

Exploring teachers' experiences of secondary school physical education in England

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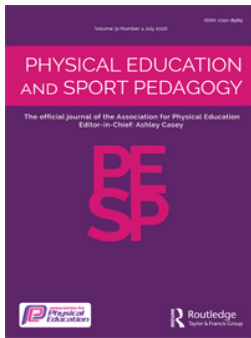
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Citation:

HEMINGWAY, Kirsty, EASTBURN, Sara and AZEVEDO, Liane (2026). Exploring teachers' experiences of secondary school physical education in England. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 1-20. [Article]

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To cite this article: Kirsty Hemingway, Sara Eastburn & Liane Beretta De Azevedo (26 Feb 2026): Exploring teachers' experiences of secondary school physical education in England, Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, DOI: [10.1080/17408989.2026.2635095](https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2026.2635095)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2026.2635095>



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Exploring teachers' experiences of secondary school physical education in England

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ABSTRACT

Background: Traditional sports-based forms of Physical Education (PE) have been widely criticised for marginalising many students through limited opportunities for personalised learning and a dominant emphasis on competition and performance. Early experiences of physical activity (PA) through PE are critical for fostering positive attitudes towards lifelong participation, positioning PE teachers as key agents in engaging and inspiring students. However, teachers' pedagogical autonomy is increasingly constrained by neoliberal education policies that prioritise standardisation, accountability, and measurable outcomes, with curriculum decisions often shaped by political rather than pedagogical priorities. Although research exploring students' perceptions of secondary school PE consistently highlights the central role of the teacher in shaping positive experiences, the bodies of literature on student-centred learning and need-supportive teaching have largely developed in isolation. As a result, limited attention has been paid to how teachers' own experiences, beliefs, and values influence their pedagogical practices within contemporary school contexts.

Purpose: This study explored how teachers' experiences, beliefs, and values shape their pedagogical practices, identifying factors that support or constrain changes in pedagogical beliefs and practice.

Method: Guided by a social constructionist framework, the study involved semi-structured interviews with 12 secondary school PE teachers (six male, six female; aged 24–49 years, SD = 8.63) from Yorkshire, England. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, generating four higher-order themes and eight lower-order sub themes.

Results: Teachers identified the culture of PE within their school as fundamental to shaping both students' experiences of PE and teachers' capacity to enact their pedagogical values. Four interrelated elements were perceived to influence PE culture: the perceived value of PE within the wider school community, curriculum structure and flexibility, relationships among colleagues and between teachers and students, and teachers' perceived

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 April 2025

Accepted 17 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Physical education; PE culture; teachers; PE curriculum; relationships; value of PE

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2026.2635095>.

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professional role. Together, these elements shaped teachers' sense of autonomy, willingness to innovate, and ability to prioritise student-centred, health-focused pedagogical approaches.

Impact statement: This study contributes to the field of PE by clarifying how school-level cultures and systemic constraints shape teachers' pedagogical beliefs, practices, and professional identities. It extends existing literature by integrating perspectives on student-centred learning and need-supportive teaching through teachers' lived experiences. For practice, the findings highlight how curriculum rigidity, low subject status, and performance-driven priorities limit meaningful pedagogical change. Pedagogically, the study offers evidence to support relationship-focused, flexible approaches to PE and provides actionable insights for school leaders and teacher educators seeking to create more inclusive and engaging PE environments.

Introduction

Teaching practices are a critical influence on students in secondary school Physical Education (PE) (Haerens et al. 2015; Hemingway et al. 2025), with teaching strategies and practices found to impact students' motivation (Koka et al. 2019), as well as effort and enjoyment in PE (Bechter et al. 2018). Although PE is a compulsory subject in the UK between the ages of 4 and 16 years, the effectiveness of current teaching practices in successfully encouraging a physically active lifestyle has been questioned (Bennie et al. 2017; Kirk 2019). This questioning is especially important given that the majority of young people in the UK do not meet the recommended levels of daily physical activity, raising concerns about whether current PE provision is achieving its intended public health and educational goals (James et al. 2023).

Curriculum

The current National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) (DfE 2013) allows teachers a degree of freedom and flexibility when designing their programmes. However, in practice, there remains a strong emphasis on traditional, sport-focused methods across schools in England (Gray et al. 2022). This suggests a disconnect between the flexibility intended in the curriculum text and how it is enacted in schools. While the NCPE does not explicitly prescribe a traditional model, its language and structure continue to reflect dominant discourses around physical performance and competition, which may implicitly guide teachers toward conventional approaches (Gray et al. 2022). These entrenched practices have been criticised for failing to meaningfully engage many students, often due to their narrow focus on competition and limited relevance to students' lives beyond PE lessons (Kirk 2019; Ennis 2015). In response to rising concerns over children's physical inactivity and mental well-being, the Sport England Strategy (Sport England 2021) and other recent research (Cale 2021; Kirk 2019) have advocated for a broader, more health-oriented approach to PE. This mirrors curriculum developments in countries like Australia and Canada, where the integration of health and physical education is now formalised (ACARA 2022; Ontario Public Service 2019).

