoting a culture of inclusivity and support for girls in sports.

5.2.4 Summary of Theme – Invovlement of Boys

This theme delves into the experiences of girls in PE when boys are present, revealing that gender dynamics within PE settings are not fixed but rather influenced by historical and cultural contexts. Butler's theory highlights the role of repetition and normalisation in constructing gender identities (Hey, 2006). Within PE, the recurring favouritism towards boys reinforces the idea that boys are inherently more skilled or deserving of recognition in

physical activities, while girls are often relegated to secondary roles. Bourdieu's field theory of social context perpetuates a cycle where girls internalise feelings of inadequacy (Metcalfe, 2018), further entrenching gender disparities in PE settings. Additionally, Foucault's exploration of power highlights how power operates not only through overt domination but also through subtle mechanisms that shape social relations and hierarchies (Munro, 2003). This suggests that within PE, power dynamics influence interactions between boys and girls, contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and shaping girls' experiences and perceptions within the educational setting. Overall, these theoretical perspectives are paired with the findings from this research. shed light on the complex interplay of factors influencing gender dynamics in PE and highlight the need for interventions to promote inclusivity and equity within this context.

5.3 Teacher Influence

This theme delved into the influence of teachers on girls' experiences in PE encompassing both positive and negative instances. Participants shared experiences where teachers exhibited bias, negatively impacting the girls' PE experiences. However, on a more positive note, supportive teachers were noted to have a profoundly positive influence on the girls. Additionally, there was a notable appeal from the girls for teachers to offer further support and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, to further motivate and support them.

5.3.1 Experiences at the Individual Level

Throughout the literature on girls' involvement in PE, girls have frequently been portrayed as the issue when it comes to their limited engagement (Azzarito, Solomon, & Harrison, 2006).

This narrative has often placed blame on girls themselves for their perceived lack of participation. However, a shift has occurred in the perspective of PE researchers over time. Increasingly, it has been acknowledged that the root of the issue lies not with the girls themselves, but rather with the curriculum and social contexts within which they are expected to engage (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010). This recognition highlights the role of social constructs of gender within the PE environment, wherein traditional notions of femininity and masculinity may shape expectations and opportunities for participation (Jones et al., 2009). By reframing the issue in this way, researchers aim to address systemic barriers and promote more inclusive and equitable practices within PE.

Foucault's ToS concept refers to the various techniques and practices through which individuals actively shape and cultivate their own identities, behaviours, and subjectivities (Markula, 2003). In the context of PE, enthusiastic and passionate teachers can be seen as embodying certain ToS (Foucault, 1988). Their passion and dedication serve as models for girls in their class, encouraging them to adopt similar attitudes and behaviours towards physical activity. Through their enthusiasm, as the participants in this thesis discussed, teachers not only impart knowledge but also inspire students to actively engage in the process of self-transformation, developing a positive relationship with their bodies and physical well-being.

Moreover, theories such as Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital offer valuable insights into the dynamics between teachers and students in the PE setting (Huang, 2019). Firstly, habitus refers to the internalised dispositions that individuals develop through their experiences. In the context of PE, students' habitus may be influenced by interactions with enthusiastic teachers and peers, shaping their attitudes towards physical activity and their

willingness to participate. In this research, the participants spoke of their enthusiastic teachers and how they inspired them within PE. Additionally, Bourdieu's concept of capital encompasses various forms of resources, including social capital, which individuals possess and can create within specific social contexts (Huang, 2019). In PE, the support and motivation provided by teachers and peers can be considered forms of social capital. Students who receive encouragement and recognition for their efforts accumulate social capital, thereby enhancing their confidence and motivation to engage in physical activities.

5.3.2 Influence of Gender

The findings presented the experience of a participant in which the teacher selected boys first in sports activities. I reflected on this, considering how these experiences reinforce the gendered hierarchy, which links to Foucault's (1991) assertion that our failure to acknowledge, critically examine, and challenge these normalised norms as potentially artificial leads to the unconscious enforcement of gendered conformity. Studies reveal that gender bias is prevalent among PE teachers. Preece and Bullingham (2022) involved 21 qualified PE teachers who participated in an online storytelling exercise featuring scenarios with male or female participants. The results indicated that teachers' perceptions often aligned with conventional gender stereotypes, including beliefs about traditional gender roles, gendered sports, and character assumptions. Similarly, Mateo-Orcajada et al. (2021) administered a gender beliefs and stereotypes questionnaire to 127 teachers in the USA. Their findings revealed that female trainers perceive PE classes as stereotyped, with beliefs that favour boys in sports participation and hinder girls' involvement. Moreover, older and more experienced teachers exhibited a higher prevalence of gender stereotypes. These studies collectively highlight how there are instances of gender bias among PE teachers. This shows

the importance of continuously addressing and challenging gender stereotypes within the educational environment to promote inclusivity and equity in PE settings.

Within PE, gender bias can materialise in several forms, including instances where teachers inadvertently show favouritism towards boys over girls, whether through attention, praise, or opportunities for participation, as described by the participants in this thesis. Such biases often originate from entrenched beliefs about gender roles and abilities, resulting in unequal treatment and opportunities for girls when compared to boys. Butler's theory of gender performativity sheds light on how societal norms influence individuals' conceptions and expressions of gender (McKinlay, 2010). In the context of PE, this theory suggests that teachers' biases towards specific gendered behaviours are not solely personal inclinations but are also deeply influenced by broader societal norms.

Furthermore, gender bias can perpetuate gender stereotypes and contribute to the marginalisation of girls in PE. This relates to Bourdieu's notions of habitus in how ingrained societal beliefs about gender influence teachers' perceptions of boys' and girls' physical capabilities, reinforcing unequal treatment in PE settings (Huang, 2019). When teachers unconsciously favour boys over girls, it reinforces the notion that boys are inherently more skilled or deserving in sports and physical activities, while girls are relegated to secondary roles.

5.3.3 Societal Influence

The experience of boys being selected over girls in PE aligns with Foucault's gender theory, which posits that societal norms and power structures contribute to the unconscious policing of gender conformity (Fisher & Dennehy, 2015). By assigning boys and girls to stereotypical

roles, the teacher perpetuates the gendered hierarchy, reinforcing the idea that certain activities are more suited to one gender over the other.

Within PE classes, practices often reflect teachers' assumptions and beliefs shaped within heteronormative contexts, overlooking alternative gender conceptions (Wrench & Garrett 2017). Research suggests that teachers may struggle to grapple with the multifaceted nature of societal influences, including those related to gender, as teachers' discourses tend to simplify complex issues and prioritise generic conceptual values such as game rules and teamwork, often excluding the considerations of gender dynamics by (Dowling & Kårhus, 2011).

Furthermore, the review emphasises the pivotal role of socio-cultural context in shaping and dismantling gender differences within PE. Effective strategies for promoting gender equity in PE include implementing Teaching Games for Understanding interventions (Barba-Martín et al., 2020) co-creating curricula with students, and empowering students by giving them a voice in the learning process. These findings present the importance of addressing systemic factors and fostering inclusive environments within PE settings to facilitate equitable participation and opportunities for all students, regardless of gender.

