**What is recognised as ability in physical education? A systematic appraisal of how ability and ability differences are socially constructed within mainstream secondary school physical education**

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**Introduction**

As an ‘explicit discourse of the syllabus’ (Hay, 2008: 154) in Queensland, Australia (Queensland Studies Authority, (QSA) 2004; 2010: 4) and Sweden (Skolverket, 2002: 1), ‘ability’, as Evans and Davies (2004) remark, ‘has come to be understood by policy makers, politicians and practitioners’ (p. 6) as ‘proxy for common sense notions of intelligence’ (Demaine, 2001: 2). Indeed, Hay (2005) suggested that the prevailing view of ability which circulates in schools, PE and sport appears to be ingrained in the ‘positive eugenic perspective’ (p. 44). In this perspective ability is largely understood as an inherent and relatively immutable capacity, amendable to varying degrees by interventions such as training regimes (Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2008) and education (Hay, 2011). Differences in achievement are assumed to be an inevitable consequence of natural variations in ability and an indication of motivation or effort (Hart, 1998). In this regard, a lack of predisposed ability acts as a legitimate justification for a lack of achievement in schools and PE. The traditional eugenic understanding is, however, problematic in that this position abstracts the analysis of other possible factors (e.g. teachers’ beliefs about ability) that generate differential, and in some cases constrain student achievement in PE.

**An alternative (re)interpretation of ability**

In seeking to challenge the traditional eugenic understanding and ‘explore what ability means and how it is configured’ (Evans, 2004: 99) in PE, Evans (2004) proposed an alternative socially constructed (re)conceptualisation of ability. Drawing on the conceptual tools (habitus and field) of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as a theoretical grounding for his ability proposition, Evans suggested that an individuals embodied dispositions can function as capital and thus be ‘perceived as abilities when defined relationally with reference to attitudes, values and mores prevailing within a discursive field’ (p. 100). In other words, an individual may be conceived of as able if their resources (e.g. personal characteristics) which are ‘collected, constituted and employed through habitus’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a: 16) are recognised and/or desirable to those who are powerful contributors (e.g. PE teachers) to the PE field. In this regard, ‘the more symmetry between the characteristics of one’s habitus and the values that prevail within a field, the more an individual is recognised as possessing ability within that field’ (Hay, 2005: 47). Importantly, Hay (2005; 2011) reminds us that Evans’ alternative perspective on ability does not deny that ‘human genetic variation exists’ (Hay, 2005: 46) but ‘promotes an awareness of the constituting elements of fields in which ability recognition occurs, and the effects of field practices on one’s value (or ability) in the field’ (p. 94). Indeed, by considering ability as a social construct (configured in part by agents operating in social fields) we are better placed to recognise that the opportunities students are provided to develop their abilities (for example), rather than ‘ability’ alone is just as significant in explaining achievement/underachievement in PE and schools. To comprehend Evans’ alternative view of ability it is necessary to consider further Bourdieu’s three central analytical concepts (habitus, capital and field).

**Habitus**

Habitus is a term used by Bourdieu (1990) to describe the deep-seated bodily dispositions of a person that are evident as sets of ideals, beliefs, attitudes, tastes and inclinations etc. The dispositions that make up a person’s habitus are socially constructed, arising out of early childhood socialisation (upbringing); reflective of an individual’s social location and histories (e.g. class identity), and a product of a person’s interactions with agents in social contexts (e.g. family, schools and peers) (Macdonald, 1990; Hay, 2005). Significantly, habitus is embodied and therefore manifest in a person’s actions, appearance, ways of moving and talking, and bodily deportment (mode of conduct and behaviour) (Bourdieu, 1990; Hay, 2011). As Hay and Macdonald (2010a) propose ‘it is these elements of a person’s being that contribute to their categorising and positioning as able (or degrees thereof) depending on whether and how the elements of an individual’s dispositions are valued in a field of operation’ (p. 5).

**Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) identified three principal forms of capital; economic, cultural and social capital. In broad terms economic capital refers to one’s wealth or acquisition of money. Social capital can be understood as one’s network of relationships with others (in a field) that would enable the individual to ‘maximise their opportunities to acquire, invest in and trade other capitals’ (Redelius & Hay, 2009: 276). Cultural capital refers to one’s familiarity with the prevailing culture in a particular social context (Bourdieu, 1986). More specifically, as Hay (2011) elucidates, ‘Bourdieu explained that cultural capital could be realised in three forms; the embodied state (dispositions in the mind and body, that is, how one acts and looks); the objectified state (the possession of culturally valued goods); and in the institutionalised state (largely in the form of educational qualifications’ (p. 93). In addition, although Bourdieu referred to embodied or physical capital under the heading of cultural capital, Shilling (1991) contended that the ‘physical is too important to be seen merely as a subdivision of cultural capital’ (p. 654). Shilling went on to argue that it is possible to view the body as possessing physical capital; encompassing body size, shape, physique, appearance and performance; the production of which refers to the ways bodies are afforded symbolic value in various social fields (Shilling, 1991).