Despite suggestions by Gray et al. (2022) to reform, many teachers remain cautious with traditional PE approaches remaining deeply embedded in the cultural and institutional fabric of schools, focused on beliefs about discipline, performance and physical competence (Gray et al. 2022). Teachers often perpetuate traditions by interpreting curriculum requirements as procedural tasks rather than opportunities for pedagogical innovation (Green, 2014). Consequently, radical reform could be viewed as undermining the subject's legitimacy, particularly within a neoliberal education system that emphasises performance metrics (O'Connor and Penney 2021; Kirk 2019). Teachers' focus on skill acquisition may therefore reflect not only pedagogical beliefs, but also a strategic effort to maintain PE's standing within an academically driven curriculum.

PE culture/values/beliefs

Teacher autonomy is increasingly constrained in the neoliberal education context, where policy development is treated as a mechanistic process driven by external pressures such as Ofsted, league tables, and school academisation (Jess et al. 2021; Evans and Davies 2014). Government influence over PE curricula reflects broader ideological priorities with limited input from teachers or researchers, contributing to resistance to change within PE (Gray et al. 2022).

PE has the potential to be uniquely multidisciplinary with opportunities to develop the whole person, rather than just a focus on the physical domain. However, despite its capacity to foster social inclusion, well-being, and broader educational outcomes, PE continues to be marginalised within the curriculum, often due to a lack of widespread recognition of its value (Bailey 2018; Jess et al. 2024). Similarly, recent research concluded that while PE can play a key role in supporting social and emotional development, it is frequently sidelined in schools, partly because its holistic educational contribution remains underappreciated (Jess et al. 2024). Teachers can find it challenging to change their pedagogical approach due lack of time (Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin 2022), increased workloads, and disruptive students (Lee 2019), resulting in substantial numbers of qualified PE teachers leaving the profession within five years (Lee 2019). Student-teachers often express a desire and willingness to negotiate more holistic issues through PE (Jess et al. 2021). However, developing physical competencies and engaging in competitive sports still dominate most PE lessons (Gray et al. 2022).

The persistence of traditional teaching methods in PE could be attributed to social acculturation, where newly qualified teachers adapt their practices to fit the norms of their schools and departments (Kirk 2019; Wintle 2022). Rossi and Macdonald (2016) describe the PE office as a social and micropolitical environment reinforcing these norms, which pre-service and early-career teachers internalise. They advocate for teacher education that fosters critical reflection to challenge, rather than reproduce, traditional practices. This echoes Tabachnick and Zeichner's (1985) concept of 'washout,' where innovative pedagogies acquired in training often fail to persist, and Tinning's (1988) 'pedagogy of necessity,' where structural constraints lead teachers to default to familiar routines.

Recent research highlights a continued reliance on teacher-directed, control-oriented approaches in PE, especially as students' progress through school, with lessons increasingly focused on attainment (Hemingway et al. 2025; Leisterer and Gramlich 2021).

These approaches often marginalise holistic, student-centred pedagogy, reducing engagement and enjoyment (Moy, Renshaw, and Davids 2014). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) research links controlling teaching styles to lower intrinsic motivation. Within SDT, controlling teaching refers to instructional approaches that rely on pressuring language, rigid instructions, external rewards or sanctions, and limited opportunities for student choice or input. This evidence highlights the importance of autonomy-supportive teaching for fostering students' psychological needs (Ennis 2015; Haerens et al. 2015; Weeldenburg et al. 2022; Bennie et al. 2017; Tilga et al. 2021).

Alternative pedagogical models, such as Models-Based Practice (Dyson and Casey 2012), Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (Manzano-Sánchez, González-Víllora, and Valero-Valenzuela 2021), and Sport Education (Cuevas, García-López, and Serra-Olivares 2016), promote active student involvement, critical thinking, and autonomy by encouraging learners to co-construct knowledge and develop transferable skills. However, PE teachers often lack confidence in implementing these autonomy-supportive approaches. They may face practical challenges related to classroom management and accountability pressures that favour traditional, performance-focused teaching styles (Bennie et al. 2017; Weeldenburg et al. 2022), which have been shown to foster students' basic psychological needs and intrinsic motivation (Manzano-Sánchez, González-Víllora, and Valero-Valenzuela 2021; Cuevas, García-López, and Serra-Olivares 2016).

Relationships

The role of social interaction has been studied extensively in PE contexts (Salvador-García et al. 2020), with findings highlighting the unique nature of PE classes in fostering interpersonal connections. Unlike traditional classroom settings, PE provides more opportunities for student-student and student-teacher interactions (Harris et al. 2023). These interactions have lasting effects, shaping students' attitudes toward physical activity (PA), self-confidence, and social development well beyond their school years (Dey 2025).

Positive relationships with PE teachers are linked to stronger interpersonal skills supporting a student's transition into adulthood and professional life (Koka and Hein 2006). When teachers provide emotional support to respond to students' needs, their engagement in school improves (Burgueño et al. 2024).

