

# Exploring social and environmental factors affecting adolescents' participation in physical activity

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## Abstract

This study explores the social factors that influence young people's participation in school and out of school physical activities. Fifty-two 16-year-old adolescents from different socioeconomic backgrounds in one suburban and one inner-city secondary school in the Midlands, UK, participated in group interviews which explored their perceptions about physical activity and the constraints they had experienced. The study suggests that involvement in physical activity is linked with students' social class, home environment and economic status. The level of participation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds was limited compared to their higher socioeconomic counterparts. Furthermore, adolescents' 'cultural', 'physical' and 'economic' capital were salient factors in their involvement in physical activity settings. This study stresses the need for better and wider provision of structured physical activity in schools in economically deprived areas to compensate for lower participation levels.

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**Key-words:** environment • physical activity • physical education • social class • socioeconomic status

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## Introduction

This paper sets out to examine the social factors affecting young people's participation in physical activity. Researchers have documented the decline in physical activity amongst young people (Hardman and Stensel, 2004), but according to Azzarito and Solomon (2005: 26) 'the racial, gender and social class differences of these reports have neither been highlighted nor received much attention'. A number of social, environmental and technological changes over recent years, such as accessibility of high calorie foods, computer games and transport, have caused an increase in sedentary behaviours in young people (Fairclough et al., 2002). Social class is one factor that may affect adolescents' physical activity levels (Macdonald et al., 2004; Wright et al.,

2003). With the increased prevalence of health-related diseases, high percentages of obesity amongst young people and a rise in sedentary behaviours, understanding the factors that affect young people's participation in physical activity is of great importance. Existing research supports the view that involvement in physical activity contributes to numerous health benefits (such as prevention of obesity and type II diabetes and cardiovascular diseases) and the well-being of young people (Department of Health, 2004; Duncan et al., 2004; Hardman and Stensel, 2004).

The environment is said to play a significant part in the reduction of health-enhancing physical activity and claimed to have contributed to an increase in incidence of obesity (Foster and Hillsdon, 2004). Factors such as the decline of walking and the reduction of physical education (PE) and sport in schools are given as reasons behind the increase of sedentary behaviours (Hardman and Stensel, 2004). For the purposes of this paper a combination of psychosocial and ecological perspectives have been employed to attempt to define the environment. Psychologists see the environment as constructed through the individual's perceptions and experiences and ecologists focus on how the environment affects the individual's thinking and behaviour (Foster and Hillsdon, 2004). Owen et al. (2000: 155) define ecological perspectives as 'social and physical situations in which behaviours take place, by promoting certain actions and by discouraging or prohibiting others'. This study explores psychosocial and environmental factors that contribute to decline in adolescents' participation in physical activities in and out of school hours.

### **Adolescents, socioeconomic status and physical activity**

Many epidemiological studies have documented the decline in adolescents' participation in physical activity; however, as Macdonald et al. (2004) and Wright et al. (2003) suggest, these studies have not taken into account the social, cultural and local contexts that shape children's everyday lives as well as the circumstances that may prevent them from participating in physical activities and leisure. More specifically, physical activity and leisure is 'context-dependent' (Wright et al., 2003: 19) closely related to broader notions of socioeconomic status and divisions. Furthermore, physical activity participation is framed within discourses of class, socioeconomic status and gender (Wright et al., 2003). Divisions within society attribute different meanings to physical activity and leisure according to opportunity, which shapes identity and habits in relation to participation in compulsory and leisure contexts (Macdonald et al., 2005).

According to Bourdieu (1984), the disposition to engage in physical activity arises from a complex interplay of various economic, cultural and social factors. All these factors constitute an individual's habits, identity and dispositions towards physical activity and leisure which are characteristics of someone's social class. The habitus is considered as a main factor which contributes to the development of the body (Bourdieu, 1984). It consists of the existential environment of a person, including their beliefs and dispositions, and prefigures everything that a person may choose to do.