The significance of Bourdieu’s concepts of capital (specifically physical capital) for this appraisal is in its exchange or conversion value. In essence of Evan’s (re)conceptualisation of ability for example, valued ‘physical appearance (viewed as embodied cultural capital) can be traded for the capital/s of high ability recognition’ (Hay, 2011: 93), and then for the institutional cultural capital of high achievement grades in the field of PE (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a). In this regard, Bourdieu’s (1986) conception of the body as a bearer of symbolic value (or capital) is particularly valuable for considering how the resources or capital/s that one possesses are ‘privileged, marginalised, traded and acquired’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a: 5) within fields such as PE.

**Field**

Importantly, one’s habitus and possession of capital does not exist and function except in relation to a particular social ‘field’ (Bourdieu, 1990). According to Hay (2005):

“A field is a site in which the boundaries and internal social structures of that context are defined by sets of rules, guidelines, expectations and values. It is a social arena of practices (like pedagogy and assessment in a PE class) and relationships (e.g. between teachers and students) in which certain values and beliefs (e.g. about ability) are situated, consolidated and imposed on people” (p. 46).

Some of the structuring (or defining) elements of educational fields are overt (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a), these may include the syllabus, school work programmes and assessment practices (Hay, 2005). Additionally, other defining features of educational fields, such as teacher’s beliefs and expectations about ability (for example) are ‘less overt or readily observable but no less powerful influences on the constitution of a field’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a: 4). It is these defining features of fields which acknowledge and give value to the personal resources (e.g. economic, cultural and social) that may operate as, and be allocated as capital within that context (field) (Hay, 2011). It follows that particular student resources have more capital worth than others within the field of PE. For example, students who demonstrate dispositions similar to those established by the structuring features of the field are more likely to be recognised as able, and in turn accumulate other forms of capital. Accordingly, although we all have varying degrees of capital, important differences arise not so much in the amounts of capital one possesses, but how valuable they prove to be in particular social fields.

**Macro influences: Sporting dominance**

Decisively, the structure of educational fields are constituted not only by the practices of those in the micro context of the classroom (e.g. teachers), but also by those located at the macro context (e.g. curriculum and policy writers) (Hunter, 2004). Any analysis of ability in PE must therefore concern itself with the macro level discourses that constitute the field (e.g. sport and competition) (Wright, 1996). Such discourses are not only likely to shape, support and/or impede the actions of teachers in PE but are also likely to provide some indication of how ability may be conceptualised in the subject (Hay, 2008). As Evans (2004) remarks:

“We should ask not only how ‘ability’ is configured within the practices that define PE but how thinking about ‘ability’ as teachers is influenced by the knowledge/s that define our fields, how it is encoded by the interests of sport and how physical capital is reflected, reproduced and perhaps reconfigured and challenged in schools” (p. 104).

Although the actions and expectations of teachers in the localised PE context are likely to have a powerful influence on the nature of resources that operate as capital in the PE field, our analysis acknowledges that these expectations (e.g. about ability) are explicitly and subtly framed by wider discourses of sport and the ‘official curriculum guidelines and associated expectations of educational systems’ (Penney & Hay, 2008: 434).

In Queensland, Australia and Sweden performance-based sport and competitive team games invariably constitute much of the provision in PE (Quennerstedt, 2006). The strong sporting emphasis which pervades much of the PE curriculum has, however, been criticised by numerous writers (e.g. Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Penney, 2006; 2007) for ‘privileging, legitimating and reproducing the dominance of discourses of performance in sport’ (Penney, 2006: 568). Indeed, the fundamental attributes necessary for competent performance in these curriculum activities are those largely constructed around conventional masculine dispositions of competition and aggression. With the subject content of the Queensland Senior PE curriculum narrowly defined around performance-based team activities, Wright and Burrows (2006) warn of the danger that the attributes recognised as physical abilities, and thus assigned value in the PE field will be those associated with the ideologies of hegemonic masculinity. Is this currently the case in PE space? Does a narrow focus on performance in sport limit those who can be deemed ‘able’ in PE? Moreover, with sport and more specifically traditional team games situated at the apex of the PE curriculum (Green, 2002), if the activities offered in the curriculum do influence the nature of abilities in the PE field, what are the achievement implications for student’s possessing abilities in sports or physical activities which are excluded from the PE curriculum?

