Methodological considerations; Listening to the voices of children with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Physical Education

Richard Medcalf¹, PhD Research Student

Supervisors: Joe Marshall², John Visser³, Ken Hardman¹

¹ Institute of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Worcester, UK
² UK Sport, London, UK
³ School of Education, University of Birmingham, UK

Contact address:

Richard Medcalf,
PhD Research Student,
University of Worcester,
Henwick Grove,
Worcester,
WR2 6AJ

+44 (0)1905 855416

r.medcalf@worc.ac.uk

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Abstract

Growing attention is being paid to the wide ranging benefits of engagement in quality physical education (PE), with research highlighting the physical, social, affective and cognitive benefits of participation in the subject (Bailey, 2006). Practical, physical and expressive creative experiences in education have also been cited as being an important constituent when educating children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) (Cole and Visser, 1998). However, the benefits of participation in PE have not yet been explicitly postulated as being efficacious to the psycho-social and physical development of children with SEBD. Beyond this, research has yet to address the experiences of the child with SEBD, as told by themselves, alongside the ideological benefits of their participation in physical education. The opportunity for these children to articulate their experiences whereby they are afforded the chance to offer their opinions in a way in which they themselves have defined (Groves and Laws, 2003) is a central feature of this research. An interpretivist case study design was adopted whereby twenty four weeks were spent, full time, in two mainstream case study schools in the UK. Within each of these schools, three children aged 12-14 were selected, each on a programme at ‘school action plus’ making reference to their behavioural needs. After an initial six week familiarisation period, observations and field notes taken within PE lessons were supplemented by weekly interviews with each of the participants, of which the content was grounded in each child’s own experiences. Photo-elicitation protocols were adopted, with each of the participants complimenting their final interview with a pictographic record of their experiences in PE; the analysis and discussion of which being led by the participant themselves. This research highlights a number of methodological issues pertinent to both the planning of case studies of this type and, subsequently, the analysis of their content. In attempting to find meaning in their experiences of PE, the importance of a participant researcher trust relationship was an instrumental success criterion. By spending twelve weeks with each participant, gaining this trust, and giving them ownership of interview content, multiple realities emerged between cases in their experiences of PE. The importance of interpreting each participants social constructions of truth (Macdonald et al., 2002) meant that in practice, the research was conducted on their terms. This research has shown that it is possible to gain greater depth of understanding as to how children with social emotional and behavioural difficulties experience physical education. The context specific experiences cited by the participants further highlight the importance of an interpretive methodological approach. The intention of this paper is to highlight methodological considerations which were encountered when researching how children with social emotional and behavioural difficulties experience PE.


1.0 Introduction and rationale
This research is an interpretivist exploration which will give further awareness and a greater
depth of understanding to the relative importance of Physical Education (PE) to children
described as having Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD). The explicit aim of
this research is to investigate, through an appreciation of student voice, the experiences of
the child with SEBD in PE. Further to this, the objectives are to:

- Collect data within an interpretive paradigm, which interprets the perceptions of
  secondary pupils with SEBD towards PE.
- Explore and interpret the voice of the child with SEBD to assist in identification of areas of
  similarity and difference, between cases, in their experiences of National Curriculum PE.
- Make use of these interpretations, in exploring the ethos and approaches of each school
to teaching PE to children with SEBD, and to then extrapolate and discuss observed
institutional commonalities across cases.

This research looks to incorporate the notion of practical, physical and expressive creative
experiences, widely acknowledged as being an important constituent when educating children
with SEBD (Cole and Visser, 1998), with the growing attention that is being paid to the wide
ranging benefits of participation in quality PE. The study of PE and its relative benefits across
a spectrum of domains has received a growing amount of attention in recent research articles.
In offering justifications for the subject’s inclusion as a National Curriculum (NC) subject and
its affiliated educational benefits, research has begun to highlight the physical, social,
affective and cognitive benefits of participation in PE and school sport (Bailey, 2006).
Research has in the past, however, neglected to devote a proportionate amount of time to the
possible behavioural impact that PE may have upon adolescents, especially for those pupils
who have some form of SEBD.