In the Government's recent publication New PE guidance for schools strengthens equal access to sport (2024) they acknowledged the importance of teachers "to create opportunities for all pupils to exercise for sustained periods of time, school staff need the knowledge, expertise, and confidence to adapt a wide range of sporting and physical activities to engage a diverse range of pupil interests and abilities." (p.8). These insights emphasise the importance of fostering a positive and supportive PE culture within schools, where teachers play a central

role in inspiring and motivating students to lead active and healthy lifestyles. By nurturing a passion for PE, teachers can empower students to embrace the value of lifelong fitness and well-being.

Specific PE initiatives aimed at improving girls' involvement in PE have shown positive results, with a particular focus on PE teacher training. For instance, the Tapscott Trust, located in the London Borough of Newham, identified a need for increased confidence amongst primary teachers in delivering high-quality PE. To address this challenge, the Trust established a supportive structure known as the "Sports Hub." This initiative employs highly skilled practitioners who assist all schools within the trust by providing planning, training, and organising competitive sports and physical activities, (Sports Hub, 2023).

Research has offered valuable insights into ways teachers can better understand the experiences of girls in PE. Recent publications from the UK government have highlighted examples of individual schools' initiatives aimed at upskilling their teachers in this regard. For instance, one school has created a policy towards any negative gender stereotyping comments during PE sessions to decrease their occurrence (New PE guidance for schools strengthens equal access to sport, 2024). This proactive approach reflects a commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all students, particularly girls, within the PE setting.

In Australia, Murphy et al. (2014) put forth recommendations that place a significant emphasis on teacher involvement in promoting gender equity within PE. One such recommendation was to modify scoring systems in mixed-gender activities within PE settings. The goal is to mitigate the perceived skill level and competitiveness bias often

attributed to male students. Moreover, they advocate for the promotion of extra-curricular activities tailored to engage female students in physical activity both within and outside the school environment (Murphy et al., 2014). This proactive approach aims to broaden the opportunities available to girls, thereby encouraging their participation in sports and physical activities traditionally associated with males. By fostering a supportive environment for physical activities, there exists potential for challenging and dismantling stereotypes surrounding gender and sports participation. These recommendations reflect a concerted effort to create inclusive and equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of gender, within the PE landscape in Australia.

However, while these policies are attempting to proactively improve the experiences of girls in PE, there are still some critiques to consider. For instance, some may argue that focusing solely on modifying scoring systems or implementing policies against negative gender stereotyping comments may not address deeper systemic issues within PE culture. Furthermore, the success of extracurricular activities tailored for female students may depend on various factors such as accessibility, resources, and student interest, which may vary across different school contexts. Therefore, while these initiatives represent positive steps towards promoting gender equity in PE, there remains a need for continued evaluation and refinement to ensure their effectiveness and long-term impact.

5.3.4 Summary of Theme – Teacher Influence

This theme has presented the role that teachers play in shaping the experiences of adolescent girls within the context of PE, in relation to gender. Teachers were described by the participants in this thesis as key influencers who not only deliver curriculum content but also

shape the learning environment and interactions within it. By integrating gender theory into the examination of girls' experiences in PE, researchers have uncovered the profound impact that teachers have on shaping girls' perceptions, opportunities, and overall experiences in this setting. Theoretical frameworks such as Foucault's ToS, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital, and Butler's theory of gender performativity provide valuable insights into the interactions between teachers and students in the PE context, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which gender norms and societal expectations manifest and influence individuals' experiences and identities within this educational setting.

By recognising and addressing the influential role of teachers in shaping girls' experiences in PE, we can work towards creating environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to participate in physical activity. With the findings of this thesis, it is increasingly evident that teachers need access to comprehensive information regarding the unique experiences and challenges faced by girls in PE. By understanding these experiences, teachers can better tailor their approach to instruction and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for adolescent girls.

5.4 Mental Health

This theme of mental health encompasses both positive and negative aspects concerning mental health within the context of PE, including opportunities for relaxation during PE and the educational benefits derived from mental health education and awareness imparted through PE lessons. Conversely, the negative mental health discussions occurred around the bias felt towards male sport and social media influence.

5.4.1 Experiences at the Individual Level

I further considered the connection to Foucault's (1988) ToS. Specifically, the emphasis on the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive environment in PE for adolescent girls. In this context, the supportive girls-only environment serves as a technology of the self that enables girls to feel relaxed and comfortable, as described by the participants, thus enhancing their enjoyment of PE. This environment may, therefore, allow girls to explore and express themselves without the constraints or expectations imposed by patriarchal structures or gender norms.

More than 1 million teenage girls fall 'out of love' with sport (2023) study found a concerning trend: the disengagement of teenage girls from sports, even with girls who previously considered themselves sporty. The reasons for this disengagement are multi-faceted, ranging from fear of judgment and lack of confidence to external pressures such as schoolwork and safety concerns.

Further research indicates that one contributing factor to girls' disengagement from sports is their increased focus on academic studies, particularly their GCSE subjects. Cowley et al. (2021) conducted eight focus groups involving girls aged 13 to 18, revealing a common theme among participants. These girls expressed a lack of free time since transitioning to secondary school and acknowledged a shift in their priorities since entering adolescence. Many of them recounted being active in sports during their younger years but had since dropped out as they reached adolescence. Across all focus groups, there was a shared belief among the girls that academic pressures intensified as they progressed through secondary education, especially in the later years. This acceptance of heightened academic demands

further emphasises the challenges girls face in balancing their academic commitments with extracurricular activities like sports.

This awareness suggests the potential for integrating PE with other lessons, particularly during stressful periods of the school year. By recognising the value of PE as a form of relaxation, PE could be advocated for its inclusion as part of a holistic approach to education. Such integration could offer students valuable opportunities to recharge and enhance their focus, ultimately benefiting their academic performance.

5.4.2 Influence of Gender

The insights shared by the girls highlighted the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes within the context of PE. Through their reflections, it becomes apparent that the curriculum often places disproportionate emphasis on male-dominated sports and activities, inadvertently perpetuating societal norms that prioritise masculine athleticism while marginalising feminine participation. Kelly (2013) described how through the ToS, girls may have internalised and conform to societal expectations within PE. This prevailing belief not only reflects societal biases but also serves to shape the self-perception of girls within the PE environment. Consequently, girls begin to internalise these messages, resulting in diminished self-worth and confidence in their athletic abilities.

Furthermore, the perceived bias towards boys in sport has the ability sense of exclusion among female students, undermining their sense of belonging and motivation to engage fully in PE. However, it also reveals that girls often shoulder this responsibility alone.

This disparity in representation can, at times, cause gender inequality within the realm of sports but also impedes girls' ability to reap the full benefits of physical activity for their mental health (Fox & Harris, 2003). McKinlay (2010) described Butler's theory of gender and offers insight into how individuals conform to societal expectations of gender roles. Within the context of PE, girls may feel pressure to conform to traditional notions of femininity, which often prioritise and determine the choice of activities perceived as more feminine or less physically demanding (Metcalfe, 2018). This pressure to conform further exacerbates feelings of exclusion and discourages girls from fully participating in activities perceived as masculine or traditionally male-dominated. Thus, Butler's theory shows the complex interplay between societal norms, individual identity formation, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the PE environment.