Drawing on the conception of ability proposed by Evans, this paper critically appraises the processes of ability construction within the field of PE. More specifically, the paper addresses the following questions:

1) How is ability socially constructed (conceived of and re/produced) in PE?

2) ‘How are the abilities of boys and girls differently configured and dis/advantaged’ (Evans, Rich, Allwood & Davies, 2007: 56) through teachers’ ability conceptions in PE?

3) How do conceptualisations of ability in PE influence students’ experiences, opportunities for learning and potential achievement in the subject?

4) How do particular discourses such as sport, and the PE syllabus, influence the construction of ability/ies in PE?

**Conducting the appraisal**

**Methodology**

Before considering the methodological detail it would be appropriate to clarify and distinguish between systematic review and systematic appraisal. A systematic review is a research methodology subject to the same validity and reliability requirements as any other. Rather simplistically, Bronson and Davis, (2012) suggest that a systematic review is a comprehensive summary of ‘research to inform practice and policy decisions’ (p. 6). Not differing significantly, Torgerson (2003) notes that systematic reviews contribute towards establishing ‘what works’, to provide evidence of further research requirements, and to inform policy and professional practice. Petticrew and Roberts, (2006) add that systematic reviews are of use in identifying areas that have little or no research history. Perhaps more importantly, Petticrew and Roberts, (2006) also note that systematic reviews flag up areas where ‘spurious certainty abounds. These are areas where we think we know more than we do, but where in reality there is little convincing evidence to support our beliefs’ (p. 2). For example, we may believe that PE is totally inclusive and does not discriminate on grounds of gender and/or ability. A systematic review may disabuse us of those beliefs, confirm them or not support either argument.

The process undertaken and presented in this paper is, however, a systematic ‘appraisal’. Although systematic reviews and appraisals share crucial commonalities there are a small number of distinctions. The main difference between a systematic review and an appraisal is one of scale. Systematic reviews tend to be conducted by a team of researchers who have resources to call upon in their attempts to locate all possible material on a particular topic. The appraisal is more often conducted by a single researcher whose resource is only his/her time and only the most relevant texts are selected by stringent inclusion/exclusion criteria. We refer to this work as an appraisal rather than a review. As the ‘literature’ discusses ‘reviews’, and the authors here are producing an appraisal, it must be noted that ‘appraisal’ and ‘review’ may be used interchangeably at times.

**Sources and search criteria**

Initial electronic database searches were directed by the use of specific key words (ability, social construction and PE) extracted from the research question, which allowed for the main concepts of this appraisal to be investigated; a process which also led to the formulation of the scope for the appraisal. The study selection criteria were used to identify primary studies that provided specific and direct evidence about the research questions (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Mindful that key words and concepts can vary among both databases and countries, in developing a search strategy we inculcated ‘skill’ and ‘talent’ (as synonyms of ability) into the search strategies.

In order to identify relevant research, systematic searches were conducted in eight major electronic databases and seven electronic journals (see figure 1). A highly sensitive database search strategy combining the three conceptual components from the research question (social construction, PE, ability and the synonyms talent and skill) proceeded and was translated into the major electronic databases and journals. It is important to note that the development of the search strategy was iterative. It became clear throughout the search process that studies which considered the social construction of ability were grounded in Evan’s (2004) agenda setting paper and utilised Bourdieu’s theories as a framework. It was thus decided to use ‘Evans (2004)’ and ‘Bourdieu’ as additional key terms for the search strategy. Reference lists of pertinent retrieved articles were also scanned for additional relevant publications, using the same inclusion criteria. Finally, specific efforts were made to identify grey literature (i.e. literature that has not been formally published) via an electronic database that records details of unpublished reports: System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe (SIGLE).

**Selection criteria**

The process of applying stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria to potentially useful studies is carried out within a review as a measure of quality control (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). These criteria are used to allow the researcher to narrow the focus of the search strategies to ensure that only those studies which could be used to answer the research question are reviewed (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). As this appraisal was concerned with how ability is configured within the field of ‘PE’ intervention studies which focussed on physical activity beyond the PE context (e.g. with coaches) and in Universities were excluded. Date restrictions were also applied to the inclusion criteria. Studies which pre-dated 2004 were excluded on the basis that research on the social construction of ability is grounded in Evan’s (2004) agenda setting paper. Lastly studies were eligible for inclusion if their theoretical framework drew upon Bourdieu’s conceptual tools (habitus, capital and field). There was no limitation of study by country of origin.