Equally, there is seemingly a need and growing appreciation for the inclusion of ‘student
voice’. Legislation is driving the increasingly popular practice of incorporating the voices of
children for whom the research has connotations. It was noted by Lewis (2002) that the shift
towards the inclusion of children’s views has been triggered by various legislative guidelines
that have stressed the need to ascertain the views of the child. This is underpinned by
inclusive education policy documents such as the Convention on the Rights of a Child (United
Nations, 1989) and the Right to Inclusion (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural
Organisation, 1994). The Revised Code of Practice for SEN (Department for Education and
Skills, 2001) also highlights the need to ascertain the views of the child. Young people have a
right to be consulted, heard, and listened to on any matters for which their views have
resonance, and as such this is the focal ideology, which underpins this research.
This report will present a justification for and a reflection upon the methods used thus far, alongside their applicability to the case study’s they serve, and the potential of the data they generate. It will highlight the development of the meanings which one participant ascribed to their experiences of PE, and my initial interpretations of these.

2.0 Sample Literature Review

Physical Education is often advocated as being a source of many positive developmental characteristics through adolescence. The subject’s varied content is often justified as a NC subject by both its capacity to develop varied physical skills and to facilitate the development of human excellences of a certain valued kind (Parry, 1998). The subject offers a niche in which multiple personal and social qualities can develop if complimented by teaching, learning environment, and lesson content, which the individual finds facilitative to his or her long term development.

The perceived role of PE has expanded in recent years and to some extent there has been a re-affirmation of its purposes for which some people have long such argued. It is now appreciated more widely as playing an important role in achieving broader educational objectives such as whole school improvement, community development and effecting personal behavioural and attitudinal change among pupils (Houlihan and Green, 2006). Physical Education is no longer seen as being merely part of the relatively short lived curriculum for children of school age; its unique contribution to lifelong learning and education is also widely acknowledged (Doll-Tepper, 2005). The subject is in a relatively unique and indispensable position from which it can have a reciprocal relationship and hence, a responsibility in someway addressing many contemporary issues; in this instance that of the behaviour and educational provision for students with SEBD. It is one of few national curriculum subjects whose inherent motives, structures, pedagogies and content lend themselves to the opportunity for a holistic and developmental programme of activities which go some way in fostering social attributes. Physical Education has distinctive features within the educational process with characteristics, which no other learning or school experience shares (Talbot, 1999) including physical and creative learning experiences, in a learning environment, which spatially and pedagogically facilitates opportunities for expression.

This study focuses specifically on children whose behaviours in school are said to be challenging and who as such have been categorised with having SEBD. Those who are classed as having SEBD form a sub-group of children deemed to have a Special Educational Need (SEN) and are perhaps best described as sharing a loose collection of characteristics. There is no evidence to suggest that the different emotional and behavioural manifestations that are given the SEBD label are related to form a single condition and it would be wrong to assume that there is any kind of homogeneity in what we place under the broad and crude heading of SEBD (Cooper, 1999). The term implies a homogenous group of children whose
needs can be assessed and met with special educational provision (Travell, 1999). Alongside the seemingly all-encompassing nature of the term, it remains important (when sampling) to differentiate between a pupil who has a recognised educational special need and a pupil who is disaffected or delinquent (Visser and Stokes, 2003).

The concept of SEBD attempts to come to grips with the fact that behaviour, which does not meet diagnostic criteria, sometimes poses serious problems at school (Jones, 2003). Studies have highlighted the differential nature of problems exhibited by students with SEBD (Nelson et al., 2003) and the ambivalence inherent in the concept (Jones, 2003). Alongside the behavioural tendencies, which many children with SEBD share, it remains important to appreciate that more often than not these children’s needs are complex. They are most likely labelled with diverse and often co-morbid problems that are underpinned by their behavioural difficulties. As such the specifics of the experiences to be discussed, and the recommendations made as a result, should most often be formulated on an individual basis.