Fostering social cohesion among students during PE lessons can also enhance peer relationships and increase motivation (Girard, Gal-Petitfaux, and Vors 2022). Teachers themselves acknowledge that strong interpersonal skills are essential to motivating students (Lawson 1983). However, growing levels of stress and burnout among educators are contributing to emotional detachment and diminished focus on social connection in lessons, which is ultimately hindering students' motivational development (Shen et al. 2015).

The present study

The literature on student-centred learning and needs-supportive teaching has largely developed in isolation from one another. This research considers the findings of a previous study (Hemingway et al. 2025) to further understand students' PE experiences by intercalating the role of the teacher. The overall aim of this study was to explore teachers' experiences of PE and understand how teachers' beliefs and values shape their

pedagogical practice. The study had three main objectives: (1) Explore how teachers' experiences, beliefs, and values shape their pedagogical practices in PE; (2) Identify the key factors that support or hinder changes in teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices; (3) Examine the similarities and differences between teachers' and students' perceptions of PE.

Method

This qualitative study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and employs a Social Constructionist framework (Berger and Luckmann 2016) to explore how teachers' beliefs and values have shaped their pedagogical practice. A social constructivist approach acknowledges that each teacher's experience is valid and shaped by their personal and social context. By validating teachers' voices and lived experiences, this approach moves beyond searching for objective truths, instead valuing the subjective meanings teachers assign to their pedagogical practices. Additionally, the constructivist lens supports the use of qualitative, interpretive methods that are well-suited to capturing the complexity and nuances of teaching within dynamic school settings. University ethical approval was granted prior to data collection. The research was approved by the ethics board (June 2020, Converis code ER24439157).

As the researcher has prior experience in the field of PE, it was essential to engage in bracketing to minimise the influence of personal assumptions on data collection and analysis (Sorsa, Kiiikkala, and Åstedt-Kurki 2015). Reflexive journaling was used to document personal reflections and identify moments where prior experience might shape interpretations (Dado, Spence, and Elliot 2023). By acknowledging and actively managing subjectivity, the study sought to uphold the interpretive integrity and authenticity of the findings.

Participants

Twelve secondary PE teachers (6 male, 6 female) were recruited via snowball sampling from a convenience sample of twelve comprehensive schools across Yorkshire, England. Ten schools served students aged 11–16, while two included sixth form provision (ages 11–18). School sizes ranged from 1277 to 1836 students, with varied socio-economic intakes. Socio-economic status was gauged using free school meal (FSM) entitlement, a common measure of disadvantage (Taylor 2018). Five schools were above the national FSM average (24%), and eight were below. To participate, teachers needed a minimum of two years' PE teaching experience; those included had between 3 and 27 years (average: 12 years). Regarding career mobility, two had worked in three schools, six in two, and four in one. Initial contact was made via email, with follow-up communication through email or phone. Participants received information sheets and consent forms outlining the study's aims and procedures, and participation was voluntary.

Data collection

The lead researcher met with each teacher via Zoom to outline the purpose of the study. The initial intention was to interview teachers in their 'natural' setting, in this case, a school. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were carried out remotely.

A pilot study was conducted with two recently retired PE teachers to increase confidence in interviewing skills and to assess the quality of the interview questions in meeting the objectives of the study (Atkins and Wallace 2012). The pilot interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and followed by detailed notes and participant feedback on the structure and content of the questions. Revisions included rephrasing broad or unclear questions to encourage deeper reflection and refining the interview style to remain conversational while aligned with the study's aims. This process enhanced the overall rigour of the study. Semi-structured interviews ensured some level of consistency across all interviews, whilst also allowing autonomy to explore and probe so that further information could be gathered (Atkins and Wallace 2012). Interviews lasted between 52 and 74 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher. Teachers were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, that their identities would remain anonymous. Questions regarding their teaching career, factors that have influenced their teaching strategies, their views on the purpose of PE, their values of PE, and factors which affect their role as a PE teacher were asked. The semi-structured interview guide can be found in Supplement 1. Interview prompts were developed to guide the interview, clarify ambiguous statements, and encourage teachers to expand their answers where appropriate (Rubin and Rubin 2011). The semi-structured interview approach allowed emerging topics to be explored. The lead researcher has ten years' experience teaching PE in secondary school and has the subject knowledge to be able to empathise with the topics discussed. Understanding the role of a PE teacher was valuable when developing interview questions, although care was taken to ensure that interviewer bias did not influence the questions asked. The lead author's experience also supported the development of rapport with participants and facilitated open, practice-based dialogue during data collection. At the same time, this positionality required ongoing reflexivity, particularly in recognising how familiarity with school contexts and professional norms could shape questioning, interactions with participants, and the interpretation of data. To address this, the lead author engaged in continuous reflexive reflection throughout the research process, ensuring that analytic decisions remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than personal professional assumptions (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl 2019). They also recognised their role as a co-creator of data together with the interviewee, accepting that teaching experiences would influence their understanding of the context or the experiences of the interviewee (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl 2019). Open-ended questions focused on neutral language to avoid introducing subtle metaphors and introducing content or terms, which may, in turn, influence participant responses (Cairns-Lee, Lawley, and Tosey 2022). The language of the interview questions allowed teachers to develop their own interpretation of the meaning. There were no time constraints during the interview process, as the teachers chose the time for the interview.