5.4.3 Societal Influence

Importantly, this research linked with increasing mental health issues for adolescent girls, exacerbated by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hu & Qian, 2021). The findings show the importance of addressing societal norms, providing supportive environments, and offering tailored interventions to encourage teenage girls to continue participating in sports. As well as focusing on physical activity, it is about empowering girls, boosting their confidence, and promoting their overall well-being. Collaborative efforts from organisations, schools, communities, and policymakers are needed to reverse this trend and ensure that all young people, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to thrive in sports.

The media often portrays certain stereotypes which can actively shape societal norms and expectations. In many cases, the sporty girl is depicted as less conventionally attractive or feminine (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). I reflected on this in relation to Foucault's ToS (Kelly, 2013), as it refers to the ways in which individuals actively shape their own identities and subjectivities within broader societal structures. In the context of social media, girls are not just passive recipients of media messaging but actively engage in processes of self-regulation and self-presentation (Vaughan et al., 2015).

In relation to PE, the classes can be a battleground for these societal expectations. Girls may feel pressure to conform to traditional notions of femininity and attractiveness rather than embracing their athleticism. This highlights how media representations and societal expectations intersect to shape girls' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. It highlights the importance of critically examining these influences and empowering girls to improve their confidence.

However, with these challenges, there is a noteworthy movement and change from social media to reduce the negative effects and celebrate male and female sport more equally, improving the confidence of adolescent girls (Hinds, 2020). Social media platforms have emerged as avenues for athletes who have historically received limited attention from traditional media, such as female athletes and para-athletes. This broader exposure offers a diverse array of role models to the community. Particularly, the increased visibility and success of elite female athletes have been associated with a surge in participation among women and girls, as they serve as inspirations and role models (Hinds, 2020).

The mere presence of female-centric news in the media is not the full picture as it is important that such coverage mirrors that of male athletes, encompassing positive narratives and success stories. In other words, achieving gender parity in media coverage entails not only increased representation but also an equitable portrayal of female athletes' achievements and contributions. Yang et al. (2020) found that sport organisations recognise the potential of using female athletes to engage and attract young women and girls into physical activity and sport participation. However, there is a risk of negative consequences when promoting athletes using online platforms. While social media provides a means to reach a wide audience, it also exposes athletes and organisations to risks such as cyberbullying and harassment (Sanderson & Truax, 2023). These adverse effects have the potential to overshadow the positive messages originally intended, emphasising the importance of responsible and mindful promotion strategies in online spaces. By recognising the significance of having diverse role models and mentors, schools can foster a culture of inclusivity and empowerment, ultimately promoting the well-being and participation of adolescent girls in sports. (Zarrett, Veliz, & Sabo, 2020).

5.4.4 Summary of Theme – Mental Health

This theme explores both the positive and challenging aspects of mental health within the context of PE, while considering the intricate interplay of societal structures. It acknowledges the influence of both internal and external factors on participants' experiences. Drawing on Foucault's (1988) insights into self-development and Butler's (1990) conceptualisation of gender, it offers a psychological framework to understand these experiences, encompassing influences from individual to societal levels. Additionally, it delves into the role of social media, aligning with Foucault's (1988) concept of ToS. This exploration sheds light on how

adolescent girls are influenced by and navigates the opportunities in PE to support mental health, alongside the challenges within the broader social and cultural context. Moreover, it deepens our understanding of the gender-related challenges within PE, spanning from individual levels, such as boys and teachers, to institutional levels, including the influence of social media.

5.5 Overall Summary of Themes

Bringing together these four themes reveals insights into the adolescent experiences of PE in relation to gender. These themes were presented from the data from eight participants. These eight participants presented with different experiences and wishes for PE. These themes demonstrate how adolescent girls are influenced by gender dynamics within the PE setting. Drawing on Butler's (1988, 1990) acknowledgement of gender as a societal construction, these themes illustrate the significant impact that the involvement of girls, boys, and teachers has on the individual level. The involvement of girls predominantly fostered a supportive environment, aligning with Foucault's (1976) notion of how the environment shapes self-presentation and interpersonal dynamics, particularly evident in the formation of friendships in PE. Furthermore, positive findings emerged regarding the influential and inspiring role of teachers, which can be linked to Bourdieu's (1985) field theory, emphasising the influence of social structures on individual behaviour.

However, amid these positive aspects, significant challenges were also observed. The involvement of boys in PE often had a detrimental impact on girls' confidence, reinforcing feelings of inferiority and exclusion. This highlights the influence of societal beliefs and gender dynamics (Bourdieu,1985; Foucault, 1988). Additionally, teachers' biases towards

boys further compounded challenges for girls in PE participation and enjoyment, worsening mental health concerns among adolescent girls. When considering these findings through the lens of Bourdieu, it suggests that girls face obstacles to participation and enjoyment due to societal pressures and the need to conform to gender norms (Huang, 2019). This perpetuation of bias and unequal treatment mirrors broader societal issues surrounding gender in sports and the impact of social media.

In summary, these themes offer insights into the positive and challenging impacts of gender dynamics in PE for adolescent girls. The participants shared their experiences and hopes for the future of PE, highlighting their diverse perspectives. The differences among these eight participants highlight the complexity of making blanket recommendations on whether PE should be separated by gender, whether there should be more PE, or whether offereing more choices would enhance girls' involvement and enjoyment of PE. These varied experiences and wishes can be used to create a more cohesive and inclusive space for adolescent girls in PE. The themes emphasise the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environment within PE settings to mitigate the negative effects of gender biases and promote the well-being and participation of all students, regardless of gender.

5.6 Implications of the Research

This research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the experiences of adolescent girls in PE in relation to gender. These insights have significant implications for supporting schools in effectively implementing initiatives aimed at empowering girls and enhancing their participation rates in PE.

Policymakers, PE staff, and broader educational professionals can leverage these findings to develop targeted training and support programs addressing the underlying barriers that may hinder girls' engagement in PE. For example, this research has identified factors such as gender stereotypes and confidence issues as key influencers of girls' participation in PE. As recommended by the DfE "schools would benefit from upskilling existing staff through the support" (Department of Education, 2024, p.28). The findings from this research offer valuable insights to inform and enhance such initiatives, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive PE environment for adolescent girls.

Cockburn and Clarke (2002) emphasised the pivotal role of educators, including both teachers and teacher trainers, in driving the necessary changes to foster inclusivity within the educational landscape. As stakeholders within the teaching profession, they asserted the importance of assuming responsibility for such transformations. However, the responsibility does not solely rest upon educators; rather, it extends to encompass all individuals who populate the systems and institutions that influence and shape the teaching profession. This includes inspectors, advisers, in-service training providers, administrators, and other personnel who operate within the frameworks and structures surrounding education. These individuals hold significant influence in shaping educational practices and policies. As such, they possess the capacity and obligation to contribute to the advancement of inclusivity and equity within educational settings. By recognising and leveraging their influence, these stakeholders can collaborate with educators to enact meaningful change and dismantle barriers to inclusivity, ultimately fostering environments that prioritise the holistic development and well-being of all students.

5.6.1 Educational Psychology Implications

Current recommendations from the UK government emphasise improving PE expertise within schools to elevate overall standards in delivering high-quality PE. One strategy entails implementing an open-door policy, allowing all staff members to observe PE teachers who consistently deliver exemplary lessons. Additionally, collaborative approaches such as team teaching with other PE specialists or planning lessons with peers can facilitate knowledge sharing and professional development. Furthermore, providing support through modelling PE lessons to other staff and adopting a paired teaching approach, where PE lessons are delivered jointly with constructive feedback provided afterwards, can enhance teaching practices, and contribute to continuous improvement in PE delivery across the school. These recommendations highlight the importance of collaborating with internal expertise and fostering joint learning environments to promote excellence in PE provision (New PE guidance for schools strengthens equal access to sport, 2024).

