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Curriculum intent and lived practice in primary physical education

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ABSTRACT

Primary school teachers in England are responsible for teaching multiple subjects to pupils aged 3–11. This study examined the barriers and challenges they encountered when implementing the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE). A case study research design was adopted, and multiple semi-structured interviews were conducted with five primary school teachers. Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Five themes were developed: (1) constraints on teachers' practice, (2) issues with curriculum design and assessment, (3) key factors influencing effective physical education (PE) delivery, (4) influencing factors on pupil participation in PE, and (5) consequences of poor PE delivery over time. Findings highlight a misalignment between curriculum intentions and classroom practice, suggesting that greater curricular support, including increased time allocation and professional learning opportunities, could help address the practical and knowledge-based challenges teachers face.

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Introduction

Physical Education (PE) has long been recognized as a vital component of a well-rounded primary school curriculum, contributing not only to children's physical development but also to their cognitive, social, and emotional well-being (Dudley et al., 2022; Opstoel et al., 2020). In this study, PE is understood as a curriculum subject concerned with pupils' progressive learning in, through, and about movement (Gallahue & Donnelly, 2003). This distinguishes PE from broader physical activity promotion or school sport, although these domains may overlap in practice. In England, the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) outlines the intended outcomes for PE, emphasizing competence in a broad range of physical activities, sustained physical engagement, and the development of positive attitudes toward health and exercise (Department for Education [DfE], 2013a, 2013b). However, translating these policy intentions into classroom practice has proven complex, particularly in primary schools, where generalist teachers are responsible for delivering PE alongside many other subjects (Powers et al., 2022; Randall, 2023).

Although this study is situated in England, the challenges facing primary PE are not unique to this context. Across different national settings, primary PE is often shaped by low subject status, limited

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curriculum time, uneven access to resources, and reliance on generalist teachers who may feel underprepared to teach PE (Baghurst et al., in press). In Australia, Morgan and Hansen (2008) identified barriers affecting classroom teachers' capacity to deliver quality PE, while in Ireland, Murphy et al. (2021) showed the importance of structured field experiences for primary generalist teachers' PE preparation. Canadian research has similarly identified barriers faced by elementary generalist teachers, including issues relating to confidence, training, resources, and self-efficacy (Truelove et al., 2021). In New Zealand, Petrie (2010) demonstrated the value of sustained professional development for supporting generalist teachers' confidence and motivation to teach PE. Against this international backdrop, the present study offers a focused analysis of how primary teachers in England experience curriculum misalignment when implementing the NCPE.

Despite efforts to enhance teacher training and provide structural support through initiatives such as the PE and Sport Premium, a ring-fenced grant designed to improve the quality of physical education and school sport (DfE, 2019), concerns persist regarding the consistency, quality, and prioritization of PE in primary education (McEvilly, 2022; Randall, 2023). Classroom teachers frequently report feeling underprepared, under-resourced, and overburdened by competing curricular demands, which may hinder their ability to deliver meaningful and developmentally appropriate PE experiences. These challenges are frequently cited as being due to the challenges of implementing a PE curriculum in primary schools, lack of support (e.g. financial, logistical) for PE, and inadequate training.

The challenge of curriculum implementation in primary schools

The National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) in England was intended to provide high-quality physical education for all pupils (Department for Education [DfE], 2013a, 2013b). While the NCPE positions PE as a compulsory and valuable curriculum subject, its broad wording leaves considerable interpretive responsibility to schools and teachers. This flexibility may support local adaptation, but it can also produce inconsistency when teachers lack subject knowledge, time, resources, or professional support. This is particularly important given the current review and reform of curriculum and assessment in England, which has renewed attention to curriculum breadth, balance, and implementation (Herold, 2020). However, more than a decade after its most recent revision, consistent enactment across primary schools has remained elusive (McEvilly, 2022). Scholars have reported that classroom teachers often feel ill-prepared to interpret curriculum outcomes, select developmentally appropriate content, and translate policy aims into coherent lesson sequences (Borgen et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2022). When curricular expectations exceeded teachers' perceived competence, they frequently narrowed task demands, relied on commercially produced schemes, or defaulted to games that pupils already understood, prompting some teachers to admit that 'sometimes the kids know more than me' (Griggs, 2010, p. 40). This mismatch between curricular intent and pedagogical reality has been shown to restrict pupils' opportunity for motor-skill development, progressive learning, and sustained moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Wang & Zhou, 2021). This is important, as international research shows that elementary-aged children who develop sport-based skills are more likely to have higher fitness levels in later adolescence (Vlahov et al., 2014). Therefore, researchers have recommended a deeper exploration of the day-to-day constraints primary practitioners encounter when delivering NCPE-mandated lessons (Herold, 2020).

Funding and resource problems for PE in primary schools

In England, primary schools have been eligible for the PE and Sport Premium since 2013 (DfE, 2019). Although evaluative reports indicated pockets of success, researchers have suggested that the premium often subsidizes short-term coaching services rather than sustainable staff development or equipment renewal (Tannehill et al., 2021). Limited budgets, inadequate indoor space, and insufficient or ageing apparatus continued to constrain curricular breadth and lesson quality, particularly in urban schools with high pupil density (Hao & Wang, 2026). Where facilities were shared, teachers

were forced to modify activities, reduce cognitive and physical challenges, or cancel lessons altogether during inclement weather (Association for Physical Education [afPE], 2020). Such material inequities have disproportionately affected lower-socio-economic communities, exacerbating health and movement disparities among children (Hasson et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding how resource shortfalls intersect with teachers' everyday practice remains critical to informing policy decisions and targeting funding where it is most needed.