To enhance the credibility of the data, interview transcripts were shared with each teacher for approval and agreement (Atkins and Wallace 2012). No issues were raised, and all teachers agreed that the interviews could be analysed without any omissions from the transcripts. Thick description quotes have been provided in the results section from all teachers included in the study (Atkins and Wallace 2012) to ensure that the findings authentically represent participants' voices and to respect their diverse experiences. Pseudonyms were used to ensure teachers remained anonymous.

Data analysis

Following transcription, a thematic analysis based on the six-stage process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019) was conducted. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts with participants to confirm accuracy. Although reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) does not require member checking as a means of verifying the ‘accuracy’ of themes, given its emphasis on the researcher’s active role in interpretation, this study adopted member checking in a way that aligns with its interpretivist foundations. Member checking was not used to validate final themes, but rather to honour participants’ voices and ensure ethical transparency. Transcripts were transferred into Nvivo for analysis. They were read numerous times to become more familiar with the content before significant data extracts were coded and then collated and organised into themes. The process of coding was time-intensive, as themes were actively developed through sustained engagement with the data. Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise the active role of the researcher in constructing meaning, highlighting that themes do not passively emerge from the data but are generated through thoughtful engagement and interpretation. In line with this reflexive approach, the analysis in this study was not treated as a rigid, linear application of the six phases, but rather as a flexible and iterative process. Coding evolved over time, with continual movement between phases to support deeper reflection and refinement of developing patterns.

Results

Overview

Thematic analysis generated four higher-order themes with eight lower-order sub themes. Figure 1 outlines the themes which together provide a broader understanding of PE culture and its determinants. Examples of data have been included to ensure authenticity and enhance the context for the reader (Atkins and Wallace, 2012).

PE culture

PE culture considers not only what is being taught within the PE curriculum, but also the environment that is created to allow students to build character and gain confidence (Richards et al. 2019). In this study, the PE culture was affected by four key themes that were identified by teachers to affect student experience in secondary school PE: (1) The value of PE; (2) The PE curriculum; (3) The relationships between colleagues and between students and teachers; and (4) The perceived role of a teacher.

Theme 1: the value of PE

Subtheme 1: support from the senior leadership team (SLT)

The teachers emphasised that the value placed upon PE within a school often relies on support from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT):

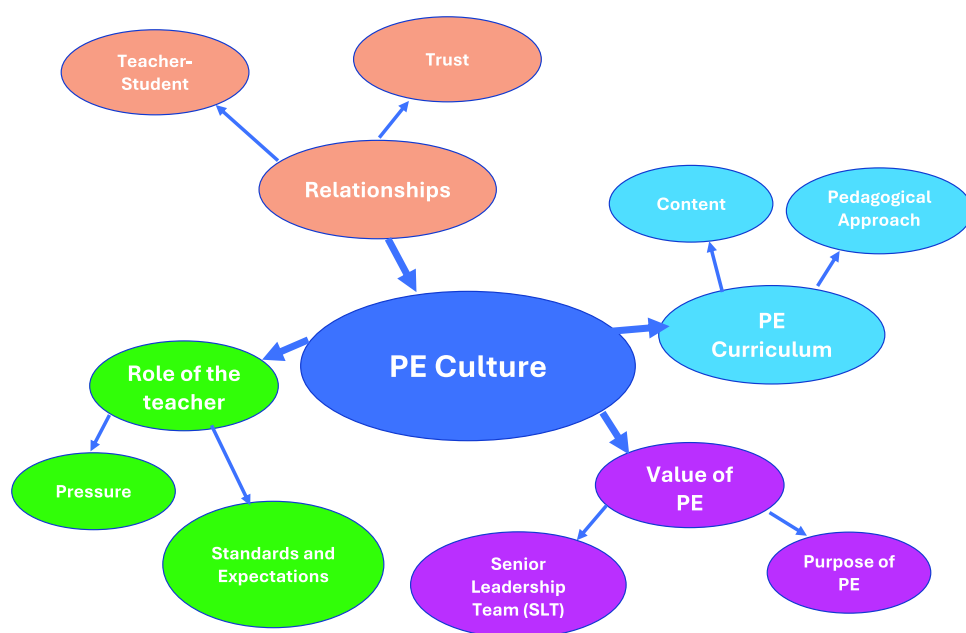


Figure 1. Overview of themes.

Hassan: you need that support from SLT and it is a big driver in terms of where our departments are going. If you haven't got that support from above, you are limited in where you can go in developing PE across the department and the school.