Additional attention will be directed towards the specificity of the EP field and its pertinence to the themes. This aims to introduce the utilisation of research for EP practitioners who are required to work at three levels: at the individual level, at the whole school level, and at the local authority level. Within each of these tiers, they perform five core functions: assessment, intervention, consultation, research, and training (Cameron, 2006). The implications of this thesis are aimed to be seen as a guide, informing EPs of the experiences, and inviting further reflection and thought of the scope of their EP work.

The specific relevance of EP practice entails examining individual engagement, group dynamics, and the application of psychological theories to understand the cognitive,

emotional, and social aspects of adolescent girls' experiences in PE. EPs are encouraged to evaluate their personal methodologies when engaging with CYP, whether it be through consultation, assessment, or training. EPs have the opportunity to consider how gender particularly during activities like PE impacts their interactions with CYP and their enjoyment of PE. Additionally, this reflection could extend to encompass the broader school environment. By acknowledging and reflecting on the gender dynamics identified in this thesis, EPs can refine their approach to better address gender-related issues not only in PE but also in other school subjects and within the school system as a whole.

Similarly, it emphasises the importance of acknowledging the influence of female peers in group settings and highlights the role of EPs in providing training to staff to deepen their understanding of this influence. Additional considerations may involve policy development at the local authority level and further with the aim to enhance awareness of the significant role played by female peers in shaping girls' PE experiences.

At the individual level, mental health is a key aspect for adolescent girls with their PE experience. EPs can consider their work at the individual level how support and enhance the mental well-being of adolescent girls in their work. By understanding the causes and influences of both positive and negative mental health and incorporating strategies that address these negative aspects of mental health within PE, EPs can create a supportive environment where adolescent girls feel empowered to navigate their emotions and challenges caused by as well as dealt with through PE. This could involve integrating mindfulness activities, promoting self-esteem through skill-building exercises, fostering a sense of belonging within the PE class and providing resources for coping with stress or anxiety.

The importance of EP practice at the group and systemic level considers an understanding of staff engagement and the application of psychological theory to understand the role of the teacher, the power, influence, and impact of a teacher on the experience of adolescent girls, and how this can impact adolescent girls in PE. Furthermore, it invites EP to consider their consultation approach with school staff where relevant, discussing their approach to CYP and staff regarding PE experience. Additionally, it prompts consideration of the teacher's role in fostering inclusivity, confidence, and enjoyment of PE among adolescent girls, as well as addressing any barriers or challenges they may face in the learning environment, which EPs can support through consultation and training as part of their role.

By leveraging their expertise in child development, learning theories, and behaviour management, EPs can support schools in implementing evidence-based approaches to enhance girls' empowerment and engagement in PE. In doing so, EPs contribute to fostering a school culture that values diversity, promotes inclusivity, and prioritises the holistic development of all students.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

This thesis was carried out within a single school located in East London. The decision to focus on one school stems from various methodological considerations outlined throughout this thesis, albeit with acknowledged limitations.

As the researcher, my primary goal was to design a thesis that would explore the voices demographic group that had been underrepresented in academic inquiry: the diverse student population of London. Upon conducting research on London's boroughs, Newham emerged

as the most diverse population, a demographic makeup where 69.5% of its residents identified as non-white (Brazzill, 2023). My intent with this thesis was to add to the existing literature, which has predominantly featured participants of white ethnicity within this field.

The choice to conduct the thesis solely within one school in a London Borough, was influenced by a combination of time constraints, participant availability, and specific research design requirements. Although I deliberated over the possibility of expanding the thesis to include additional schools, I ultimately found the participant pool at the chosen school to be adequate and refrained from imposing on others. The positive response received from this particular school upon initial contact further reinforced my decision not to pursue alternative institutions.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the narrow geographic focus of this thesis may present limitations regarding the generalisability of its findings. I recognise that various intersecting factors such as class, race, and religion play pivotal roles in shaping individuals' experiences, and these dynamics may differ across diverse locations within London and further UK-wide. Through the literature review, it became evident that there is a gap in research specifically examining experiences within the London context. Hence, I advocate for the integration of this thesis's findings with existing research from other regions in the UK to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of adolescent girls' experiences in PE. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, the thesis's findings should be seen as supplementary data enriching existing research and providing insights into the current experiences of adolescent girls. Considering the early stage of research in this field, incorporating these findings holds value for deeper comprehension.

Furthermore, in researching gender, this thesis has concentrated on the frameworks proposed by three theorists. Future investigations in this domain could incorporate a feminist

perspective. Griffin (1983, 1984), as a feminist theorist, has made significant contributions to pedagogical research, highlighting gender disparities in PE. Griffin (1985) documented instances of boys discriminating against girls, while in team sports, boys tended to dominate participation. Azzarito and Solomon (2005) also highlighted the necessity of further feminist inquiry into racialised masculinities and femininities in PE. While the selected gender theorists in this thesis exhibit connections to feminist theory, additional examination integrating specific feminist frameworks would enrich this area of research.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that while my research explored the experiences of PE in relation to gender, the emphasis was restricted to gender alone. With gender now being explored further in research, it opens the door for added exploration of intersectionality. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals possess multiple intersecting identities that influence their experiences and viewpoints. Hence, future research efforts should strive to investigate the intricate interplay of various identities, encompassing factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion, alongside gender. In the context of race, one participant spoke of how she desired greater recognition of Black women in sports, increased promotion of Black girls to participate in sports, and acknowledgement of Black girls' experiences in PE and sports. Another participant shared how she thought religion had impacted her experience of PE, in addition to gender, and how Christian religious teachings shaped her perception of gender norms. Recognising the qualitative nature of this thesis, it is imperative to acknowledge that the findings are inherently bound to the experiences and perspectives of the participants and may not necessarily be universally applicable to the entire population. Future research may adjust their interview questions to open conversation to race, ethnicity, religion, and cultural influences, inviting conversation of marginalisation. By

naming these as influences for some, researchers can enable the range of intersecting factors that could be present for future participants to be discussed further.

To enhance the theoretical contributions and as the next step in exploring intersectionality, as well as a more nuanced understanding of non-white gendered identities, future research could consider incorporating elements of critical race theory (Lawrence & Hylton, 2022). Critical race theory provides a framework for analysing how race intersects with other social categories to produce systemic inequalities. By integrating such perspectives into research methodologies and analyses, research can provide a deeper understanding of how race and gender intersect to shape individuals' experiences within PE contexts.

Consequently, while these findings may not be generalisable in a statistical sense, they nevertheless offer rich insights that can inform and shape future research endeavours. Moreover, they hold n relevance for physical activity providers, offering valuable guidance on understanding the nuanced needs and challenges faced by adolescent girls in engaging with PE. Thus, this thesis's outcomes serve as a pertinent resource for advancing both scholarly inquiry and practical strategies aimed at enhancing the physical well-being of adolescent girls.

5.8 Conclusion

This research explored the experiences of adolescent girls in PE in relation to gender. Through eight semi-structured interviews, participants shared insights that led to the identification of four overarching themes, shedding light on the significance of girls' involvement, boys' presence, teacher influence, and mental health in shaping their experiences.