Issues with PE teacher training for primary school teachers

Initial teacher education (ITE) in England typically allocates fewer than 30 hours to physical education, leaving many generalist trainees without sufficient subject-matter or pedagogical content knowledge (Randall, 2023). Consequently, early career teachers have reported low self-efficacy, limited assessment literacy, and anxiety when managing physically active groups.

In this study, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and professional learning are treated as related but distinct concepts. CPD refers to formalized activities designed to develop teachers' knowledge, skills, and practice, such as workshops, external training sessions, coaching input, or in-service training. By contrast, professional learning is understood as a broader and more situated process through which teachers develop understanding and confidence over time through reflection, collaboration, observation, enactment, and adaptation within their own school context. This distinction is important because access to CPD does not necessarily guarantee meaningful professional learning (Friedman, 2023).

Although CPD opportunities are available, they are often ad hoc, one-off, and externally delivered, limiting their capacity to generate sustained professional learning or long-term changes in practice. This distinction matters because CPD describes the provision of development opportunities, whereas professional learning refers to the process through which teachers internalize, adapt, and enact new knowledge within their own teaching contexts (Tannehill et al., 2021). The resulting confidence gap means that teachers may rely on pupil demonstrations or external coaches, reinforcing the perception that pupils sometimes possess greater practical expertise than their instructors (Randall & Griggs, 2021).

Research has further shown that without robust training, teachers struggle to differentiate tasks, embed relevant assessments for learning outcomes, and align lessons with the NCPE's progression model (Herold, 2020; Ward & Kim, 2024). However, the degree to which PE training experiences, or the lack thereof, affect teachers' effectiveness and the strategies they adopt when implementing the national curriculum remains unclear. This distinction is particularly significant in primary PE, where generalist teachers may receive limited initial teacher education in PE and may rely on external coaches or occasional training opportunities. In such contexts, CPD may provide exposure to new content or strategies, but sustained professional learning requires opportunities to observe, practice, adapt, and reflect on PE pedagogy over time. Therefore, this study uses CPD to describe formal development provision and uses professional learning to describe the ongoing process through which teachers build confidence, subject knowledge, and pedagogical capacity.

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by Glatthorn's curriculum model, which conceptualizes curriculum as a multidimensional and dynamic construct rather than a single written policy (Glatthorn, 1999). In the model, Glatthorn proposed that curriculum exists simultaneously in several forms, including the written (or intended), taught, supported, assessed, learned, and hidden curricula. Together, these dimensions highlight the complexity of curriculum enactment and the potential for misalignment between policy intentions and educational practice (Glatthorn, 1999).

Within the context of this research, Glatthorn's model is particularly pertinent, as PE is a subject shaped not only by formal curriculum requirements but also by contextual, cultural, and structural

influences within schools (Fernández-Balboa, 1993). While the written curriculum outlines statutory expectations, what is taught in practice is influenced by factors such as time allocation, teacher confidence, resource availability, and institutional priorities (Gray et al., 2022). The supported curriculum draws attention to the extent to which teachers are provided with appropriate training, facilities, and professional learning opportunities to enact policy expectations effectively. Similarly, the assessed curriculum foregrounds how accountability and assessment practices shape pedagogical decision-making and curriculum emphasis (Backman & Barker, 2020).

This theoretical framework also emphasizes the significance of the hidden curriculum, the implicit values and messages conveyed through school culture, organizational practices, and subject hierarchies. In PE, these implicit messages can influence how the subject is positioned relative to others and how teachers and pupils perceive its value. For this study, the value of Glatthorn's model lies in its ability to explain *why* curriculum implementation problems may arise even when policy intentions are clear. The NCPE represents the written curriculum, but teachers' enactment of PE is mediated by the support available to them, including time, training, resources, assessment practices, and school priorities. As a result, gaps can emerge between what the curriculum intends, what teachers are able to teach, what pupils experience, and the implicit messages conveyed about PE's status within the school. This framework, therefore, supports an analysis of PE delivery as a problem of curriculum alignment, rather than simply teacher confidence or competence.

In summary, by adopting Glatthorn's (1999) curriculum model as a theoretical framework, this study aims to examine PE curriculum implementation as a complex, multi-layered process. Therefore, the framework provides an appropriate conceptual lens for understanding how different forms of the curriculum interact and how misalignments between them may shape teachers' experiences in delivering PE.

Purpose

Given the challenges primary school teachers face in interpreting and implementing the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) in England, particularly due to limited training, resources, and curriculum support, we explored the lived experiences of teachers who deliver PE as part of their full-time role. Specifically, this research was driven by the following two questions:

RQ1: What day-to-day challenges do primary school teachers experience when delivering PE lessons within the NCPE framework in England?

RQ2: What aspects of the NCPE are most challenging for primary school teachers to interpret and teach, and why?

Methods

A constructivist epistemology and a relativist ontology underpinned this research. A constructivist epistemology is a philosophical perspective that argues that knowledge is generated through experiences and social interactions with the world, and that attention is placed on the meanings participants attribute to their personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2016). A relativist ontology acknowledges that reality is socially constructed but recognizes that individuals may have multiple perspectives and interpretations (Mayan, 2023; Sparkes & Smith, 2009).

Participants and setting

A qualitative case study design was adopted to examine teachers' experiences of PE curriculum enactment within a specific school context. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of how the NCPE was interpreted and delivered in practice, while also allowing attention to the contextual factors shaping teachers' experiences.