Bourdieu (1984) suggests that the habitus has its origins in early childhood through the interaction with family members and various other social groups (e.g. schools, neighbourhoods). The habitus affects every aspect of the human embodiment; and the way people 'taste' and experience physical activities 'reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984: 190). Bodies are also formed through the development of 'taste' (Shilling, 1991, 1993). 'Taste' is defined as the 'process whereby individuals appropriate as voluntary choices and preferences, lifestyles which are actually rooted in material constraints' (Shilling, 1993: 129). The development of taste, 'which can be seen a conscious manifestation of habitus', is embodied and affects people's orientation to their bodies (Shilling, 1993: 129)

Social class has been identified as an environmental and social factor which may have a positive or negative influence on adolescents' participation in physical activities (Green, Smith and Roberts, 2005). Furthermore socioeconomic status (SES) has been used as a synonym for social class which represents groupings in society based upon occupation, education and housing (Green et al., 2005). According to Bourdieu (1984) different classes tend to develop orientations to their bodies which result in the creation of various bodily forms. Bourdieu's work encompasses the notions of economic capital (financial associations, goods and services); social capital (such as friends, peers, colleagues, religion, ethnicity as well as skills, knowledge and abilities that young people possess and learn from belonging to a specific social class); and cultural capital (education, academic qualifications and long-lasting dispositions of the body and mind). The long-lasting disposition of body and mind which has been defined by Bourdieu as the 'embodiment' aspect of cultural capital has also been referred to as 'physical capital' (cited in Shilling, 1993: 149). According to Shilling (1993: 127) the production of physical capital

... refers to the development of bodies in ways which are recognised as possessing value in the social field while the conversion of physical capital refers to the translation of bodily participation in leisure, sports and physical activities into different forms of capital.

More specifically Shilling (1993) suggests that physical capital can be converted into economic capital (in the form of professional sports and sponsorship), cultural capital (in the form of scholarships to universities and enhanced education) and social capital (in the form of social networks and connections through sports organizations).

Bourdieu's (1984) framework of social stratification explains also how middle and upper class people tend to be attracted to more costly and new physical activities. Certain 'prole' or 'working class sports' (Wilson, 2002: 6) are attractive to the lower classes due to their being relatively inexpensive. Both 'cultural and physical capital' (education, the range and extent of social associations, patterns of behaviour, values and ways of life; see Wright and Burrows, 2006: 288) and 'economic capital' (financial associations) have a direct influence on participation levels and involvement in certain activities. Furthermore, according to Duncan et al. (2004) those 'rich' in *cultural and physical capital* are more likely to be involved in an activity due to 'taste', past experience or life-long involvement through family. Whereas

those 'rich' in *economic capital* are more likely to be involved in an activity primarily because of taste and the symbolic values accorded to particular bodily forms but also because they can afford it, in terms of both money and time. As Macdonald et al. (2004) explain in their study on family involvement in leisure contexts, parents from higher SES see physical activity as a 'task' impacting on family's everyday routines and transport arrangements. Central to this paper and to this argument is Bourdieu's (1984) concept of intergenerational transmission of physical capital (habitus and taste for specific forms of physical activities): the attempts of one generation to cultivate its embodied habits in the next generation. As such Bourdieu (1984) argues that the dominant classes are likely to invest a considerable amount of time and money in *elite* activities for their children designed to maximize the potential production and conversion of physical capital.

Duncan et al. (2004) have suggested that higher socioeconomic status is linked with higher involvement in physical activity. In addition, higher educational attainment and family income contribute to higher involvement in physical activity (Wilson, 2002). Adolescents from a low socioeconomic background are twice as likely to be overweight compared to their higher upper middle class counterparts. Duncan et al. (2002, 2004) reported that young people with high socioeconomic status spent more time in moderate and vigorous physical activities than young people from a low socioeconomic background. Also they reported that young people from lower economic strata experience greater barriers (e.g. financial, location, proximity of facilities) to activity than students from higher economic status. In addition it has been suggested that adolescents from low socioeconomic backgrounds 'suffer worse health status and have limited access to facilities or organizations promoting healthy and active behaviours' (Azzarito and Solomon, 2005: 26).