From a psychological perspective, this thesis has explored influences from each level, of influence, whilst considering Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 2007). This emphasised the importance of considering various interconnected systems rather as well as individual influences and experiences. The use of three gender theorists in this thesis served to establish a framework for a deeper understanding of the experiences of adolescent girls within the context of psychology, with the aim of generating findings applicable to practical application. Butler (1988, 1990) provided a definition of gender, emphasising reflexivity and the societal influence on gender construction. Foucault's (1976-1990) theory aided in contemplating individual gender development within the hierarchical gender framework, using the ToS (Foucault, 1988). Bourdieu's (1968-2001) contributions expanded the perspective by considering gender beyond individual and group dynamics, delving into the influence of social structures and institutions. Relating this to adolescent experiences of PE in relation to gender, these theories offer a comprehensive lens through which to examine the intricacies of gender dynamics in PE settings, reflecting on the interplay between individual experiences, societal norms, and institutional practices. By incorporating these theoretical perspectives, the thesis explored the multifaceted factors influencing girls' experiences in PE.

This thesis has explored the experiences of adolescent girls in PE in relation to gender, contributing to the continuous exploration within the field of gender and PE. By examining these experiences, this research offers opportunities for further insight and understanding of the role of gender in PE, for adolescent girls. It considers the influences, challenges, and opportunities for adolescent girls in PE. This exploration allows readers to integrate gender considerations into their practice, enhancing their ability to understand the influences and

challenges faced by girls in PE settings. The findings of this thesis have unveiled themes that readers can contemplate through the lens of psychological theory, providing insights that professionals can apply in their practice as deemed relevant. Through this integration of theory and practice, professionals can better support and advocate for the well-being and equitable participation of adolescent girls in PE.

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7.0 Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699
https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/

Charlotte Wastell

By Email

4 August 2023

Dear Charlotte,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: 'Exploring adolescent girls' experiences of PE and the ways gender has impacted their experience.'

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Franklyn

Academic Governance and Quality Officer
T: 020 938 2699
E: academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

cc.   Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

7.2 Appendix 2: Consent/assent forms

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Assent Form for Young People (11 – 15 years)

To be completed by the young person and their parent/guardian

Please circle all you agree with: (Young Person)

Has somebody explained this study to you?	Yes / No
Do you understand what the study is about?	Yes / No
Have you asked all the questions you want?	Yes / No
Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand?	Yes / No
Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time?	Yes / No
Are you happy to take part?	Yes / No

If any answers are 'no' or you don't want to take part, don't sign your name!

If you do want to take part, please write your name and today's date

Your Name:

Today's Date:

Your parent or guardian must write their name here too if they are happy for you to do the study

Parent/Guardian Full Name (BLOCK CAPITALS):

Parent/Guardian Signature:

Today's Date:

Consent to share: demographic information

It would be helpful if you are happy to share the following information, but it is okay if you would prefer not to say!

Current age: ……………….. / Prefer not to say

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Consent form

Assent Form for Young People (16+)

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Involving the Use of Human Participants

Exploring adolescent girls experiences of PE and the ways gender has impacted their experience.

I have read the information sheets regarding this research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what it being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research programme has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS):

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Your parent or guardian must write their name here too if they are happy for you to do the study

Parent/Guardian Full Name (BLOCK CAPITALS):

Parent/Guardian Signature:

Today's Date:

Consent to share: demographic information

It would be helpful if you are happy to share the following information, but it is okay if you would prefer not to say!

Current age: ……………… / Prefer not to say

7.3 Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

  <u>Exploring adolescent girls' experiences of PE and the ways gender has impacted their experience.</u>

This interview schedule is an example of how an interview would run. It is presented here so that the TREC reviewers are able to see how a theme would potentially be explored in the interview following their creation of it as a topic.

The interview format is semi-structured, meaning that there is room for flexibility. At times, the participant may guide the direction of the discussion and the interviewer will follow their lead, asking questions based on the topics they introduce. The interviewer will be adaptable and open to this approach.

Follow up questioned that have been considered in advance are in italics.

1. Opening

- Introduction

The researcher will introduce themselves, as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, here today to facilitate an interview to gain an understanding of your experiences.

- Purpose

The researcher would how they will be asking some questions about their background, education, and some experiences during their PE lessons throughout their school life.

- Motivation

The researcher will explain how this information will be used to help with getting a deeper and more detailed understanding of the experiences of adolescent girls.

- Timings

The researcher will describe how the interview time can vary but will take approximately one hour.

2. Introduce topic

The topic for today's interview is experience of PE and the influence of gender.

3. Demographic information

- How often do you have PE in school?
- Have you taken part in PE throughout your school life?

4. Understanding of gender

- There are different ideas and a variety of definitions of gender. There is no right or wrong with these questions about gender, rather I am just curious to hear your thoughts on it.
    - o How do you understand the word 'gender'?
    - o How would you describe your gender?

5. PE

- Can you talk to me about your experience of PE?
  - *Are there any experiences whilst in PE that stick in your mind?*
- Do you think gender has influenced your experience of PE?
  - *Do you think you notice your gender whilst in PE?*

Potential probes
- *Can you say more about…*
- *Is that something you would like to talk more about…*

6. Closing

The researcher will signal that the interview will be ending soon and invite the participant to share any other thoughts.
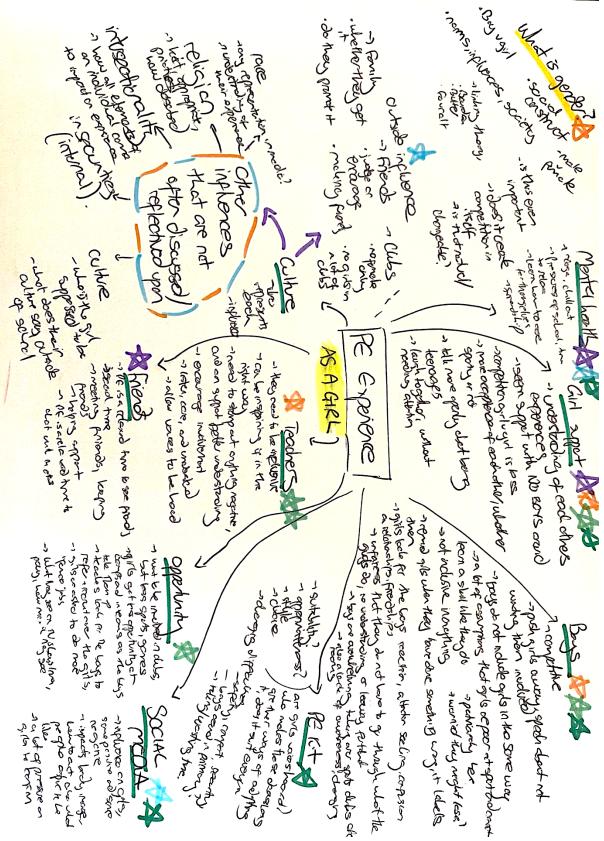
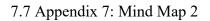Then thanking the participant for sharing.
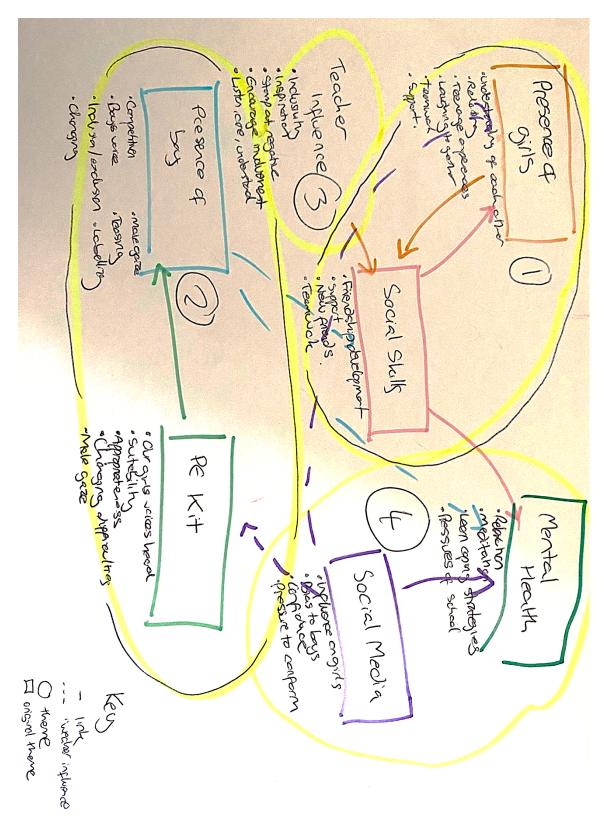
7.4 Appendix 4: Code Examples