Five teachers at a primary school in England (students aged 4–11 years) agreed to participate in the study. The school was selected due to an existing professional relationship between the lead researcher and the Head Teacher, facilitating access and trust. The participants were chosen because they all taught Key Stage 2 (Years 3–6; pupils aged 7–11 years) PE lessons within the school. The sample consisted of three females and two males, aged 24–55 years, with 7–26 years of teaching experience. All five participants taught Year 3 and above (ages 7–11). The participants' names and school have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Instruments

Interviews were conducted with each teacher in their classroom and recorded using a Dictaphone. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, allowing flexibility to explore any new questions and issues that may have emerged, while standardized questions remained. Interviews were separated into two parts and conducted on separate occasions.

Part one contained information on participants' confidentiality and individual rights, an introduction to the effectiveness of the NCPE, and questions about their background. Examples included the following questions: '*What training have you received to teach PE*?' and '*How confident are you in delivering PE lessons?*'

Part two focused on the challenges and benefits of implementing the NCPE in Key Stage 2, specifically as it applied to the participant's school. Examples of the types of questions included: '*How are your lessons informed by the NCPE?*' and '*How do you assess lessons using NCPE guidance?*'

Procedures

Following institutional review board approval, the school's Head Teacher was contacted by the lead researcher, who had a prior professional relationship with the school, which helped facilitate the opportunity to conduct the research. A confirmation letter from the headteacher was provided, indicating the school's willingness to support the research, subject to it not interfering with teaching commitments.

Interviews were scheduled for the autumn and spring terms (December 2024 to February 2025). Once interview dates were arranged with the five participating teachers, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face at the school. Each interview (i.e. part 1) lasted approximately 40–60 min and was transcribed by the lead researcher. Where relevant, supporting documents were collected, including the school's PE curriculum document and the PE lesson structure plan. These documents were used to supplement and contextualize participants' responses, enabling a more accurate representation to be developed for the case study.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The process involved six phases, which allowed for examining data to develop different insights that apply to the research questions. Phase one consisted of familiarization with texts. This involved printing the written interview transcripts and reading and re-reading the text. Phase two consisted of the coding stage, which involved highlighting meaningful and relevant sentences to the research question and assigning code labels. For example, a sentence that said, 'It is supposed to be two hours a week,' was given the code 'curriculum standards.' Phase three consisted of the initial theme generation. This phase involved clustering codes based on their similarities and any running patterns. This included codes such as 'time' and 'availability.' The fourth phase aimed to develop meaningful, high-level labels for the code categories from the third phase. The fifth phase consisted of further refining and defining the themes to capture a main, first-order, and second-order theme. For example, a first-order theme generated was 'Constraints on Teachers' Practices', leading to a second-order theme of 'Planning Issues.' Lastly, the sixth stage consisted of producing a table summarizing the overall analysis of the process.

Reflexivity

The lead researcher had an existing professional relationship with the school, which supported access and helped establish trust with participants. However, this relationship also created potential power dynamics and may have influenced how openly participants discussed challenges in PE delivery. To mitigate this, participants were reminded that involvement was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any point, and that all responses would be anonymized. The lead researcher also engaged in reflexive note-taking during data collection and analysis to consider how prior knowledge of the school context may have shaped questioning, interpretation, and theme development. The lead researcher also regularly conversed with the research team, who served as critical friends and helped shape the follow-up interview questions. While the lead researcher's relationship may have introduced bias, it also provided contextual familiarity that supported more informed questioning and interpretation of participants' accounts.

Results

Five first-order themes and 11 second-order themes were developed from the data (Table 1). First-order themes were: (1) Constraints on Teachers' Practice, (2) Issues With Curriculum Design and Assessment, (3) Key Factors Influencing Effective PE Delivery, (4) Influencing Factors on Pupil Participation in PE, and (5) Consequences of Poor PE Delivery Over Time. Supporting quotations were selected from the interview transcripts to convey each theme's meaning most effectively and to provide the reader with an additional layer of contextual understanding. For brevity, the results section was kept concise, while the discussion section expands on the key findings and situates this research within broader academic literature.

Table 1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Teachers' Perceptions of the Barriers to Implementing the Key Stage 2 PE National Curriculum.

First Order Themes	Second Order Themes	Example Quotation
Constraints on Teachers' Practice	Planning issues	*"I am not sure I've managed to fit everything in, as there are lots of lesson plans with lots of content, with little time. So, I will skip and adapt the planning."*
	Teacher Training and Knowledge Gaps	*"Not so aware of the different approaches that we can take because we haven't had the experience and training in PE."*
	Teacher Confidence and Attitudes	*"My own personal experience with PE is that I was never good enough, so I never enjoyed it, and it filtered into my teaching. I never felt my PE teaching is any good."*
Issues With Curriculum Design and Assessment	Curriculum Structure and Content	*"The curriculum is quite generic. It could do with being more specific because just looking at it can be tough, then, to put an effective lesson together."*
	Assessment and Student Progress	*"I think it's quite simple and easy to use … for the staff to use … assessing straight onto the platform. However, if they leave the assessments till after the unit, it won't be as accurate."*
Key Factors Influencing Effective PE Delivery	Teaching Strategies and Methods	*"You break down the curriculum in a whole different way. However, that only comes from further understanding of CPD."*
	Support, CPD, and Professional Learning	*"If you have a specialist teacher delivering aspects of PE in addition to a member of staff, that does help as that teacher has a vast amount of experience delivering the subject content as well as breaking down those prejudices and walls with the children."*