Recent investment in government funding and policy in the UK has raised the importance of PE and sports within schools; this is seen as the gateway to prolonged involvement in physical activity in young people (Corbin, 2002; Green, 2004; Fairclough, 2003). However, Kirk (2005) suggests that adolescents from lower socio-economic groups participate less in sport, and they also suffer poor health and have a lower life expectancy. This emphasizes the importance of increasing participation levels of all students to ensure a healthy standard is achieved across society. School and recreational programmes should be designed and funded to enhance adolescents' participation (Wright et al., 2003). Identifying the social groups that participate less is relevant, but understanding the social factors that affect young peoples' participation choices is critical. Therefore this paper will try to explore socio-environmental factors that influence young people's participation in compulsory, structured and unstructured physical activity and leisure settings.

## Methodology

Interviews were seen as the most appropriate investigative tool in order to generate data based on the students' own words. This is important, since as Macdonald et al.

(2005: 195) suggest, very little research has been undertaken '*with* children rather than *on* children'. Since the study is based within the interpretive paradigm, it is important to formulate a detailed description and explanation of certain phenomena based on the data collected. Our intention was to gather data based on perspectives, orientation and participation patterns of young people in physical activity and school sport across a range of social, cultural and geographic locations (Wright et al., 2003).

Two schools from the Midlands, UK, were selected for this study. The selection was based on location and provision of free meals (Linder, 2002; Macdonald et al., 2004). Free meals as a method to identify students' socioeconomic background has been validated and used in the past (see Macdonald et al., 2004; Shuttleworth, 1995). In addition Linder (2002) suggests that academic attainment is another indicator of socioeconomic status and this was an additional feature of the sample schools.

School A was located in the suburbs with excellent league table results with 78 percent of students leaving the school attaining five or more grades A\*–C, and 2 percent of the students attending the school were entitled to free meals. The school attracts students from middle and higher socioeconomic status families. In addition sport and physical activities are placed high in the school's curriculum and 'ethos'. School B was located in the inner city with only 40 percent of the students leaving school attaining five or more grade A\*–C and 85 percent of the students eligible for free meals. This school attracts students from lower socioeconomic status families, and sport provision beyond the statutory PE hours is restricted to very few extra curricular clubs.

Group interviews (4–6 students in each group) were conducted with 52 (26 boys and 26 girls) 16-year-old adolescents from both schools. All interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and took place after consent forms outlining the purpose of the study were returned signed by the students' parents/guardians. Furthermore, permission was granted from gatekeepers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Gratton and Jones, 2004) – in this instance the heads of schools and the heads of PE departments. In addition before each group interview began students were assured that anonymity would be maintained and that all data would be treated with confidentiality. For this reason the quotes in the next section are accompanied only by the gender of the student and the school he/she was attending (e.g. Boy/Girl; SA: School A; SB: School B).

A semi-structured interview protocol with predefined questions was used to explore issues related to the types of physical activities adolescents engaged in both in and out of school. The interview guide allowed participants to explore issues related to beliefs, dispositions and choices, opportunities for participation in physical activities, location, family support and motivation, and environmental constraints to their participation in school sports and out of school physical activities. Examples of the questions asked during the group interviews are as follows: 'What types of activities are you engaged in within PE?'; 'Do you participate in any after school activities?'; 'What types of extracurricular activities are being offered in your school?'; 'Does your teacher encourage you to participate in these activities?'; 'What type of physical activities are you engaged in during the weekends?'; 'Are these activities being supported

by your parents?'; 'In what ways?'; 'Do you do any activities with your family/parents during the weekends?'; 'How do you spend your free time, if not involved in any forms of physical activities during the weekends?'; 'Do you think your neighbourhood provides you with sufficient opportunities to participate in organized physical activities?'