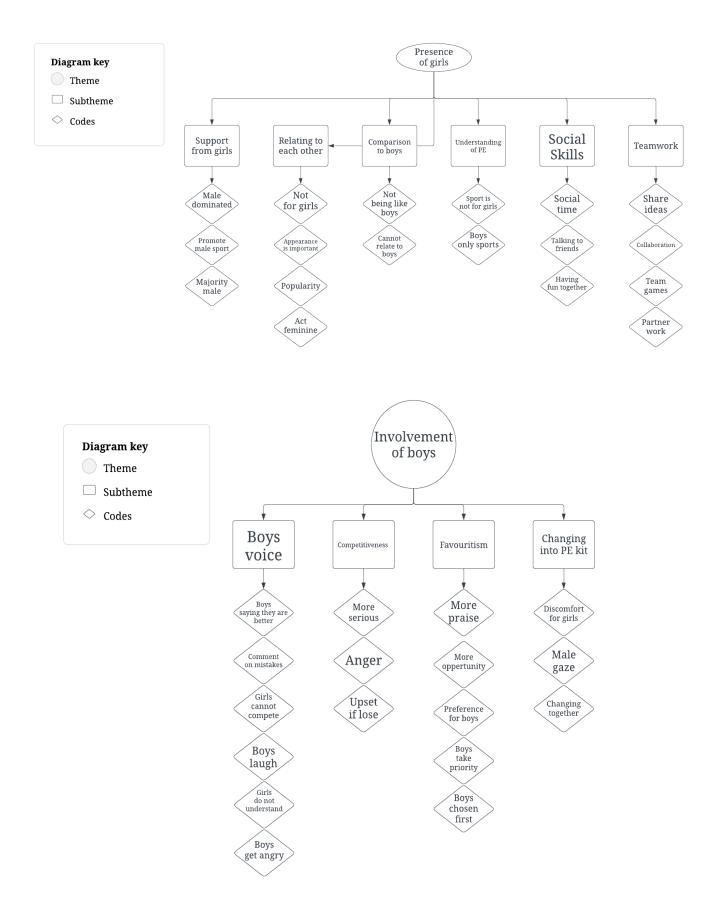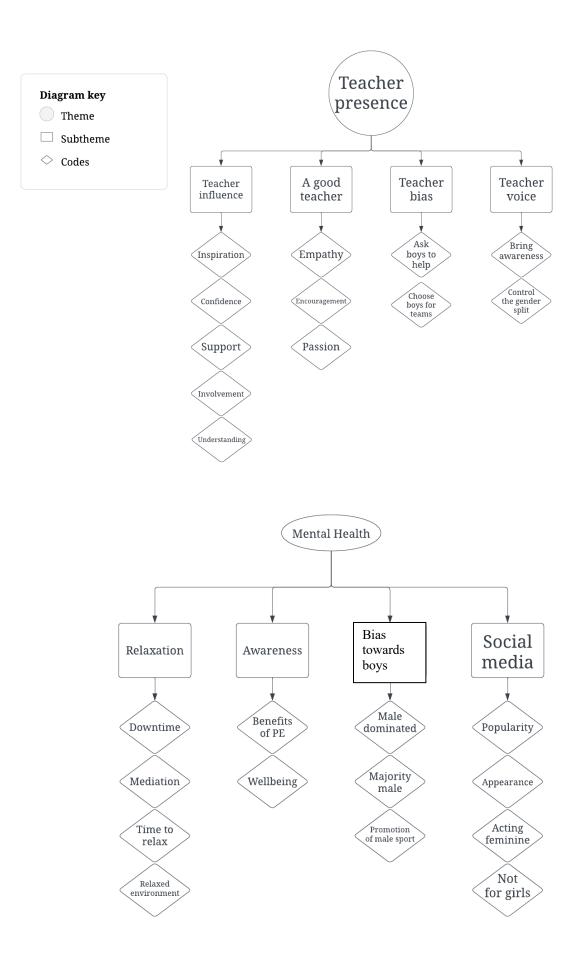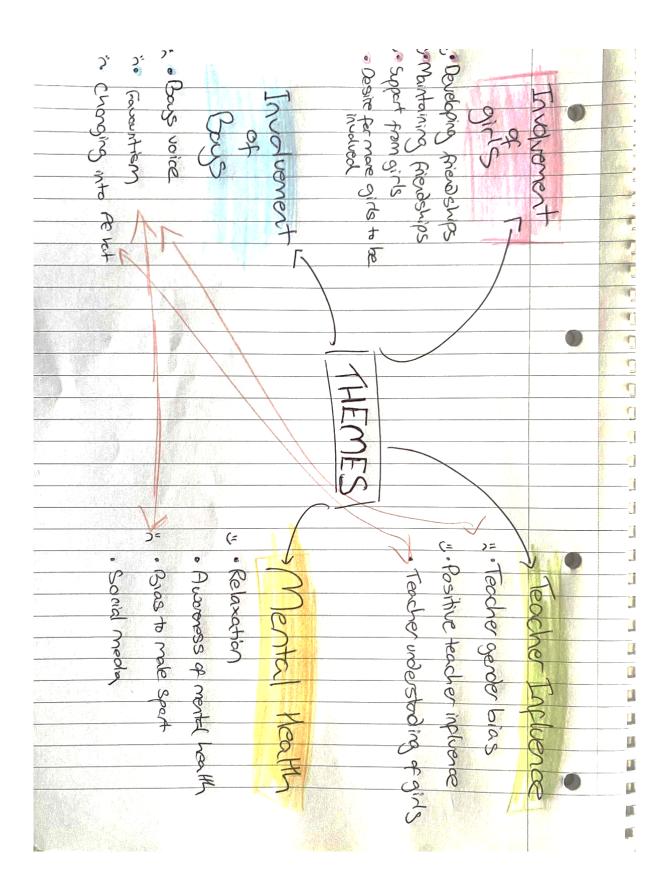| Friendships	Yeh, I mean, even if you do PE by yourself it can still be enjoyable but with friends it can be a lot more enjoyable because you are more motivated by them
	You can do a lot more, like you can do football practice by yourself but with friends you can improve on technical stuff.
	think the friends that hang around with in PE and just outside of PE, like, they've helped me that I've helped them
	I made my first when I joined, I had like no friends. And I had my first friend in PE, because we were both left handed. And we were doing like some kind of, I think it was a some game that you had to have be left handed for. Right. And we were always working together. And like that, I think that's like how I made like my first frien
	So basically, majority of my class decided, we'll all join clubs, and then we'll make other friends in the clubs
Hanging out with friends	Like, I can just I will not hang out but like, do the lesson with my friends have a nice time
	I guess it's the chance to do something with your friends
	I am like a busy person so I don't always get chance to practice with my friends, and in PE you are guaranteed to practice with other people not just you friends but your classmates as well
	I enjoy hanging out with my friends
	and it's just that you get to communicate with friends
	I did it with a lot of my friends.
	They just want to get the competition done or go back to their friends.
Making friends	Then in year eight because we got to like move around the school more like you'll see people, like in their friendship group more, not just in their classes.
	That I've made tons of friends
	So it's fun to do have some friends and make friends into clubs and yeah.
Self-image	It comes into sort of a, you know, self image for how you want to be
	Basically, because I have some eczema on my foot. So I'm just like, kind of insecure and self-aware about that.
	I have to be careful, sometimes, I need to have to let tighten it, adjust, so I have to be aware have to be like, make sure that everything is zipped up.
	Like, I don't want to sweat
	I think so. Because I had like, I have skin issues like eczema and when I do PE like the sweat in primary school like affect my eczema make it even worse
	because like, you can have PE in period one, when people are thinking they are going to sweat during the day and stuff
	Women will get popular because of their looks
PE Kit	I mean my PE kit's all right. But sometimes the jogging bottoms and stuff like that can be impractical for things like dance and stuff.
	yeah, now that we have to come into school in our PE kits, we can have more time for PE, and we don't have to worry about getting changed quickly enough. So yeah.
	It's nothing special about it. It's just regular PE kit, it's comfortable. Its nice. It's easy to move in
	It's nothing special about it. It's just regular PE kit, it's comfortable. Its nice. It's easy to move in
	I like it, because it has the badge on it. So we know that it's our school
	he only thing I'm kind of peeved about is that this one it's not stretchy.
	t's like, right, but like it's overall like it is I think it's quite comfortable.