If PE is not valued at senior leadership level, the standards within the department suffer, and in turn, can affect students' values of PE:

Cath: The influence that those high up have on the department is huge, even things like the kit that staff are provided with. It's awful and the kids pick up on it. A department should look professional and set standards for how they want the students to look.

Another participant provided an example of a head teacher's perception of PE:

Annie: The last week of term she asked us to run a three day sports day with 45 kids so she could do some staff training. We were childcare for all the students.

Another teacher expressed frustration with the SLT as students were taken out of PE to focus on 'more important' subjects:

Dev: They've taken kids out of lessons because they need to catch up on work in other lessons, that frustrates me because we are told these children have no resilience and problem solving skills, but you take them out of the lesson that teaches them that, I feel like we've been undermined as a subject.

All teachers agreed that PE has many holistic benefits, however, this was not always recognised within the school by those in decision-making roles:

Cath: PE should be up there as one of the four with English, Maths and Science. It gets you physically fit, but it also helps with mental health, social health, a lot of kids learn how to win and lose, they learn co-operation and working with people that they might not know or like.

Subtheme 2: the purpose of PE

Teachers recognised changes in their perceptions of the purpose of PE throughout their careers:

Ben: my degree shifted my perspective in terms of considering a more holistic view rather than just the physical and performance side of it. In my placement school, I struggled with the competitive focus and didn't agree with their philosophy.

There was a shift in mindset around the purpose of PE with many teachers increasingly valuing the importance of promoting lifelong participation over developing sports performance:

Kayleigh: When I first started teaching, I wanted to find the next super hockey player, whereas now, I focus more on participation and the people who are not really that sporty to make sure they have a happy active lifestyle. Secondary school PE is about teaching morals and values. It's about those things that you don't get in a maths or science lesson, and those things stand you in good stead for life. Teaching someone the values of how to be healthier so when they leave school, they can make informed choices about what they want to do.

Teachers recognised that enjoyment is a key objective of PE:

Annie: Enjoyment must be number one, otherwise they won't engage. So, they're almost forgetting that learning is taking place. You could teach what Ofsted would outline as an outstanding lesson, but the kids don't enjoy it, so what's the point in you doing it. Kids might not get better at a skill but if they enjoy the lesson, then they're taking other values out of that, like teamwork and social skills.

Theme 2: the PE curriculum

Subtheme 1: pedagogical approach

Teachers often felt under an obligation to meet a strict set of criteria within their lessons:

Annie: We have to follow a certain structure and accountability. You don't want to be the teacher that's been looked at for not being able to teach properly. Our lessons are very structured with clear routines.

Lenny: We are very tied to having an objective and to showing that we're questioning, which takes a long time if you do it properly. And that's all taking away from them being active and making progress. You're trying to evidence the learning and so you feel restricted

This was frustrating for many teachers who would have liked to teach lessons with more flexibility, autonomy and opportunities for play:

Jared: We sometimes have 7 or 8 sports going on and we just rotate around. Even when you let them play a game, there is still learning going on. It's the hidden curriculum. It's those life skills that they've learned like communication and decision making. They really enjoy that cos it's their lesson and they probably don't get that anywhere else in school.

As well as the importance of teacher autonomy, all teachers in this study identified that some choice was offered within their KS4 curriculum:

Ben: Key Stage 4, we do a games pathway and an individual pathway, so the individual pathway doesn't have any competitive games. And it works well. The boys benefited from

a non-competitive pathway in PE because the ones that don't like football had an option where they felt a bit safer and could enjoy the lesson more.

However, some teachers suggested that choice should not be offered at KS3:

Flo: With Key Stage 3, structure works better because they haven't got that maturity. We tried to do sport education with year 7 and we found that the younger ones need more structure to be able to play the game. With KS4, it's more relaxed. I will often set them off and then join in one of the games. Trying to do that with KS3 wouldn't work.

Subtheme 2: the content of PE

Some schools have restrictive procedures regarding the content of lessons with constraints in terms of creativity and flexibility:

Ella: We're not allowed to do non-traditional activities in core PE because it's not GCSE related. A lot of these kids aren't doing GCSE PE so why are we restricting them to a certain curriculum? I try to get away with teaching ultimate frisbee and the non-sporty kids love it. It's a great leveller.

Teachers believed that motivation and engagement in lessons improved when they were given the opportunity to be creative with the activities delivered in lessons:

Imogen: I went and bought some glow sticks, and I did Clubbercise. They were working on their fitness, but the lights were off, so any sort of issues around their body image and self-confidence disappeared. The kids came out of that class sweating. From then on, the head of PE wanted to change the way we do things.

However, not all teachers agreed with moving away from a more traditional PE curriculum:

Hassan: The lads do football, rugby, athletics, fitness and cricket, rounders basically a traditional set of activities all the way through school. For me, rightly or wrongly, we stick to what we know and what the kids have done well at.

Only male PE teachers involved in this study discussed traditional, structured approaches more favourably, whilst female teachers preferred incorporating alternative activities within the curriculum to increase engagement.