Interviews were taperecorded and transcribed in full, and 'respondent validation' was possible for all the students who participated in the study. After coding each transcription, the process of identifying common themes started. The analysis was based on deductive and inductive procedures (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), which involved scanning the data for categories and relationships among the initial categories (predefined questions), developing working typologies on an examination of initial cases and then modifying and refining them on the bases of subsequent cases (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). Consequently, new categories emerged, as well as subdivisions in each category. The identified categories will be discussed in detail in the following section of this paper.

A detailed description of the students' responses was shared between researchers to enable similarities and differences in the emerged categories to be identified. 'Peer-debriefing' and 'members check' methods were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study; preliminary results were discussed with 16 students from both schools during informal conversations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## **Findings**

A number of psychosocial and environmental factors that young people face in relation to their physical activity participation were identified. These factors related to the type of school, the location of residence, proximity of facilities, financial support, and significant others (friends, family, siblings). More specifically, three issues emerged which were allied with (a) access to provision, opportunity and location, (b) financial support and (c) encouragement and motivation.

### **Access to provision, opportunity and location**

The interview data suggested that students from School A were involved in more physical activities than students from School B in school sports and during the weekend. More specifically, students from School A provided a positive response to their access to provision and opportunity to participate in physical activity and sport in school. The provision included a variety of activities from basketball, cross-country, hockey, swimming and rugby to ski trips and dance and drama clubs. School A was promoting students' involvement in physical activity outside of school hours by encouraging students to join sports clubs; as one pupil explained, 'the school has links with a lot of clubs so it is easier to join' (Boy/SA).

Students from School B identified only very few activities offered by the school such as football, netball and basketball. Students suggested that their opportunities were hampered as a direct result of the school having no playing fields; as one pupil explained, 'my school hasn't got playing fields so we are limited to what we can do in terms of sports and playing' (Boy/SB).

Location of the school and area of living played an important role in students' opportunities to participate in physical activities. Students from School A commented on location in a favourable manner, explaining that location was a major contributory factor to their involvement in physical activities, and this was evident in all the group interviews in that school. As one student explained: 'I live close to the countryside and every Sunday me and my parents go for a long walk' (Boy/SA). They illustrated that the surrounding area provided plenty of opportunities for engagement in physical activity as well as the type of activities:

I think this area (around School A) gives plenty of opportunity to take part in physical activity, there is a local swimming pool . . . plenty of parks to play football . . . tennis courts . . . plenty of local private clubs . . . (Boy/SA)

In addition they commented on the importance of the proximity of sports facilities to their participation in physical activity, as one girl explained referring to her area of residence: 'my involvement with athletics might have been affected if I wasn't living close to a very well equipped athletic club' (Girl/SA).

On the other hand, a different picture was drawn by students attending School B. They commented on the restrictions they faced due to the location of their school, as illustrated by comments such as 'there is not much to do here' (Boy/SB). In addition a girl expressed a view that the school's limited provision of physical activities was a perceived factor for non-participation. She explained that

. . . if I lived in an area where the school did different after school activities then I would have got involved (in after school activities) . . . so I suppose living somewhere else (different residential area and different school) may have given me a better opportunity. (Girl/SB)

With regard to residential area, students from School B commented on the lack of leisure centres in the area and playgrounds to spend time while playing with friends, as two students (one boy and one girl) from one group interview explained:

Well I like playing basketball but there is nowhere round here to go. (Boy/SB)

Maybe if there was a gym close by I might have gone to that . . . (Girl/SB)

## Financial support

All the students in School A mentioned that parental financial support was a crucial factor in their involvement in physical activity and that without parental support

their participation would be threatened. They commented on support for specialized clothing, equipment and membership to private clubs. The following comments illustrate the point:

My parents pay for it (specialized clothing and equipment) so I suppose without their help I wouldn't be able to attend my training sessions. (Boy/SA)

. . . they are paying for my gym membership. (Girl/SA)

. . . they buy me all my kit. (Girl/SA)

In School B, students mentioned the lack of support and money to participate in physical activity. They explained that financial support offered by their parents was non-existent for such activities. As one pupil explained: 'my parents don't have money . . . to have membership of a sport club' (Girl/SB). They also expressed the view that 'I can't really afford it anyway' (Boy/SB). Lack of financial support had a direct influence on students' participation in out of school physical activities. It was evident from all the interviews conducted in both schools that financial support was very closely linked with parental support, motivation and encouragement to participate in physical activities, as will be discussed in detail later.