7.5 Appendix 5: Codes and Theme Development

7.6 Appendix 6: Mind Map 1

What is gender? — social construct
- male
- price

- Boy v girl
- norms, influences, society
  - linking theory
  - gender
  - letter
  - femails

PE Experience AS A GIRL

Mental health + Girl
- is this even important
- pressure of school, how to relax
- teen how to see
- does it cook competition in itself
- self is it natural?
- sexuality?
- competition v girl is less
- more acceptance of each other/older
- tell more openly about body
- laugh together, what makes others
- boys do not include girls or enjoy at sports
- particularly for a world they might lose
- not inclusive everything
- equal girls when they have done something wrong, it labels

Boys
- competitive
- understanding of each other
- push girls away/speak about not wanting them included

Culture
- the french book influence
- can be inspiring if in the right way
- need to stamp out anything negative and can combat positive understanding
- encourage involvement
- foster, care, and validated
- allow voices to be heard

Teachers
- they need to be relatable

Other influences that are not often discussed/reflected upon

Outside influence
- friends
- Clubs
  - compete only
  - regular's in a lot of clubs

- do they promote it
- family
- whether they get it
- making friends

race — how reflected in media?
- any reflected at all
- unability of their experience

religion
- what elements
- how reflected

intersectionality
- how all elements come an individual experience
  to impact on experience in securities
  (internal)

culture
- who is the SM supposed to be
- meeting true friends, keeping
- friends support
- PE is so close and have to chat out in class

friend
- PE is a relaxed time to see friend
- must be involved, not spots, genes
- girls get less opportunity
- compared meds as the boys
- teachers look for the boys
- PE + mcmt over the girls
- girls easier to do more

opportunity
- girls look for the boys reaction, a think seeing, competition
- relationships, friendships
- influence that they do not have to go through what the boys do, no understanding or leaving football
- toys are overwhelming they are spot clubs are
- also a lack of awareness, chang

PE ict
- are girls voices heard
- who makes these decisions
- for her ways of doing
- does it suit everyone

- sexuality?
- aggressiveness?
- style
- choice
- dangers of pressure
- boys appear "primary safety"
- girls appear "primary"
- Helps lifestyle is true

social media
- influence on girls, some positive also some negative
- impacts body image
- come back, could look like
- people think it be
- a lot of pressure on girls to conform
- what they see on TV sleep time, pos, have me a big see

7.7 Appendix 7: Mind Map 2

Presence of Girls ①
- understanding of each other
- reliability
- teenage experiences
- laughing / fun
- teamwork
- support

Teacher Influence ③
- inclusivity
- inspiration
- support at practice
- encourage involvement
- listen, care, understand

Presence of Boys ②
- competition
- boys vote
- inclusion / exclusion
- changing
- teasing
- labelling
- male gaze

Social Skills
- friendship development
- support
- new friends
- teamwork

PE Kit
- our girls voices heard
- suitability
- appropriateness
- changing approaches
- male gaze

Mental Health
- reflection
- meditation
- learn coping strategies
- pressures of school

Social Media ④
- influence on girls
- bias to boys
- confidence
- pressure to conform

Key
— link
··· unclear influence
○ theme
▢ original theme

7.8 Appendix 8: Theme Development Diagrams

Diagram key
- ● Theme
- ☐ Subtheme
- ◇ Codes

Presence of girls

- **Support from girls**
  - Male dominated
  - Promote male sport
  - Majority male
- **Relating to each other**
  - Not for girls
  - Appearance is important
  - Popularity
  - Act feminine
- **Comparison to boys**
  - Not being like boys
  - Cannot relate to boys
- **Understanding of PE**
  - Sport is not for girls
  - Boys only sports
- **Social Skills**
  - Social time
  - Talking to friends
  - Having fun together
- **Teamwork**
  - Share ideas
  - Collaboration
  - Team games
  - Partner work

Diagram key
- ● Theme
- ☐ Subtheme
- ◇ Codes

Involvement of boys

- **Boys voice**
  - Boys saying they are better
  - Comment on mistakes
  - Girls cannot compete
  - Boys laugh
  - Girls do not understand
  - Boys get angry
- **Competitiveness**
  - More serious
  - Anger
  - Upset if lose
- **Favouritism**
  - More praise
  - More oppertunity
  - Preference for boys
  - Boys take priority
  - Boys chosen first
- **Changing into PE kit**
  - Discomfort for girls
  - Male gaze
  - Changing together

Diagram key

- ⬤ Theme
- ▢ Subtheme
- ◇ Codes

Teacher presence

Teacher influence
- Inspiration
- Confidence
- Support
- Involvement
- Understanding