**Results**

The search strategy yielded thirty-seven references of possible relevance. Once titles, and where obtainable, abstracts were assessed, hard copies of 21 papers were retrieved and examined in detail. From the original thirty-seven papers generated seven met the criteria for inclusion (see figure 1). Individual contact (via e-mail) was additionally made with four authors of papers which had met the inclusion criteria to identify additional published and unpublished references. This process generated a further two articles (see figure 1). In total nine studies were included.

(Insert figure 1 here)

**Extraction**

Following the identification of a definable set of studies, and to identify key messages and themes which permeated the data-set, a dual process of deductive and inductive thematic analysis took place. Principally, we identified the key components of our stated research focus (ability, gendered ability, student experiences and curriculum) as four overarching themes (see table 1). We anticipated that such an approach would make possible the identification of important and relevant aspects of the data-set which we could draw upon to address our specific research questions. The findings of the included papers were read and reread several times. Subsequently, information (relevant to each theme) was extracted directly from the selected articles and aggregated to the structured summary table under the identified theme. This process made possible the comparison and synthesis of the data-set. In addition, mindful that our pre-conceived categories might be inadequate for revealing the nature and/or intricacies of the social construction of ability emanating from the studies, we used inductive thematic analysis to enable themes to arise directly from the data. The results of the included papers were broken down, thoroughly analysed and rigorously read multiple times to identify major themes, patterns and categories. Highlighter pens were used to indicate potential patterns, relationships and inconsistencies within and across the data set. Once again, data were extracted from the studies and aggregated to table 1. Data extraction was done by one author and cross checked by the other two other authors. Any discrepancies between the three authors were resolved by consensus. The data extraction form itself thus does not contain a synthesis of the articles; rather the synthesis draws on the tables.

**Study characteristics**

The details of the study designs, context and participants are described in table 1. The data used to inform this appraisal has been drawn from studies which focus on the social construction of ability in Queensland, Australia and to a lesser extent Sweden. Importantly, Queensland, Australia and Sweden rather than the international context is therefore the focus of this report. The studies share important methodological characteristics. For the most part a ‘few’ researchers have considered how a ‘small’ number of ‘male’ PE teachers socially construct ability within ‘secondary’ school PE. A relatively lesser emphasis is given to female teachers on the constitution of the field (Hay, 2008) and primary and middle schools where significant identity development and social construction around ability might also occur. In this regard, it could be argued that a dearth of critical substantive research on the social construction of ability points to a need for more empirical work, rather than spotlighting the small amount of work that does exist. This is a reasonable summation; however, there is also a case to be made for bringing together as much existing data as possible to determine what is already known and what remains to be learned. The latter position informs this appraisal. In this regard, we suggest that more teachers and a balance of gender, in addition to primary and secondary schools might provide broader perspectives on the social construction of ability in PE.

(Insert table 1 here)

**Summary of papers**

**The ‘good student’ in PE**

According to research conducted by Hunter (2004), ‘the discursive space of the good student in PE is shaped by characteristics of competence, competition, displays of skill, fitness and aggression within a context of PE as sport' (p. 181). Although consistently identified by teachers as the most significant form of capital for high grades in Hunter (2004); Hay and lisahunter (2006) and Hay and Macdonald’s (2010a; 2010b) studies, Hay and Macdonald (2010a) observed that the prominence of one’s physical capital (e.g. competitive displays of performance) was not sufficient in itself to ‘warrant high ability identification or guarantee achievement’ (Hay, 2008: 262) within PE. Previous displays of competency in fields beyond, but similar to the activities in PE (e.g. sporting achievements in a rugby team) also served as key symbolic capital that marked students as able in teachers’ assessment and grading regimes (Hay, 2008). Hay and Macdonald, (2010a: 9) however, accentuated that the ‘decisive factors in the recognition of ability’ in PE were not confined to aspects of performance alone. Students could also accrue cultural capital in PE if they demonstrated their capacities in field valued ways, such as displaying effort and enthusiasm (affective characteristics) and a desire to achieve (dispositional actions) (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a). Less physically ‘able’ students could also achieve in the subject through conformity and building relationships with teachers in the PE field.