### Encouragement and motivation

Family, teachers and peers were the three social groups which provided encouragement and motivation to the students in this study. More specifically students from School A referred to more parental support, motivation and encouragement for their involvement in physical activity than students attending School B. Responses from students at School A referred to a number of reasons for this, such as involvement in certain activities of another family member or an older sibling. It was evident that an active parent or an active sibling (brother or sister) was a motivational factor to participate in physical activity and leisure settings. The following extracts from students' interviews in School A illustrate the point:

. . . my father is a coach in our local football club. (Boy/SA)

I got involved in rugby because my dad used to play . . . (Boy/SA)

I got involved (in netball) because my sister used to do it when she was young . . . I used to go and watch her . . . it looked good fun. (Girl/SA)

There was also particular reference to the activities that students from School A enjoyed participating in as a whole family during weekends, such as going for country walks or visiting local leisure centres. As two students explained:

We (referring to the whole family) are members of a local private gym just down the road, which is great . . . and they (leisure centre) have a really good swimming pool. (Girl/SA)



We do it (participation in physical activity) as a whole family sometimes by going to the gym. My parents enjoy it as much as us (referring to himself and his brother). (Boy/SA)

Being driven to sporting matches was another form of parental support. They referred to parents' attendance at sports days and sporting matches as a motivational factor to participation in specific sporting activities:

Without my parents driving me backwards and forwards I wouldn't be able to do it (referring to playing football in a local sport club) . . . without their support I would find it very difficult. (Boy/SA)

. . . by taking me (reflecting on parents' support) to all the rugby matches as well as staying and watching me . . . (Boy/SA)

Several students also commented on the support and encouragement received from their PE teachers. They explained how teachers' guidance and expertise helped them maintain their involvement in sporting activities within school. Accounts were given of teachers' encouragement to increase participation levels in physical activity by explaining the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, healthy living and physical activity:

If both my PE teachers hadn't supported me or pushed me I may not have done so well at my football. (Girl/SA)

My PE teacher gives me a lot of encouragement to take part in activities and they teach us the benefits of being active. (Boy/SA)

Students from School A did not identify peers as the most influential group for participation in physical activity. Nevertheless, many students suggested that they enjoyed participating in activities with their friends and school sport was identified as such a setting.

The interview data from School B suggested a stronger indication towards peer influence in relation to support, encouragement and motivation for physical activity. Many students in School B commented that they did not participate in physical activity during weekends and very few participated in school sports. For many students, the range of offered activities was very restrictive: 'it is either football or netball (referring to school sport) . . . not interested in these activities' (Girl/SB).

In addition, most of them were not interested in getting more physically active. They explained that they would spend their free time with their friends 'hanging around' in local parks and streets:

I mostly hang around on the streets with my friends (commenting on use of free time), there is not much to do here (area of residence). (Boy/SB)

. . . all my friends live very close so after school we just hang around.  
(Girl/ SB)

For the very few students from School B who expressed the view that they were partaking in some forms of physical activity, peers were identified as a strong influence:

I used to play basketball they (referring to the City Council) put up an outdoor basketball hoop, me and my mates used to play sometimes in the summer . . . now we don't bother . . . don't know why . . . think we just grew out of it.

(Boy/SB)

Sometimes, in the summer, I would spend my time with my friends playing football in the park. (Boy/SB)

In addition the data revealed that students at School B had no 'whole family' approach to physical activity compared to their School A counterparts. This was evident in all our group interviews conducted in School B and the following comment taken from one boy illustrates the point: 'I don't do any sports with my parents during the weekends' (Boy/SB).