Theme 3: relationships

Sub theme 1: relationships with students

Good relationships with students were identified by teachers as essential in ensuring a positive experience in PE:

Ben: I was talking to my students about motivation and they like that I don't always highlight my quieter students, I don't pick on them but still give them praise and a little thumbs up, so they recognise I'm valuing what they're doing but don't have to highlight it.

Teachers compared good and poor practice regard to their ability to develop positive relationships within PE:

Kayleigh: I get to know the kids and listen to them, I'm not afraid to be myself and have a laugh and a joke. Whereas another teacher I share a class with, there's a lot of difficult

characters in this class and they are good for me. This other teacher is very regimented. Its very teacher led, and they don't respond well to that.

Teachers noted that if they fail to develop good relationships with their students, engagement and motivation in lessons will suffer:

Jared: You can't do anything else if you don't have that relationship. It's different to the relationships with teachers in other subjects because of the nature of the subject. There are moments where it's formal but many more where it is informal.

Subtheme 2: trust between students and teachers

The unique relationship offered within PE for students and teachers to develop trust in one another is a crucial element in developing a positive culture in PE:

Lenny: Relationships are so important. If they feel like they can trust you, and they think that you're fair and consistent, they're more likely to do what you've asked them to do. The rapport with students, whether they're sporty or not, they just coming in and talking to the PE staff. From a mental health perspective, they like being able to offload.

Teachers reported more opportunities to communicate informally with students and potentially address sensitive issues such as their mental well-being:

Flo: We have a very high percentage of looked after children, and they tolerate PE. It's not their favourite place to be, but if you compare their engagement in PE to other subjects, you wouldn't believe how much better it is. That is because we have developed trust and worked hard on those relationships.

Theme 4: the perceived role of a teacher

Subtheme 1: increased accountability of teachers

Long-standing teachers were concerned about the significant changes they had experienced in the profession. Teachers discussed an increase in pressure on teachers with a greater level of accountability, and teachers being fearful of making mistakes or trying new things:

Annie: accountability over time has gone from being very little to being at the forefront. In my first teaching job, you were just thrown in, get on with it, which was good as you learnt on your feet and had authority to do what you want. Now there's too much micromanagement and a focus on being accountable for student progress and results.

Many teachers felt restricted by Ofsted criteria in their role as a teacher, which was detrimental to the student experience in PE:

Graham: You're governed by Ofsted and you must tick a box. If an Ofsted inspector came into my classroom and they're just playing I would be judged badly so until PE is judged differently, teachers won't change the way they teach. At Key Stage 3 we should be trying new things so the kids can enjoy something in school, particularly those who struggle academically.

The teachers noted that accountability and school standards have prevented them from adopting a more creative teaching approach:

Dev: you're not trusted to do your own job. There's always SLT saying you need to be doing that and there's no autonomy to do it your own way. You have to give feedback on a certain

sheet, using a certain format. I wanted to be able to apply the things I've learned at uni, but they say no you can't do it that way because we've never done it that way before.

Subtheme 2: standards and expectations

Standards, expectations, and responsibilities were discussed by teachers when reflecting their role:

Cath: It's much more difficult than it was. The children coming through the door are different now. We're dealing with behavioural issues, being a social worker and everything else. I'd say there's more emphasis on that and children with more complex needs.

Teachers noted differences in the work ethic of their colleagues in the teaching profession with many showing reluctance to go above and beyond their role, which negatively impacts the development of a positive PE culture:

Imogen: We had a teacher that just retired this year. He would just do football with year 10 and 11 lads, and other year groups did dodgeball. I would try and offer something different, and he would just do whatever's easiest. It could be quite easy to not go above and beyond because there is so much paperwork and planning to do.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' experiences of PE, to understand their beliefs and values and how these impact upon their pedagogical practice. The findings suggest that developing a positive PE culture was instrumental in creating an environment where students can thrive in PE, and PE culture was influenced by four factors: the value of PE, the PE curriculum, relationships and the role of the teacher.

The value of PE

Teachers in this study expressed frustration at the low status of PE within schools, noting that senior leadership often viewed it as a less important subject. This aligns with previous research highlighting the continued marginalisation of PE, despite its potential to develop broader, more holistic outcomes (Bailey 2018). Although PE can significantly support students' social and emotional development, it can be overlooked as those in education fail to recognise its holistic educational value (Jess et al. 2024).

Several teachers in this study reflected on how their understanding of PE's purpose had evolved throughout their careers, expressing a growing desire to prioritise health and well-being over traditional skill development. While research shows that health is often considered a valued objective of PE (Cale 2021), current practice does not always reflect this shift in philosophy (Capel and Cliffe 2020). Many teachers involved in this study expressed frustration at the limited emphasis placed on promoting lifelong physical activity and health, often attributing this to a reluctance to change within PE departments. Several participants also acknowledged uncertainty and limited confidence in delivering health-related content, suggesting that existing knowledge and training were insufficient to support these aims. This aligns with previous research indicating that PE teachers often lack adequate health-related content knowledge (Hastie, Chen, and Guarino 2017), highlighting the need for targeted professional development and

ongoing support if such aspirations are to be realised. In the schools involved in this study, however, PE remained largely sport-centred and focused on skill acquisition. This may reflect what Tinning (1988) termed a ‘pedagogy of necessity,’ where limited institutional support leads teachers to fall back on familiar, teacher-led approaches (Hemingway et al. 2025; Leisterer and Gramlich 2021), often at the expense of more holistic and innovative pedagogies. This reinforces existing research showing that the current neoliberal education system restricts teacher autonomy (Evans and Davies 2014), which is particularly concerning given that traditional approaches in PE tend to serve only a limited number of students (Sprake and Walker 2015).