**Gender and ability**

The value placed upon the sporting body in the contexts of the studies analysed served to establish the pre-eminence of physical capital as the most valued resource for recognition as able in the social field. Notably, the highly regarded bodily practices that operated as physical capital in the field (e.g. competitive and aggressive dispositions) are visibly congruous with traditional and stereotypical ideas of hegemonic masculinity (Redelius et al., 2009), and run precisely counter to the cultural conception of what it means to be stereotypically female (Brown & Rich, 2002). This follows Koca, Atencios and Demirhan’s (2009) understanding that ‘social fields are hierarchically organised according to the distinctive ways in which they create, support and reward certain forms of cultural capital over others’ (p. 57). By considering ability through such narrowly conceived dispositions, Hay and lisahunter (2006) remind us that ‘certain students (particularly females) are already marginalized according to their habitus, even with valuable learning having taken place’ (p. 309). As Evans et al. (2007) articulate; ‘years of socialisation, differential resourcing and participation have predisposed male and female students with (different) skills and abilities necessary for proficient performance in particular activities’ (p. 62). Female and male bodies are bearers of differential value. Accordingly, the physical capital and propensities of many (but not all) female students in the context of this paper ultimately had less exchange value than their male counterparts and as such had important implications for their ability to convert physical capital into symbolic and cultural capital.

Teachers’ perceptions of male and female students’ abilities also appeared to be informed by gendered assumptions (Cassidy et al., 2008). Broad consensus existed among teachers in Hay and lisahunter’s (2006) and Hay and Macdonald’s (2010b) studies that male students were more able in the physical realm; supposedly indicated by their hard work and aggression, and females in the academic. For the female students in particular their gender was a ‘liability in the process of ability construction’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010b: 283), as the expectation of their relatively inferior physical capacities immediately undermined their ability identification, and thus achievement possibilities, in a field where physical abilities are exalted over academic abilities (e.g. thinking skills) (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a).

For female students the expression of ability and accrual of high levels of institutional cultural capital in the PE field required their compensatory investment in the subject in two potential ways (Hay & Macdonald, 2010b). Female students were consistently identified as able if they possessed considerable physical and cultural resources (transferable as physical capital) in the form of high levels of reputation in sports beyond but comparable to the hegemonic order of the PE field (Hay, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010b). Moreover, the demonstration of dispositions and behaviours (e.g. performance of hegemonic masculinity) which deviate from stereotypical norms of emphasised femininity (e.g. being passive and non-aggressive) legitimated one’s capital accrual and identification as a good student in the field (Hunter, 2004).

A point of particular importance therefore in the studies analysed is that men/boys are stereotypically aggressive and competitive – these attributes almost being the norm. So what does a women/girl do when aggression and competitiveness are called for, when these are not stereotypically characteristic female traits, when women tend to be cooperative and supportive? Although the studies used to inform this appraisal do not focus directly on the issue, the currency afforded to hegemonic masculinity in the PE field is likely to create particular struggles for many female students. Many girls perhaps find themselves in an impasse, that in order to be recognised as able as far as the teacher is concerned they need to transcend the conventional ‘heterosexual logic of female/femininity’ (Clarke, 2002: 88) and demonstrate stereotypical masculine dispositions (e.g. aggressiveness), however, to succeed in terms of their male and female classmates they (perhaps) need to confirm their femininity by being non-aggressive (Cockerhill & Hardy, 1987). Brown and Rich (2002) remind us that in PE; those who fail to act in appropriate feminine ways are seen as deviant (not normal) and are vulnerable to the pejorative label lesbian applied from female peers and male counterparts. In this regard, many girls have to choose between ‘two polarised identities’ (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; 661). A girl can contravene the traditional gender boundaries (e.g. be aggressive and assertive), be seen as able by the teacher, but simultaneously be vulnerable to ridicule by their peers, or can take up a subordinated feminised position (e.g. be passive and seen as low ability) but at the same time preserve their socially acceptable heterosexual feminine identity. As Cockburn and Clarke (2002) adroitly remark ‘the result is a paradox, a double standard to which girls are subjected’ (p. 661). Accordingly, we begin to see how the achievement potential of (some) girls in PE are circumscribed by the social construction of femininity. Although teachers are key figures in the definition of resources that operate as capital in the field, Bourdieu’s (1990) emphasis on relationships to the constitution of the field provides an important basis for interpreting and acknowledging the role of peers in mediating and regulating understandings of ability within the PE context.