In addition the data showed that family structure had an effect on adolescents' participation in physical activity, as one girl explained: 'I'm with my dad during the weekends . . . so I go out with friends during the day . . . and then back home early (Girl/ SB).

Students from School B mentioned that they did not receive any positive support from their parents regarding their involvement in physical activity. The carer role of siblings was identified in adolescents within single-parent families. As one student explained: 'I have no time at all (referring to physical activity involvement) I have to go home straight after school to look after my young brother' (Boy/SB).

These students also mentioned that during weekends they spend time with their friends or working part-time. They identify part-time jobs as a constraint affecting their participation in physical activity settings:

I have a part-time job . . . so I spend a lot of my time earning money. . . . if I didn't have to work then maybe I could spend more time doing different activities. (Girl/SB)

Finally none of the students interviewed in School B mentioned that their PE teachers encouraged or motivated them to participate in physical activity or even school sports. Some students stressed the facilitating role of the local community centre which offered opportunities for sport involvement, but even in those cases students noted that the limited activities in the community centre were often a reason to drop out, as two boys in one group interview commented:

. . . we used to do basketball it was also cheap (entry fee) but not any more . . . I mean the activities are the same . . . so we got bored (laughs) . . . instead we hang around in the park or go to the city centre. (Boy/SB)

## Discussion and Conclusions

The socioeconomic status of the students attending the two schools in this study was very different. Students from School A (higher socioeconomic status) had not only

higher reported levels of physical activity participation compared to that of students from School B (lower socioeconomic status) but also opportunities for participation in a wider range of activities. The opportunities available to participate in activities were considerably different, with both groups of students attending different types of activities within and outside the school environment. More specifically students from School A were given a diversity of activities from football, basketball, netball, athletics and cricket within the school and rowing, sailing and skateboarding during the weekends; whereas in School B football or netball were the only options offered by the school. This limited provision in School B was also evidenced during the weekends, with only very few students involved in football. This finding supports studies which suggest that students from higher socioeconomic status (SES) have generally greater participation levels than those from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Duncan et al., 2004; Linder, 2002; Wright et al., 2003).

Emphasis on the importance of physical activity and participation in PE was different in the two schools. In terms of educational context and provision, the findings of this study support the ideas expressed by Wright and Burrows (2006: 277) about 'dividing practices'. These practices contribute to the production of different experiences for secondary school adolescents in sport and physical activity, which 'further differentiate groups on the basis of ability, where differences in ability are demonstrably associated with social class' (Wright and Burrows, 2006: 277). Evidently students in School A were subject to structured provision which endorsed their sporting and physical experiences, which in turn reinforced other forms of capital such as the cultural and economic which denote socioeconomic status (Evans, 2004; Gorely et al., 2003; Shilling, 1993).

Students from School A participated in physical activity on a daily basis either as part of structured provision in school or during the weekends with their parents. On the other hand participation levels of students attending School B were very low even in compulsory setting such as school, especially due to the nature and provision of activities. This reflects comments from Evans (2004) who suggests that structured provisions of physical activity in deprived areas is limited to 'common' activities such as football for boys and netball for girls. In addition, in this study, the perceived expectations and lack of positive reinforcement of teachers was also identified as a factor appearing to influence levels of involvement in physical activity in School B. Financial support was identified as an incentive for participation in students from School A and a reason for non-participation in students from School B. The parents of students attending School A paid for memberships of local clubs and gym facilities where very often participation was a whole family event. Lack of money prevented students from School B from attending leisure centres and sports clubs.

School provision and residential location were also factors influencing participation. Students attending School B lived in an area where very few opportunities existed for physical activity participation, even though they were 'hanging around' local parks with their friends and peers. Although there was a community centre, the students perceived the choice of activities offered as very restrictive. The residential area of students attending School A was a positive factor in participation since there

was good provision of settings for formal (leisure centres and sports club) and informal (countryside for walks) physical activity participation during the weekends.