As concerns grow around adolescent mental health, PE has the potential to support emotional well-being, particularly when lessons are enjoyable and student-centred. A shift toward more health-focused, autonomy-supportive pedagogy could help make PE more meaningful and inclusive, potentially fostering lifelong PA. However, without greater institutional backing and investment in teacher development, PE risks remaining stuck in outdated models that fail to meet the diverse needs of today’s students.

Whilst findings support literature on the marginalisation of PE (Bailey 2018; Jess et al. 2024), this study also provides insight into how such devaluation is experienced by teachers and how it impacts their professional confidence and motivation. Importantly, it identifies a values – practice gap in PE, where teachers’ aspirations toward more holistic, health-focused pedagogy are constrained by systemic pressures. By foregrounding teachers’ reflective perspectives, this study offers a rarely explored viewpoint, shedding light on the internal tensions educators face as they navigate the disconnect between their pedagogical ideals and the realities of current practice.

The PE curriculum

Many teachers in this study felt that a rigid PE curriculum is often ineffective, and that adapting or even changing activities to meet student needs and abilities is essential. However, they reported feeling restricted in their ability to make such changes, often required by the rigid PE curriculum to deliver lessons they believed were unsuitable. This aligns with previous research suggesting that, while the NCPE does not explicitly mandate a traditional model, its language and structure still reflect dominant discourses of physical performance and competition, subtly reinforcing conventional practices (Gray et al. 2022). While previous research has found that pupils value having choice in PE (Hemingway et al. 2025), teachers in this study reported limited opportunities to offer it. Where choice was possible, particularly at Key Stage 4 (KS4), it was seen to enhance student motivation and engagement, supporting earlier findings (Hemingway et al. 2025; Teraoka and Kirk 2022). Teachers’ decisions to limit autonomy at Key Stage 3 (KS3) often stem from concerns about students’ maturity. However, this approach may inadvertently reinforce rigid pedagogical norms at a stage where fostering engagement and a sense of belonging is particularly important. As a result, some teachers may unintentionally delay opportunities for meaningful learning until Key Stage 4, missing a critical window to enhance motivation earlier in adolescence (Hemingway et al. 2025).

Improving students’ experiences of PE at KS3 requires that teachers are granted greater professional autonomy to interpret and adapt the curriculum to their specific school contexts, yet findings from this study suggest that such flexibility is currently

lacking. Radical reform can also be daunting for many teachers. There is a genuine concern that removing traditional performance metrics may undermine PE's legitimacy within an increasingly academic and outcomes-driven education system (O'Connor and Penney 2021; Kirk 2019). For meaningful change to take place, the education system must place greater value on the holistic contributions of PE and ensure it supports young people's lives beyond the classroom (Kirk 2019; Ennis 2015).

The relationships between colleagues and between students and teachers

This study highlights the importance of teacher-student relationships in shaping students' experiences in secondary school PE, aligning with previous research (Teraoka and Kirk 2022). PE was viewed as a unique part of the school day, providing different experiences from the classroom. Teachers felt that the PE environment fosters positive and trusting relationships with both peers and teachers, supported by research showing that PE allows for more informal interactions that help build these connections (Hemingway et al. 2025; Teraoka and Kirk 2022). Conversely, teachers in this study described how poor teacher-student relationships negatively affected student motivation, reinforcing earlier findings (Hagger et al. 2005).

This study adds to this literature by highlighting how the embodied and informal nature of PE creates a distinct pedagogical space where relational work is central. Unlike more structured classroom settings, PE enables teachers to engage students in ways that foster trust, psychological safety, and affective connection, all crucial elements for student engagement, mental well-being, and learning about relationships as adolescents through PE. Informal interactions, such as subtle encouragement or playful engagement, help build rapport and promote emotional well-being, positioning PE as a unique context for relational pedagogy. These findings align with research showing that teacher support and relatedness in PE positively influence motivation and emotional engagement while reducing anxiety (Standage et al. 2012; Teraoka and Kirk 2022).

Prospective teachers should develop an understanding of pedagogies of affect to better support student confidence and motivation in PE (Teraoka and Kirk 2022), especially given rising concerns about youth mental health (Biddle et al. 2019). However, this study provides evidence of challenges to building strong teacher-student relationships, including reduced PE curriculum time, exam-focused teaching, and limited extra-curricular opportunities.