**Bringing ‘sufficient’ capital to the context**

Consistently, across the studies (Hay & lisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2008; 2010a; 2010b), Hay and Macdonald (2010a) observed that the ‘dispositions of the students categorised as low ability were similar to those of the high ability students’ (p. 11). However, through engagement with sport beyond the PE context (a defining feature of the good student), the high ability students had brought field valued physical capital (e.g. sporting reputation) to the ‘performance context to ensure high ability recognition’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a: 9). The transaction condition (bringing sufficient capital to the field) disregards that many students, through their ‘social and cultural circumstances and histories’ (Koca et al., 2009: 56), may not have had access to the valued physical and cultural capital required for ability identification in PE (Evans & Davies, 2010). Many students in the absence of such capital, and perhaps already at an educational disadvantage begin marginalised in the field (Hay, 2008), and are therefore likely to be rendered low ability. Invariably, teachers’ ‘pedagogic initiative’ (Hay, 2008: 165) in Hay and lisahunter (2006); Redelius and Hay (2009) and Hay and Macdonald’s (2008; 2010a) research was towards those students who already possessed the valued physical and dispositional attributes, as opposed to making a positive difference to the abilities of all students in the field. Hay (2008) supposed that teachers’ lack of emphasis on developing the achievement possibilities of those without valued capital was compounded by their belief in the immutability of ability. As a result the teachers resigned themselves to the limited effect they could have on students’ capacities and so chose not to invest effort in trying (Redelius & Hay, 2009). Many students were therefore categorized as unable ‘without any effort to discover their inherent strengths’ (Hart, 1998: 158). Accordingly, Hay (2008) argues, ‘bringing capital to the PE context was fundamental, in that the recognition process tended to depend on what a student already possessed rather than what the field and the teachers operating within it could provide students with to develop their abilities’ (p. 262). In this regard, the findings discussed above support Evan’s (2004) proposition that ‘schools’ (and from the evidence presented in this appraisal) ‘teachers’ ‘build on and reproduce rather than produce and develop ability’ (p. 99).

**Privileged access in the field**

Bourdieu (1986) noted that the ‘transaction or conversion possibilities of capital depends on the nature and volume of the capital that one possesses and the opportunities for the transaction to occur’ (p. 243). In accordance, Hay and Macdonald (2008) determined that the resources a student possesses only have ‘capital worth and possible effect if they are on display and acknowledged by the most powerful agents in a field’ (Redelius & Hay, 2009: 287). In doing so Hay (2008) established that a student’s access to the appropriate relational connection of the field was a necessary transaction condition for ‘rendering their physical, dispositional and attitudinal resources as capital in the field’ (p. 308). However, by engaging with only those students who embodied the dispositions of the good student (mostly male students), and those perceived as naturally able, the teachers in Hunter’s, (2004) and Hay and Macdonald’s (2010a) research ‘positionally marginalised and strategically isolated’ (Hunter, 2004: 181) those ‘less able’ and less motivated students in the field. Whereas those students who possessed field valued capital were positioned in close proximity to the teacher and had privileged access to the relational connection of the field, the ‘less able’ students had restricted access to this relational connection, critical for ability recognition. The opportunities to accrue capital in terms of ability identification were thus not the same for all students in the field. In this regard, ‘low ability’ students had limited (if existent at all) opportunities to receive considerable institutional cultural capital as only a minority of students (predominantly competitive males) had ‘legitimate access to the required cultural opportunities’ (Redelius & Hay, 2009: 287) (operating as a form of social capital) in which the recognition of a students’ attributes could be realised (Hay, 2008).

**Alienation**

The lack of opportunities provided for those ‘less able’ students to develop their abilities created a situation in which many students struggled ‘simply to avoid failure than strive for success’ (Robinson, 1990: 30). In accordance, Koca et al. (2009) noted that for a significant number of student’s ‘feelings of inadequacy compromised any desire to participate in PE’ (p. 64). Indeed, ‘rather than have their ability (or lack of) ability exposed’ (Hay and lisahunter, 2006: 303) when investing in effort, the subordinated male and female students adopted a range of self-serving coping strategies to resist, and avoid the negative social consequences they experienced through participation in the field. Such responses included engaging in off task behaviour, feigning injury and ‘sitting out of PE altogether’ (Hunter, 2004: 187), to remain anonymous and avert the negative effects they experienced in the dominant space. However, by creating ‘pockets of resistance’ (Hunter. 2004: 180), the students were relegated to labels such as ‘lacking an appropriate work ethic’ (Hay & lisahunter, 2006: 307), and were at further risk of being marginalised and categorised as unable in a field which emphasises effort and behaviour. Without regard for the conditions that led to the lack of involvement of the students (e.g. the lack of opportunities afforded to them to develop their abilities), these students were categorised as disinterested, non-compliant and lacking ability as they displayed neither the right form of physical capital (e.g. competitiveness), nor the necessary mode of display (e.g. effort and enthusiasm) (Hay, 2008).