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

First Order Themes	Second Order Themes	Example Quotation
Influencing Factors on Pupil Participation in PE	Psychological and Emotional Factors	*"Self-esteem is a big thing, as the children are aware of their ability in PE and their confidence. All children have different experiences which play a part in it."*
	Social and Cultural Influences	*"Parent's. If you have sporty parents, you naturally have a child interested in sport, whereas others may be guided in different directions, such as towards music."*
Consequences of Poor PE Delivery Over Time	Health and Physical Well-being	*"We have seen many issues with children's mental health and research on sedentary lifestyles. Therefore, I think we need to be preparing children for the real world. And I think if the government prioritizes that more, it will have an impact on children in the long run."*
	Social and Competitive Disadvantages	*"If children are not acquired to competition and they don't respond well to losing, their barrier goes up with PE. So, you need to enforce that they are going to compete."*

This study confirmed that Key Stage 2 (KS2) classroom teachers continued to experience long-standing barriers when delivering PE (Table 1). These findings reinforced evidence, documented for over three decades, that problems such as inadequate subject knowledge, insufficient preparation time, and ambiguous curriculum guidance have persisted despite repeated policy initiatives (Borgen et al., 2021; Curtner Smith, 1999). The results focus on the most salient themes across participants' accounts and are presented to show how teachers experienced barriers to PE curriculum enactment in practice.

Theme 1: constraints on teachers' practice

Although PE has been recognized as central to holistic child development, generalist teachers' professional conditions continue to restrict their capacity to plan, resource, and deliver high-quality lessons (Rainer & Jarvis, 2021; Wintle, 2022). Interpreted through Glatthorn's (1999) curriculum model, these constraints reflect persistent misalignment between the *written curriculum* (i.e. the NCPE), the *taught curriculum* (what teachers are realistically able to deliver), and the *supported curriculum* (training, time, and resources provided to enable delivery). When pedagogical expectations exceed teachers' available time, subject knowledge, and confidence, instructional decisions default to low-risk activities and commercially produced schemes, narrowing pupils' learning opportunities (Banville et al., 2021; Randall & Griggs, 2021; Ward, 2021).

Planning issues

Teachers' accounts of restricted planning time highlight the tension between the written and taught curricula. One teacher noted, '*With the curriculum being so packed, we only get given around an hour slot to deliver a week*' (Teacher 2), illustrating how curricular overcrowding constrains enactment. Similarly, findings report limited time allocation and teacher preparedness (Ward, 2021). Within Glatthorn's framework, this reflects how curriculum intent is compromised when structural conditions do not support implementation.

Teachers' attempts to integrate PE into other subject areas can be understood as adaptive responses to these constraints. For example, Teacher 1 said, '*We try to push PE in other areas of the curriculum. This is to try and get the children's PA [physical activity] up throughout the day.*' Rather than representing curriculum failure, such strategies indicate teachers' efforts to reconcile competing curricular demands. However, these adaptations may also dilute the coherence and progression of the PE curriculum, reinforcing discrepancies between intended and enacted provision (Smith, 2015; Ward, 2021). This distinction is important because increasing pupils' physical activity across the school day is not the same as delivering physical education. While movement breaks

or active learning may support pupils' overall activity levels, PE involves planned, progressive learning in, through, and about movement. Teachers' attempts to 'push PE' into other curriculum areas, therefore, reflect a pragmatic response to limited curriculum time, but they may also blur the boundary between physical activity promotion and PE as a curriculum subject. This helps explain how the written curriculum's emphasis on progression can become weakened when PE time is compressed or redistributed across the wider school day.

Teacher training and knowledge gaps

Many teachers prioritized core subjects. Illustrating this point, Teacher 3 stated, '*Core subjects are definitely given the prioritization and the time.*' This further illustrates how PE is positioned within the broader curriculum hierarchy. From a Glatthornian perspective, this reflects a weakly supported curriculum, where limited initial teacher education and inconsistent professional development undermine teachers' ability to interpret and deliver curriculum content effectively.

Although participants acknowledged the availability of training, Teacher 4 commented that *'Subject knowledge-wise, there are just so many different areas. No one can know all of them. Some children have better knowledge than me.*' This demonstrates how insufficient subject knowledge shapes the taught curriculum, and aligns with Tucker's (2021) assertion that '*teachers are unable to teach what they do not know*' (p. 44). These knowledge gaps were not simply individual deficits in teacher competence. Rather, they reflected the complexity of asking generalist primary teachers to deliver a broad PE curriculum with limited specialist preparation and inconsistent professional learning. Teachers were expected to interpret curriculum aims, select appropriate content, differentiate tasks, and assess progress across multiple activity areas. Within Glatthorn's framework, this represents a misalignment between the written and supported curricula: the NCPE expects broad and progressive provision, but teachers are not always provided with the knowledge, time, or professional support needed to confidently enact it. This finding demonstrates *how* knowledge gaps are produced and sustained by curriculum structures, rather than being located solely within individual teachers.

Teacher confidence and attitudes

Teachers' confidence and attitudes toward PE are closely connected to Glatthorn's concept of the *hidden curriculum*. Participants reported that low confidence was influenced by limited training and prior negative experiences. Illustrating this point, Teacher 2 claimed: '*Teachers lack confidence in delivery, [which] then feeds into passion, and then that gets translated to the pupils.*' It is reported that many teachers receive minimal PE training, which may contribute to enduring confidence issues (Franco et al., 2025).