The perceived role of the teacher

Teachers in this study discussed growing pressures related to accountability and visibility within the profession. Extra-curricular involvement featured prominently in how participants understood their role as PE teachers, with engagement in clubs and teams often framed as an expected, rather than optional, aspect of professional practice. Several teachers described a mentoring culture in which experienced staff encouraged newly qualified colleagues to participate in extra-curricular activities as a means of demonstrating commitment, increasing visibility within the school, and contributing to a positive PE culture, echoing Dinsdale's (2017) findings. For some participants, this expectation intensified feelings of accountability, as extra-curricular engagement was perceived to

influence professional reputation and career progression. While increased workload and accountability pressures are widely recognised across the teaching profession (Day and Gu 2010; Shen et al. 2015), these findings highlight how extra-curricular involvement functions as a site of accountability and identity construction within PE, an area that remains underexplored. This insight reveals how informal cultural expectations add to stress and burnout, especially for early-career teachers, reflecting the complex social and emotional negotiations of teacher identity (Kelchtermans 2009). Alongside these pressures, increased paperwork, inspections, and school targets contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Lee 2019; Shen et al. 2015). Given that teacher well-being is central to the social-emotional support they provide students, it is unsurprising that these work-related demands negatively impact their personal well-being (Lee 2019).

Strengths and limitations

One strength of this study lies in the diverse sample of teachers recruited from a wide range of secondary schools, representing varied levels of teaching experience and backgrounds across multiple school contexts. This contrasts with previous research that has focused on single case studies (Elliot and Campbell 2015) or smaller participant groups (Papagiannopoulos, Digelidis, and Syrmipas 2023). Additionally, the lead author's professional experience teaching PE across different school settings enabled strong rapport building with participants, fostering open dialogue and eliciting rich, practice-based insights. By centring teachers' reflexive perspectives, the study offers a rarely explored view of how systemic pressures shape daily practice, emotional well-being, and ultimately, pedagogical decision-making in PE.

This study has some limitations. Several teachers reflected on over 20 years of experience, which may affect the accuracy of their recollections. Additionally, due to the pandemic, interviews were conducted online, which can reduce depth and require more effort to build rapport (Shapka et al. 2016). To mitigate this, the lead researcher held a preliminary phone call with each teacher to help build a rapport prior to the interview. Another potential limitation is the lead researcher's background in PE teaching, which likely helped build rapport and elicit rich insights but may also have introduced interpretive bias. While reflexivity was maintained, the influence of personal experience on data interpretation cannot be fully discounted.

Implications for practice and research

This study reveals a significant and often overlooked convergence between teachers' values and frustrations and students' long-standing calls for more meaningful physical education (PE). Teachers in this study echoed students' desires for PE that prioritises autonomy, enjoyment, and relevance – key elements consistently identified as central to meaningful experiences (Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin 2022; Hemingway et al. 2025). While student perspectives have been widely explored, much less is known about how teachers' professional aspirations and lived challenges align with those of their pupils. Recognising this alignment helps bridge a critical gap in the literature and signals a shared appetite for change.

Teachers expressed a strong desire to move beyond traditional, sport-centred models toward more holistic, health-focused, and autonomy-supportive approaches that prioritise student well-being. However, these aspirations were often constrained by limited curriculum time and accountability pressures, leaving teachers caught between their values and the need to meet school-level performance targets, especially where exam PE is prioritised, and success is defined by data and outcomes.

This study supports existing research that schools are increasingly shaped by neoliberal agendas, framing education around accountability, standardisation, and market-driven values (Kulakow 2020). In PE, this appears in the focus on performance metrics, data tracking, and the sidelining of health-oriented or relational content (Capel and Cliffe 2020; Evans and Davies 2014). Teachers reported reduced autonomy and pressure to prioritise institutional targets over student-centred learning.

At the school-level, a curriculum hierarchy persists in which subjects contributing to league tables and measurable academic performance are prioritised, with PE often devalued – particularly when fewer students enrol in examined PE pathways (Bailey 2018). This places additional pressure on PE teachers to justify their subject's worth using performance-based criteria that may conflict with their pedagogical intentions (Wintle 2022). To counter these pressures, teachers must be supported to take pedagogical risks. School leaders and senior management teams should foster an environment where innovation is encouraged – even when it does not immediately align with traditional accountability frameworks. This includes valuing alternative pedagogies and providing time, space, and resources for teachers to experiment without fear of sanctions. Targeted professional development and institutional support are essential to help teachers move beyond conventional models and implement inclusive, engaging, and holistic PE.

Finally, teacher training programmes should foreground the importance of relational pedagogy in PE. Given PE's uniquely informal and embodied environment, there is enormous potential for cultivating trust, psychological safety, and emotional connection. Training should equip teachers with the skills to build strong relationships, while schools must address structural barriers – such as limited curriculum time and exam pressures – to allow these relationships to thrive. Doing so can significantly enhance student motivation, engagement, and mental well-being, helping to reposition PE as a meaningful, valued part of the school experience.

Disclosure statement

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

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