**Fabricating ability to negotiate access to the field**

Whereas some students challenged the discursive requirements of the good student and were ‘relegated to labels such as ‘behaviour problems’ (Hay & lisahunter, 2006: 309), many students (unable to perceive a place for their abilities in PE) responded to the exigencies of the good student and attempted to invest in (some) social capital through (for example) attempting to forge positive relationships with the teachers (Hay & lisahunter, 2006). Other students in an endeavour to accrue some physical capital accepted the limitations of their own abilities (e.g. grace and poise) and chose to align their capacities to the hegemonic order of the field (e.g. acting aggressively and competitively); aptitudes which (for example) run counter to their existing abilities and preferred modes of engagement (e.g. being a team player). The students who ‘adhere to the discursive rules of the field’ (Hay & lisahunter, 2006: 307) and acknowledge the ‘unimportance of their own abilities’ (Evans & Penney, 2008: 42) create achievement possibilities through the discourses of the field emphasising compliance and conformity. In this regard, for many students ‘learning how to act’ (Wellard, 2006: 115) and adapt (rather than question) was more important for accessing the opportunities on offer in the field, than exhibiting the abilities that they possessed.

**Structuring elements of the field: the PE curriculum and syllabus**

Evans, (2004) supposed that PE’s ‘relations with sport may have altered understandings of how ability, educability and educe are recognised, conceptualised, cultivated and materialised in the actions of teachers in PE’ (p. 97). Although not possible to establish whether PE’s relations with sport had ‘altered’ understandings of ability in the subject (Hay, 2008), it is clear that the culture of the Swedish and Queensland Senior PE curriculum had a significant bearing on the nature of resources which operated as capital in the field. For example, the physical capital/s awarded symbolic value in PE (e.g. competitive and aggressive physicality) is noticeably congruent with the curriculum’s association with hegemonic masculinity, and the attributes required for successful performance in the sporting activities that constitute much of contemporary PE programmes in Queensland, Australia and Sweden.

Given that the configuration of abilities through the organisation and content of the PE curriculum was a recurring theme in a number of studies (e.g. Hay & lisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a; 2010b), and the ‘importance of the syllabus to expectations of curriculum enactment and student assessment’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a: 8), one would anticipate that the syllabus guidelines would be important factors in the structuring of the PE field (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a). The privileging of physical capital and a relative absence of reference to the written component of the course (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a) was, however, ‘substantially different’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2008: 163) from the explicit statements of the Queensland Senior PE syllabus which emphasises ‘doing’ and ‘thinking’ as equally dependent (as expressed in the notion of intelligent performance) (Hay, 2008). To reiterate this point: ‘Intelligent performance involves rational and creative thought at a high level of cognitive functioning and engages students, not only as performers but also as analysts, planners and critics in, about and through physical activity’ (QSA, 2004: 1). Indeed, the conception of ability in PE (e.g. the good student), as Hay (2008) observes ‘marginalised prominent proportions of the attributes described in the syllabus’ (p. 163). These include, for example: knowledge and understanding about ‘how the body works’ (Skolverket, 2002: 1) and the ‘ability’ to ‘analyse and apply performance strategies in groups and teams’ (QSA, 2010: 4), Moreover, the symbolic capital (the abilities ascribed value) of PE included ‘dispositional and attitudinal characteristics’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010a: 9) (e.g. motivation and enthusiasm) which are not overtly articulated within the PE syllabus. These findings certainly suggest that the teacher’s assessment regimes, values, beliefs, and expectations (about ability, for example), were key influences on the nature of the field. The resources valued and (re)produced as capital in the PE fields, were therefore powerfully constituted by both the culture of PE as sport and made formal through less tangible contributors to the field (Hay, 2005; 2008), including for example, teacher’s understandings and comprehensions of ability.

From the commentary presented it seems that the dominant value within the field of PE are static and do not become localised according to context, gender composition or the nature of the activity. The field of PE may vary with changes to the nature of the movement form (e.g. dance or health related fitness). Perhaps then the physical capital valued in these other fields has potential to vary with the nature of activity undertaken as well as the capital available in the setting. This highlights how a focus on team sports as a basis to the curriculum in PE is so problematic. What might happen in the spaces around (for example) teaching ‘games for understanding’? Are teachers’ perceptions and definitions of ability different? (e.g. the skilful player is defined through strategy and team play as much as aggression and competitiveness). We see research in these areas as having an important contribution to make to the development of theoretical and empirical underpinnings that have the capacity to inform a more holistic explication of the processes of ability construction within and across the activity fields of PE.