Motivation was a very important factor, with parents playing a central role in their children's choice of activities in School A, whereas peer approval was the main factor influencing physical activity involvement in School B. Students from School A had much more parental influence and motivation to participate in physical activity settings than students in School B. Linder (2002) suggests that parents who show interest in their children's activity levels will increase the likelihood of their children's prolonged involvement in physical activity. The study supports the view that active involvement in family activities during the weekends is a significant way of incorporating physical activity into the life of families with high SES (Wright et al., 2003). The parental 'cultural', 'physical' and 'economic' capital (social class characteristics) was mirrored in their children's participation in physical activities. Parents with high SES influenced their children's identities through the utilization of several activities especially during the weekend. Participation in physical activities from high SES families was seen as an everyday 'task' (Macdonald et al., 2004) in the form of transport to sporting events and leisure/sports clubs as well as financial support. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of intergenerational 'habitus' was evident in this study. More specifically, levels of parental involvement in physical activity was reflected in their children's participation and choices with 'consumption' of activities 'appropriate' to their social class. Furthermore, parents from high SES invested time and effort on *elite* activities to maximize the production and conversion of their children's physical capital.

With regard to parental support, this study suggests that family structure plays an important role in shaping habits and taste for physical activities. Adolescents from School B had a greater freedom in decision-making when in single-parent families or when both parents worked full time. It was evident, however, that adolescents from single-parent families had more limited experiences of physical activity either because of responsibilities as carers for younger siblings or because of lack of finance to support involvement in structured physical activity contexts. This supports findings from Macdonald et al. (2004) who agree that single-parent and lower socioeconomic families are disadvantaged in supporting children's involvement in junior sport, and thus changing household structures have the potential to significantly impact upon children's lifestyles, habitus and physical activity patterns.

This study stresses the need for better and wider provision of structured physical activity in schools in economically deprived areas to compensate for lower participation levels in physical activity outside school. In this study, PE and school sport provision in deprived areas was problematic, supporting research evidence that current forms and delivery of schools' PE programmes are less than effective and that students from deprived areas are under-represented in community-based sports clubs (Kirk, 2005). This could further confirm that educational inequalities still exist, inequalities that are being reinforced by the process and delivery of PE in schools. It seems that PE is still not able to address issues related to social class and to provide equal experiences to students regardless of their socioeconomic background, since it

is extremely difficult for PE to 'countervail against wider social processes, of which social class continues to be a prominent feature' (Green et al., 2005: 193).

The purpose of this study was to provide some further insights into the area of social class and adolescents' participation in school sport and physical activity. Although the data used in this study were generated from a relatively small group of adolescents attending two secondary schools in the UK, it provides further evidence of the experiences, beliefs, behaviours and everyday routines of adolescents which shape their values, identities and dispositions through their discursive practices which according to this study reinforce social inequalities. The use of the 'body' by the students in this study reflected their *physical*, *cultural* and *economic* capital, characteristics of someone's social class. Adolescents with low SES viewed their 'body' in an instrumental way (Shilling, 1993) as a means to an end (practices predominantly taking place in an improvised environment); whereas adolescents with high SES viewed the 'body' as an end in itself, maximizing acquisition of physical capital through maintaining 'tone' and 'fitness' by engaging in health enhancing, moderate to vigorous physical activities (Shilling, 1993; Wright, 2000).

We propose that a more focused approach is needed to improve the quality of PE and school sport in deprived areas since school could be the only setting in which some students experience physical activity. PE and school sport should provide a diversity of activities to meet the needs and interests of students by establishing better links with sports/leisure and community clubs (Green et al., 2005; Kirk, 2005). A motivating teaching and coaching climate for children could be enhanced by establishing better links between school and community and encouraging better planning and design of localities to become more activity friendly. Future studies in the area of physical activity participation should allow adolescents to express their views and should empower them to be active agents in the design of attractive physical activity choices within and out of the school environment. The 'whole family' approach to physical activity should be further investigated with particular reference to discourses that influence participation by students from families in deprived areas.