Teachers' reflections highlight how personal histories shape beliefs and pedagogical choices. For example, Teacher 4 confessed, '*I've not really had good experiences with people in school, so I didn't do PE.*' These experiences convey implicit messages about the value of PE in schools, reinforcing its marginal status relative to core subjects (Gutiérrez et al., 2026). Through Glatthorn's lens, such beliefs become embedded within the hidden curriculum, influencing how PE is enacted regardless of policy intentions.

Theme 2: issues with curriculum design and assessment

Persistent concerns about misalignment between policy rhetoric and classroom reality have been widely reported in the PE literature. When viewed through Glatthorn's curriculum model, this tension can be understood as a disconnect between the written curriculum (e.g. policy intentions articulated within the NCPE) and the taught and assessed curricula that emerge in practice. When curricular guidance is overly generic, teachers are required to interpret broad outcomes without sufficient scaffolding, resulting in variability and inconsistency in enactment across schools (Barker et al., 2026; Barrientos Hernán et al., 2023).

Curriculum structure and content

Teachers articulated many prominent issues within the curriculum structure and content. These included prioritizing core subjects over foundation subjects, curriculum imbalances, and a broad, packed, enacted curriculum. Teacher 1 stated, '*Maths and English are the stronger subjects, and I would say PE, along with foundation subjects, get pushed aside*.' This illustrates how the hidden curriculum operates alongside the written curriculum, implicitly signalling which subjects are valued within school cultures. Although PE is formally positioned within the NCPE, the hidden curriculum's 'lower' status is reflected through constrained time, planning, and resourcing. Consequently, foundation subjects such as "PE were '*squeezed*' *in terms of time and resource.*" (Harris, 2018, p. 9). This finding is echoed by research linking curriculum marginalization to accountability pressures such as Standard Assessment Tests (SATS) (Randall, 2023).

Extending this further, Teacher 4 commented, '*However, now with Ofsted's, SAT pressures, and a packed curriculum, there's no room for it [PE] to be prioritized. So, unless that changes, it cannot be.*' This highlights how external policy drivers reshape the operational curriculum, narrowing the space available for PE regardless of national intentions. Teachers' concerns about the curriculum being 'broad' and 'packed' further suggest a weak alignment between the written and supported curricula, particularly when teachers lack sufficient guidance or professional learning to translate policy into coherent learning sequences.

Most teachers reported that the curriculum was not specific enough and too condensed, which may align with teachers' reports of a lack of subject knowledge. Teacher 5 commented, '*It's totally inadequate for me to take that [government document] and turn it into a lesson. I could go off in any direction, so it could, therefore, be inconsistent across the country*.' This critique of the NCPE is not simply that it is broad, but that its breadth places considerable interpretive responsibility on schools and teachers. While this may offer flexibility in local curriculum design, it can also lead to inconsistency when generalist teachers are expected to translate broad aims into progressive units, differentiated tasks, and meaningful assessment practices without sufficient guidance or support. This reflects Glatthorn's assertion that curriculum coherence depends not only on policy clarity but also on the degree to which teachers are supported to enact it.

Where the written curriculum lacks specificity, the taught curriculum becomes highly individualized, contributing to national inconsistency. These findings align with earlier work showing that what is practiced, taught, and learned often diverges from curriculum policy when guidance is overly broad (Curtner Smith, 1999; Gray et al., 2025; Simmons & MacLean, 2018).

Assessment and student progress

The importance of accessible assessments in PE was evident throughout the study. Viewed through Glatthorn's model, assessment functions as a critical bridge between the taught and assessed curricula, shaping both instructional decisions and perceptions of pupil progress. Teachers described using simple and accessible techniques such as tick boxes, iPads, and observations to capture pupils' current performance, as illustrated by the comment: '*We can do it there and then, as it's recorded, without it taking you away from the lesson too much*' (Teacher 3). These approaches enabled teachers to manage assessment within constrained lesson times, aligning the assessed curriculum more closely with day-to-day teaching practice.

Lopes et al. (2011) likewise emphasized the importance of assessment tools for identifying and tracking pupils' gaps and progress from early ages (van Rossum et al., 2019; Young et al., 2021). Teacher 1 commented, '*If a year group had a lot of missing skills, we would slot another sector of this in so they can recap and close the gap,*' suggesting that assessment data informed curriculum adaptation. This reflects a degree of coherence and alignment between the taught and assessed curricula when assessment is manageable and embedded within practice.

Equally, research has highlighted concerns about assessment in PE, noting that teachers may spend little to no time on assessing, or lack the necessary resources or knowledge to assess

appropriately (van Rossum et al., 2019; Veloo & Md-Ali, 2016). Although these issues were not prominent in the current study, Teacher 1 did highlight the risks of delayed assessment: '*If staff leave the assessments till after the unit is finished, then it's not going to be as accurate.*' This underscores how weak alignment between the assessed and taught curricula can undermine curriculum fidelity and pupil progression when assessment is not treated as an integral component of learning rather than an add-on.

Theme 3: key factors influencing effective PE delivery

Effective PE depends on teachers' pedagogical choices and the professional learning opportunities they receive (Bailey & Dismore, 2010). Where supportive school cultures promote collaborative planning, mentoring, and continuous professional development (CPD), teachers are more likely to adopt inclusive, varied, and developmentally appropriate practices (Makopoulou et al., 2022; Stevenson et al., 2016). The following subthemes detail specific enablers identified by participants.