**Conclusion**

The socially privileged definitions of the good student in PE highlights how narrow interpretations of ability operate to enhance the achievement possibilities of only a few, mostly male students, whose abilities approximate the dominant values of the field (e.g. the good student) (Hay & lisahunter, 2006). Indeed, the limited acknowledgement of a range of physical and cultural resources in the constitution of the field had exclusionary consequences for a great many students in PE. With views of ability relating to such a narrow range of student performances which invariably only a minority of girls and boys in actual fact possess, Evans and Davies (2004) speculated that ability would be ‘reduced to a commodity to be spotted residing in the few at the expense of the multiple intelligences and potential endemic in all students’ (p. 7). The findings of this appraisal certainly present strong support for Evans and Davies assertion.

By defining capital through the embodiment of competitive and aggressive physicality, this unidimensional conceptualisation of ability, disregards the expression of alternative forms of physical and cultural resources such as the creative or aesthetic (Gard, 2006), and ‘non-performance aspects of PE, such as leadership, knowledge and understanding’ (Bailey, Tan & Morley, 2004) as valuable and contributable to one’s recognition as able (Hay, 2008). Notably, those students participating in a gymnastics club (for example) are unable to accumulate significant institutional cultural capital through this conception of ability because aesthetic abilities (e.g. grace, poise and style) are marginalised in the defining features of the good student (being competitive and aggressive) (Hay, 2008). Moreover, an individual could be acknowledged as lacking ‘ability’ in PE because they do not possess knowledge and experience in the activities incorporated in the PE curriculum (e.g. football, badminton and volleyball) (Penney & Hay, 2008). The implication is that the same individual who could be defined as exceptionally able in equestrian or a gymnastics club (where their resources are recognised as capital) could simultaneously find themselves categorised as unable in PE.

Regrettably, the potential abilities of numerous students were overlooked in the field. Many students (for example) were framed as unable, not because they did not possess abilities, but rather, because their potential achievement was inhibited by an absence of the ‘right’ physical capital (being aggressive and competitive), and a lack of opportunities to display and receive recognition for their abilities. Such conditions ultimately restricted access to institutional cultural capital (grades) which signal a students’ ability (Rosenbaum, 1980). In accordance, Hay and lisahunter (2006) proposed that ‘many students may have been deemed able within the field of PE had they been exposed to other ways of defining value’ (p. 308). These findings certainly call into question the genetic view of ability, and as such present strong support for Evans’ social construction of ability proposition. An individual’s lack of ‘ability’ and underachievement was not informed by their inherent composition ‘per se’, but rather reflected the lack of comparability between the characteristics of their habitus, the lack of possession of (esteemed) capital and the values prevailing within the PE field (the good student).

Notwithstanding the ostensible commitments to inclusivity and individualism in PE policy; the notion that ‘all’ students have equal opportunities to learn and achieve (Evans et al., 2007), the findings used to inform this appraisal present strong evidence to suggest that only a minority of students are provided with meaningful learning and high achievement opportunities in PE. Many students were not perceived as educable, and were thus deprived of opportunities and experiences to learn by virtue of their gender, social class and lack of field valued physical capital (e.g. competitiveness and aggression), rather than their willingness to put forth effort and take part. Invariably, a belief in the naturalness of ability resigned the teachers to the limited effect they could have on developing students’ capacities (Hay, 2008). In accordance, in a field where improving capacity seems to have very little relevance (Wright & Burrows, 2006), it seems highly plausible that those students who enter PE with a lack of capital (e.g. those whose parents/guardians do not possess the material resources to permit them involvement in sport) and ‘those who are not physically active during leisure time’ (Redelius et al., 2009: 258), and therefore in need of learning to develop their abilities, may not be presented opportunities to become ‘physically educated’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010b: 273) in the subject. Penney and lisahunter (2006) poignantly pronounced that ‘unless we understand PE to be about learning rather than innate physical talent, there is no justification for PE in the school curriculum’ (p. 207). Perhaps, unthinkably, from the evidence accumulated in this appraisal, it is conceivable that this may well be the case in ‘some’ PE domains.

**Acknowledgements**

We gratefully acknowledge Peter Hay (University of Queensland), Dawn Penney (University of Waikato) and John Evans (Loughborough University) for early discussions on this topic. We would also like to thank the reviewers of this paper for their rigorous and detailed comments.

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