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## Résumé

### Etude de l'impact des facteurs sociaux et environnementaux sur la participation des adolescents aux activités physiques

Cette étude examine les facteurs sociaux qui influencent la participation des jeunes aux activités physiques scolaires et extrascolaires. Cinquante-deux adolescents de seize ans, issus d'environnement socio-économiques différents et scolarisés dans un collège de banlieue et un collège de centre ville dans le Midlands (UK) ont participé à cette étude. Les entretiens en groupe avaient pour objectif de permettre l'identification de leurs perceptions de l'activité physique et des contraintes qu'ils avaient éprouvées. Les résultats de notre étude révèlent que l'engagement dans une activité physique est lié à la classe sociale d'appartenance, à l'environnement familial et au statut économique. Le niveau de participation des élèves issus des classes socio-économiques inférieures a été moindre en comparaison de celui des élèves issus des classes socio-économiques plus élevées. En outre, le capital culturel, physique et économique des élèves étaient des facteurs saillants de l'engagement pérenne des élèves dans des activités physiques. Cette étude souligne la nécessité de mettre en place des activités physiques plus structurées dans les écoles des secteurs économiquement défavorisés pour contrebalancer les faibles niveaux de participation.

## Resumen

### Estudio de los factores sociales y ambientales que afectan a la participación de los adolescentes en actividades físicas

El presente estudio examina los factores sociales que influyen en la participación de los jóvenes en actividades deportivas dentro y fuera del centro educativo. Cincuenta y dos adolescentes de dieciséis años de edad, procedentes de distintos medios socioeconómicos y estudiantes de un instituto situado en una zona residencial y de otro situado en un barrio céntrico de la región central del Reino Unido, participaron en entrevistas de grupo en las que se estudiaban sus percepciones sobre las actividades físicas y las limitaciones que habían experimentado. El estudio muestra que la implicación en actividades físicas está ligada a la clase social de los estudiantes, a su ambiente familiar y a su estatus económico. El nivel de participación de los estudiantes procedentes de medios socioeconómicos más bajos era limitado en comparación con el de sus homólogos de mayor nivel socioeconómico. Además,

el bagaje 'cultural', 'físico' y 'económico' de los adolescentes resultó ser un factor muy destacable en su implicación en actividades físicas. El estudio subraya la necesidad de proporcionar actividades físicas más y mejor estructuradas en los centros educativos de las zonas económicamente marginadas para compensar sus bajos niveles de participación.

## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Untersuchung sozialer und umweltbedingter Faktoren, die die Beteiligung Heranwachsender an körperlichen Aktivitäten beeinflussen**

Diese Studie untersucht die sozialen Faktoren, die die Beteiligung junger Leute an schulischen und ausserschulischen körperlichen Aktivitäten beeinflussen. Zweiundfünfzig sechzehnjährige Jugendliche mit unterschiedlichem sozialökonomischem Hintergrund aus einer Vorstadt- und einer Innenstadtsekundarschule in den Midlands, UK, nahmen an Gruppenbefragungen teil, die ihre Ansichten über körperliche Aktivitäten untersuchten, und die Einschränkungen, die sie dabei erfahren hatten. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass die Beteiligung an körperlichen Aktivitäten mit der sozialen Klassenzugehörigkeit der Schüler; mit ihrem häuslichen Umfeld und mit ihrem ökonomischen Status zusammenhängt. Das Ausmass der Beteiligung von Schülern mit niedrigerem sozioökonomischem Hintergrund war im Vergleich zu Kollegen mit höherem sozioökonomischem Niveau eingeschränkt. Überdies waren das 'kulturelle', 'körperliche' und 'ökonomische' Kapital wirksame Faktoren ihrer Beteiligung in Bereichen körperlicher Aktivitäten. Die Studie unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit besserer und breiter angelegter Angebote strukturierter körperlicher Aktivitäten in Schulen in ökonomisch ärmeren Gegenden um die niedrigeren Beteiligungsraten auszugleichen.

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