A good teacher
- Empathy
- Encouragement
- Passion

Teacher bias
- Ask boys to help
- Choose boys for teams

Teacher voice
- Bring awareness
- Control the gender split

Mental Health

Relaxation
- Downtime
- Mediation
- Time to relax
- Relaxed environment

Awareness
- Benefits of PE
- Wellbeing

Bias towards boys
- Male dominated
- Majority male
- Promotion of male sport

Social media
- Popularity
- Appearance
- Acting feminine
- Not for girls

7.9 Appendix 9: Mind Map 3

THEMES

Involvement of girls
- Developing friendships
- Maintaining friendships
- Support from girls
- Desire for more girls + be involved

Involvement of Boys
i. Boys voice
ii. Favouritism
iii. Changing into PE kit

Teacher Influence
i. Teacher gender bias
ii. Positive teacher influence
iii. Teacher understanding of girls

Mental Health
i. Relaxation
ii. Awareness of mental health
- Bias to male sport
- Social media

7.10 Appendix 10: Theme 1 Examples

Theme 1: Involvement of Girls

Sub Theme	Examples
Support from girls	AV: "whereas with girls its like its okay, you're gonna win next time, its more supportive" NAE "So they kind of helped me and then I enjoyed it more." NAE "I got more support from the girls compared to the boys."
Developing Friendships	AE "Yeah. Because we all go through the same and similar things. So we all stand together, and try and support each other as much as we can" AA "I guess you can relate a lot more about stuff with girl." AA "Yeh I can relate to others more because I am around girls, we go through similar things when it comes to like sports." RR "You just like, you get each other like, you know what's happening."
Desire for More Girls to be Involved	AE "Sometimes it's a bit awkward, because obviously they talk about whatever they want to talk about. And then you would just be like standing if there's no other girls in the group, you might not be able to feel as comfortable talking to them. WAF "You can do a lot more, like you can do football practice by yourself but with friends you can improve" TS "It's just gives you more of that motivation"
Maintaining friendships	RIA "Then in year eight because we got to like move around the school more like you'll see people, like in their friendship group more, not just in their classes." TS "That I've made tons of friends." RIA "So it's fun to do have some friends and make friends into clubs and yeah."

7.11 Appendix 11: Theme 2 Examples

Theme 2: Involvement of Boys

Sub Theme	Examples
Boys voice	AA "if boys stop saying that, I think they're just scared we are going to be better than them."
	AA "not saying nice things, its not gonna make me want to do it. They're just saying it to just get on my nerves and stuff."
	AE "Because if you make a mistake, or if you didn't win something, boys tend to laugh at it."
	AE "we're playing football and then I missed a goal. And the boys were like she can't score she can't score,"
	AA "The boys would direct jokes towards the girl in the club. there was always start complaining like the girls can't play football and stuff."
	AA "yeh, if a girl is actually trying to participate in sport and a boy just comes along and says ahh you aren't good at it, they just aren't going to believe in themselves."
	AA "sometimes the boys that come and it was just like, they'll try like, do kick ups and stuff and they say like, well, we can do this, but you can't."
	AV "I'll say we'll be in PE, boys will be like, they will. If you are in the boys team, and you lose the boys will get really angry at you because you just stood there and did nothing."
	AE "Because if you make a mistake, or if you didn't win something, boys tend to laugh at it."
	AE "Yeah. Like in Primary School. Yeah, it happened. Because, obviously, we're playing football and then I missed a goal. And the boys were like she can't score she can't score."
	AE "And I think it might just be that oh, because she's a girl we can't talk to her about this."
	RIA "Yeh, they didn't want any of the girls to be there, Like when we get on the mini buses and stuff like those start making moans here, like this will be fun if their friends would come or if she wasn't there."
Favouritism	AE "But when we go to competitions and such, we see that the boys get more praise from the people doing the competitions."
	AE "It is upsetting when boys are picked over the girls without reason and the boys get better training.
	AE "I feel like it was because he was a boy, because I feel like sometimes people think that even if a girl is good, boys will have more opportunity to keep on proceeding and getting better than girls."
	AE "so they might just go to the boys as they think the boys have more potential."
	TS "feel like people feel like boys play sports that any type of sport better than the women or the girls.
	RR "you're kind of like, ushered aside kind of situation with sports and things, the sports would be done by the boys and the girls would just be there."
	RIA "So like, when it was time to go competition, the coach would always like choose the boys first."

Changing into PE Kit	AV "So we had to change, was a little bit especially like up into year six and year five, girls start to develop." TS "And some of the boys would sneak in the rooms and that." NAE "We didn't really have changing rooms. And it was a mixed school. So we had to, like get changes in one room, the boys and the girls. So like, I'll kind of like change that."

7.12 Appendix 12: Theme 3 Examples

Theme 3: Teacher Influence

Sub Theme	Examples
Teacher Gender Bias	AA "PE teachers influenced my experience." AA "And she is very passionate about my PE and helps us develop." AE "It was actually in year seven with a teacher that doesn't work here but it was at a club, and we were doing athletics and then I realised that I was quite fast. And she was like you will go far with this." TS "The teachers, obviously, yeah, but they have a big part." TS "like kind of like the stuff in a sense to help you lay the foundation, they set the foundation to help you achieve that kind of stuff."
Positive Teacher Influence	AV "Also, like with like the lifting stuff, like helping the equipment In primary school, like you notice that the teacher will ask the boys to help more than like the girls." RIA "only the boys at my school went because my coach only used to pick the boys and he was a man too."
Teacher Understanding of Girls	AA" And like the teachers, like in mixed schools, especially, they should bring awareness like to stop like, saying not nice things to them." AV "Like they could either choose to like, intermingle the boys and girls." AV "Our teachers will make us get dressed in the same class with the boys, which was really awkward" WAF "the teachers do their best like make it like really inclusive and make sure everyone has like a nice time."

7.13 Appendix 13: Theme 4 Examples

Theme 4: Mental Health

Sub Theme	Examples
Relaxation	RR "very, like, chill beginning of the week." RR "And then also, just like having that downtime can help you perform better in like other classes." AA "So it's a nice thing to do to just focus on not worry about anything else in life, yeh." AV "I just use it as like a time for me to relax more than like to do PE." AV "Some people now just feel like we could be doing another subject, but actually PE can be used to relax and take a break." WAF "Yeah, because I remember last year, we did a meditation, which, especially during the end of the year, because we had our mocks, and I think it really helped me relax a lot, because in other lessons, you still have to learn stuff and gets stressful." RR "I find it very relaxing." RIA "We used to like laugh and joke with him and we felt comfortable in the environment."
Awareness of Mental Health	WAF "I feel, I think PE, in school like, not only help with your physical state, but with like your mental because if you're having a bad day be might be that lesson where you could just forget about everything." TS "for your wellbeing and your mental health."
Bias Towards Boys	RR "Like, especially within the media, like, things like toys, that are targeted towards sports are typically more targeted towards boys." RR "Which I think helps like, promote the societal norm of boys playing sport, specifically football does." RR "Which I think helps like, promote the societal norm of boys playing sport, specifically football does."
Social Media	RR "it's more just like, the idea with especially with like media and things like that, And it's not like, oh, you know, that's just like, for everybody. it's more just like, the idea with especially with like media and things like that, And it's not like, oh, you know, that's just like, for everybody." AV "I would say also like social media, you can really tell, women will get popular because of their looks." AV "Yeh, I think because social media, you have to look a certain way and act a certain way."

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