Teaching strategies and methods

Implementation and delivery are crucial to successful outcomes within PE and represent both the enacted and taught curriculum. Teachers in this study identified that effective delivery depended on teaching methods, integration, progression, and regression. Teacher 2 explained:

> A lot of the boys dislike dance, but by the end of the term, they're loving it because it's how you go in and deliver it. It's all your ideas, your creativity, and I think if you change that perspective for them, it turns out better for them.

This illustrates how teachers actively interpret and mediate the written curriculum, shaping pupils' engagement through pedagogical creativity rather than solely through content.

Pupils' attitudes were also influenced by how lessons were delivered, reflecting the operation of the hidden curriculum alongside formal teaching. Teacher 2 observed:

> It's almost like children have a hidden language, and if you are delivering a lesson reading from a sheet they can feed off that; whereas if someone knows what they are on about, they can see that, and they engage.

This highlights how pupils respond to implicit messages about confidence, enthusiasm, and competence that are not prescribed in curriculum documents but are powerful determinants of engagement.

Subramaniam and Silverman (2002) conceded that pupils' engagement and enjoyment in PE lessons are closely related to teachers' attitudes and delivery (Spruijtenburg et al., 2024). This reinforces the idea that the effectiveness of the taught curriculum depends on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, confidence, and capacity to adapt learning experiences. Teachers' references to 'energy levels' (Teacher 1), 'keeping it fast paced and making it pupil-centered' (Teacher 2), and 'modelling, praising, or reducing the activities' (Teacher 5) demonstrate how teachers make real-time curricular decisions to align learning with pupils' needs.

Support, CPD, and professional learning

Support and professional development correspond closely with the concept of the supported curriculum, which encompasses the resources, training, leadership, and structures that enable curriculum enactment. This distinction between CPD and professional learning is important. Participants described formal CPD opportunities, such as INSET and external coaching, but their accounts also suggested that meaningful professional learning occurred when support was sustained, situated, and connected to everyday teaching practice. For example, observing coaches, receiving feedback from PE leads, and adapting lessons over time appeared more valuable than one-off training alone. This aligns with literature suggesting that CPD is more effective when it is collaborative, practice-based, and ongoing, rather than delivered as isolated external provision (Friedman, 2023). Teachers

acknowledged the importance of training opportunities, support from sport coaches, and strong leadership from PE leads and headteachers. Teacher 1 noted:

> As a PE lead, I have had many INSET [In-Service Education and Training] days to try and train the teachers in the way I want the school's PE to look. I would then give feedback to the staff, which they take on board and are very good at adapting.

This suggests that purposeful leadership can enhance curriculum coherence by aligning the written, taught, and supported curricula.

The '*dedication of PE leads'* (Teacher 5) appeared to foster a supportive environment in which non-specialist teachers felt able to develop their practice. Informal and situated professional learning was also evident through the use of sport coaches. Teacher 4 commented, '*I'll be there watching him, even joining in. That is a bit of CPD [continuing professional development].*' This reflects how professional learning can occur through observation and collaboration, reinforcing teachers' confidence and pedagogical competence within the taught curriculum.

These findings align with literature reporting that schools employ external qualified sport coaches to improve subject knowledge and confidence (Smith, 2015). However, tensions within the supported curriculum remain, as Leeder and Beaumont (2021) suggested that sport coaches may pursue their own interests rather than align with the NCPE. Support mechanisms may reinforce curriculum intentions when external coaches, PE leads, and CPD opportunities are aligned with the NCPE and contribute to teachers' professional learning. However, they may fragment curriculum intentions when external provision operates separately from teachers' planning, assessment, and curriculum sequencing, leaving teachers dependent on support rather than more confident in their own PE practice.

Theme 4: influencing factors on pupil participation in PE

Children's engagement in PE is shaped by a dynamic interplay of psychological, social, and cultural influences (Adank et al., 2024). These influences can be understood as operating mainly within the hidden curriculum, interacting with both the taught and experienced curricula. While curriculum policy may prescribe inclusive participation, pupils' lived experiences of PE are strongly mediated by emotions, identities, and social norms that extend beyond formal curriculum intentions.

Psychological and emotional factors

While primary school PE was most often associated with fun, teachers' comments highlighted a range of psychological and emotional factors that constrained participation. These included low self-esteem, confidence, motivation, body consciousness, and mental health. Collectively, teachers referred to '*Embarrassment, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, and lack of interest*' (Teachers 2, 3, 4). These responses illustrate how the experienced curriculum may diverge significantly from the intended curriculum, particularly for pupils who feel exposed, judged, or vulnerable during PE.

Although dated, the Sports Council (1995) is useful for showing that concerns about gendered experiences of PE have a long history. However, more recent research also indicates that embarrassment, body consciousness, and gendered stereotypes continue to shape pupils' participation in PE (Cárcamo et al., 2021; Fischetti et al., 2020). These emotional responses are not explicitly taught but are produced through the hidden curriculum, shaped by peer comparison, gender norms, and the physical visibility inherent in PE lessons. As a result, pupils' engagement is influenced less by curriculum content and more by how safe and affirming the learning environment feels.

Teachers in this study identified pedagogical strategies to counteract these effects, such as adapting tasks to reduce anxiety: '*We try and encourage them to join in different ways; so, disguise it in a way that they don't know*' (Teacher 1). This reflects teachers actively reshaping the taught curriculum to mitigate negative experiences within the hidden curriculum. Consistent with Cárcamo et al. (2021),

these findings reinforce the importance of teachers recognizing pupils' emotional responses and adapting delivery to promote inclusion and participation.

Social and cultural influences

Teachers also highlighted social and cultural influences affecting pupil participation, including '*preconceptions*,' '*stereotypes*,' '*lack of awareness*,' and '*the influence of parents*' (Teachers 1 and 3). These influences reflect the social meanings pupils bring into PE rather than formal learning objectives. Bandura (1986) suggested that children acquire social norms and identities related to gendered behavior, which was evident in Teacher 3's observation: '*I think they're still preconceptions towards certain sports. If we do dance, you see a gender divide between boys, as they say they don't want to do that.*'

Eccles and Barber (1999) similarly found that stereotypes limit pupils' beliefs and persistence in physical activities (Cárcamo et al., 2021; Pautu et al., 2025). This was reinforced by Teacher 2's comment: '*They don't have that exposure, they don't think it's something they want to be doing.*' This demonstrates how pupils' engagement is shaped by prior experiences and cultural narratives that exist outside the formal curriculum but strongly influence how it is received and enacted.

Teachers attempted to counteract these influences by deliberately broadening pupils' exposure within the taught curriculum: '*I try to expose and show them inspirational people doing the sport so that they can be motivated*' (Teacher 3). Such strategies illustrate how teachers can use curriculum enactment to challenge the hidden curriculum by reshaping pupils' perceptions of who PE is 'for.'

The role of parents further extends the curriculum beyond the school setting into what might be conceptualized as the learned or experienced curriculum. Bandura's social learning theory (SLT) emphasized the role of parental modelling (Bois et al., 2005), which was reflected in one teacher's comment: '*If you have sporty parents, you naturally have a sporty child as they will be guided towards sport. Whereas some will be guided in different directions, such as more academics*' (Teacher 2). This highlights how participation in PE is influenced by learning experiences that precede and sit alongside formal schooling, reinforcing inequities that teachers must then navigate within the classroom.

Theme 5: consequences of poor PE delivery over time

When PE is consistently marginalized or inadequately delivered, the cumulative effects extend beyond immediate lesson quality and shape pupils' health trajectories, identities, and access to future opportunities. The following subthemes illustrate how such consequences unfold over time.

Health and physical well-being

From the perspective of the experienced curriculum, teachers perceived a strong connection between constrained PE provision and adverse health outcomes. Despite PE's recognized social, physical, and psychological benefits, reduced curriculum time and inconsistent delivery were seen to contribute to sedentary behaviours, mental health challenges, and childhood obesity. For example, Teacher 3 stated, '*With the constraints on PE, we see so many issues with children's mental health, sedentary lifestyles, and a lot more childhood obesity.*' This perception aligns with broader concerns regarding declining physical activity levels and rising obesity rates (Harris, 2018; Peranita et al., 2025).

These outcomes reflect a misalignment between the written curriculum, which positions PE as central to health promotion, and the taught curriculum, where PE is often constrained or deprioritized. As a result, pupils' lived experiences of PE are insufficient to support sustained, healthy behaviours. Teachers also acknowledged the role of policy advocacy in addressing these issues, with Teacher 2 noting that, *'As the government prioritizes this more, it will have an impact on the children in the long run.'* This suggests awareness that strengthening the written and supported curricula may, over time, reshape pupils' health-related experiences.

Social and competitive disadvantages

Teachers also highlighted longer-term social and competitive consequences associated with poor PE delivery, which can be understood through Glatthorn's concept of the hidden curriculum. PE was viewed as a gateway to social engagement, confidence, and access to sporting pathways. Teacher 2 explained:

> If the quality of PE is poor, in reception, children will go through not liking PE; in contrast, if the quality is good, they will naturally find which sport they like, and you can offer them pathways and opportunities into sports clubs.

These early experiences implicitly communicate messages about competence, enjoyment, and belonging, shaping pupils' attitudes toward physical activity across time. When PE quality is low, pupils may disengage early, limiting their participation in competitive sport and broader social environments. This aligns with Peranita et al.'s (2025) assertion that early positive experiences and success in sport are critical for continued involvement and opportunity. Such outcomes demonstrate how the hidden curriculum operates alongside the taught curriculum, either reinforcing or restricting pupils' future engagement and achievement (Rainer & Jarvis, 2021).

Discussion

This study was driven by the following two research questions: (1) What day-to-day challenges do primary school teachers experience when delivering PE lessons within the NCPE framework in England? and (2) What aspects of the NCPE are most challenging for primary school teachers to interpret and teach, and why?

Findings suggest that persistent challenges in PE delivery are not simply matters of teacher competence or motivation but are rooted in structural misalignments across curriculum layers. Many of the barriers identified in this study, including limited time, insufficient training, low confidence, unclear curriculum guidance, and constrained resources, are not new. Rather, they reflect long-standing and well-documented challenges in primary PE. The contribution of this study, therefore, does not lie in presenting these barriers as novel in isolation. Instead, its contribution lies in showing *how* these familiar issues interact across curriculum layers. Through Glatthorn's curriculum model, the findings demonstrate how weaknesses in the supported curriculum, such as limited training, time, and resources, shape the taught curriculum and contribute to misalignment between the NCPE's written intentions and pupils' experienced curriculum. This framing helps explain why similar problems persist despite repeated policy attention.

In this study, teachers consistently described tensions between policy expectations and everyday practice. Although the written curriculum promotes PE as essential to holistic development, the taught curriculum was shaped by time pressures, curriculum overload, and accountability demands linked to core subjects. These conditions constrained planning and reduced opportunities for progression, resulting in pragmatic, low-risk pedagogical decisions. Such patterns highlight how curriculum breadth and generic policy guidance can undermine coherence when not accompanied by sufficient time and clarity.

Support structures played a decisive role in shaping how PE was enacted. Teachers' accounts of limited initial training, uneven access to continuing professional development (CPD), and reliance on external sport coaches demonstrate how the supported curriculum mediates instructional quality. Where strong leadership and targeted CPD were in place, teachers reported greater confidence and adaptability in their teaching. This underscores the importance of sustained professional learning in translating curriculum intent into meaningful practice, while also raising questions about the consistency and pedagogical alignment of externally provided support.

Pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies were central to pupils' lived experiences of PE. Teachers emphasized that enthusiasm, creativity, and responsiveness influenced engagement more than activity content alone. These accounts illustrate how the experienced curriculum is constructed

through interaction, with lesson delivery shaping pupils' enjoyment, motivation, and willingness to participate. Importantly, teachers suggested that inclusive and well-structured lessons could challenge negative attitudes and broaden pupils' engagement, even in traditionally contested areas such as dance.

Issues of participation and long-term impact further revealed the significance of implicit curriculum messages. Teachers identified how gender norms, stereotypes, and prior experiences influenced pupils' confidence and engagement, reinforcing the role of the hidden curriculum in shaping identities and aspirations. Early experiences of PE were seen to have enduring effects, affecting not only pupils' enjoyment but also their access to sporting pathways, social opportunities, and health outcomes. Over time, inconsistent or low-quality PE contributed to disengagement and reinforced sedentary behaviors, while positive experiences fostered confidence and sustained participation.

The results suggest that schools should consider not only whether external coaches or CPD providers are available, but also how their work aligns with the PE curriculum and supports teachers' ongoing professional learning. External support is likely to be most valuable when it builds teachers' capacity, supports curriculum progression, and connects with the school's broader PE aims.

These findings also have implications beyond the immediate English primary PE context. Internationally, similar concerns have been reported regarding the low status of PE, uneven resourcing, limited curriculum time, and the reliance on generalist teachers to deliver specialist subject content. The findings, therefore, speak to a broader issue in curriculum implementation: policy aims may be ambitious, but their enactment depends on the practical conditions available to teachers. This issue may also extend beyond PE to other primary foundation subjects, where teachers are expected to deliver broad subject-specific curricula despite variable training, resources, and institutional priority.

Together, these findings offer a novel contribution by demonstrating how Glatthorn's curriculum model enables a more integrated understanding of primary PE. Rather than addressing planning, pedagogy, participation, or health outcomes in isolation, this study shows how they are interconnected through curriculum structures and cultures. Improving primary PE, therefore, requires coordinated attention to curriculum design, support systems, pedagogical practice, and the implicit messages conveyed in schools. By foregrounding curriculum alignment, this study provides a theoretically informed foundation for more sustainable and equitable PE reform.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research was conducted in a single primary school in England with a small sample of five participants, limiting the generalizability of the results. While the qualitative case study design enabled in-depth exploration of teachers' lived experiences, it may not reflect the broader challenges faced across diverse educational settings. Additionally, the researcher's familiarity with participants may have introduced bias, potentially influencing the candor of responses due to perceived social expectations. The study's cross-sectional nature further limits insights into how challenges and teaching practices evolve over time, particularly in response to changing policies or professional development opportunities.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating larger, more diverse samples across multiple school contexts, including urban, rural, and socioeconomically varied settings. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable for examining how teacher perceptions and practices shift over time and how sustained interventions, such as ongoing CPD or curriculum reform, impact the implementation of the NCPE. Further investigations might explore the effectiveness of targeted professional development models, the role of school leadership in supporting PE delivery, and the influence of parental engagement on student participation. Comparative studies between schools with differing levels of resource allocation or access to specialist PE staff could also provide important insights into systemic versus localized barriers. These lines of

inquiry are critical for informing future policy and ensuring equitable, high-quality PE provision for all pupils.

Conclusion

This study examined primary teachers' experiences of delivering PE within the NCPE in England. The findings highlight persistent constraints, including limited curriculum time, low teacher confidence, insufficient training, and a curriculum perceived as broad and difficult to enact. However, these challenges are not best understood as separate or isolated shortcomings in teacher practice. Rather, they interact across curriculum layers and contribute to misalignment between the NCPE's written intentions and teachers' lived practice.

Through Glatthorn's curriculum framework, the study shows how weaknesses in the supported curriculum, including professional learning, resources, assessment guidance, and institutional prioritization, shape what teachers are able to teach and what pupils experience. While PE is positioned as valuable within policy, its enactment is constrained by the practical conditions and implicit school priorities that influence curriculum delivery. As a result, early PE experiences may shape pupils' engagement, confidence, and health trajectories over time.

The study's contribution lies in applying a curriculum coherence lens to explain why familiar implementation challenges persist in primary PE. Strengthening PE provision therefore requires coordinated, system-level attention to curriculum design, teacher education, sustained professional learning, assessment, and the status of PE within schools. By foregrounding curriculum alignment, this study provides a theoretically informed foundation for future research and policy development aimed at more coherent, equitable, and sustainable PE provision.

The findings emphasize the need for coordinated, system-level approaches to PE reform that attend to curriculum design, teacher education, and sustained professional support. By applying a 'curriculum coherence' lens, this study contributes a theoretically informed explanation of why implementation challenges persist in primary PE and provides a foundation for future research and policy development aimed at strengthening curriculum alignment and impact.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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