It has been recorded how the child with SEBD often reacts positively to many of the alternatives to classroom-based theory lessons. A curriculum, which concentrates on practical, physical, and creative experiences, would often be more effective in meeting the needs of pupils with SEBD (Cole and Visser, 1998). On this theme, Hunter-Carsch (2006) comments how

“The arts permit transcendence of our routine particular roles……for some youngsters (and perhaps particularly those with SEBD) it can be easier to work with different, perhaps more accessible forms of ‘reading’ and ‘literacy’ such as can be offered through the arts”

(Hunter-Carsch, 2006) p48

The same can be said for learning in a physical context, through PE. There have been relatively few previous studies that have combined the fields of PE and behavioural difficulties and as such very little attention has been paid to the use of some form of education through physical means as acting as a behavioural intervention for those with SEBD. Those papers that have attempted this have either been largely removed from the PE context or have employed methods which negate many of the possible mechanisms for such a change that all forms of PA can potentially ensue. The time children spend on task in instructionally effective and productive classrooms is naturally reduced when behaviours of a disruptive nature are present. Negative behaviours are regularly a derivative of children with an element of SEBD and hence, strategies, which seek to alleviate these, are often sought.

In one of the earliest studies of its kind, Luce et al (1980) attempted to use ‘contingent exercise’ as a punishment aiming to ‘suppress’ excessive frequencies of verbal outbursts and
aggressive tendencies of children who were described as being severely emotionally disturbed. The authors conclude by stating their belief that their results proved how contingent exercise was a more effective punishment procedure than others. Their study involved a cohort of only two participants in a relatively limiting way, thus to some extent devaluing the ability to generalise the results. The same can be said for the case study by Etscheidt and Ayllon (1987). When working with a thirteen year old child diagnosed as having hyperactivity and distractibility problems, they intervened (in place of the child's time in the playground) by way of five minutes of prescribed exercises with a ‘therapist’. Findings showed the child’s academic performance improved significantly as a result. However, in using this design protocol, the authors did not pay a proportionate amount of attention in recognising the importance of the environment in which the intervention takes place.

Evans et al (1985) researched the potential therapeutic benefits of a PA intervention and found it to be of great use to behaviourally disordered children. Their methods again neglected to consider the socially facilitative nature of PA in that each of the subjects exercised alone so that ‘no social facilitation could inadvertently contaminate’ the effects that were shown (Evans et al., 1985). Their results, showing a relationship between the chosen exercise and a reduction in talking out in class are of course positive and commendable to this research argument. However the restrictive positivist procedures employed account for the study failing to appreciate the additional benefits that could have been found had they employed a method with greater ecological validity.

Other research papers have been more specific in their sampling by looking at children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Silverstein and Allison (1994) compared the effectiveness of antecedent exercise with Methylphenidate (Ritalin) in reducing the hyperactive behaviour of a three year old boy. They found exercise resulted in more hyperactive behaviours; however, this is unsurprising given the single case design, age of the child, and form of activity chosen (jogging). They describe how the child disliked the repetitiveness of the exercise and often tried to escape the treatment; they offer no explanation as to why they continued with the intervention. Tantillo et al (2002) followed on a similar vein; working with eight to twelve year olds, they used ‘sub maximal’ exercise on treadmills as their intervention and measured the children on numerous physiological scales. Their findings suggested that exercise has some efficacy in treating ADHD behaviours; however, they indicated how the ‘methods (they) used do not permit the conclusion’ that exercise has an effect.

The methods employed in these previous studies have most often been their restricting factor and, as a result, have reduced their subsequent applicability to the child, pedagogy, and policy. The reliance on intervention studies of single case design is not practical for implementation in an educational setting, where such levels of manipulation are not afforded.
Many of these interventions ignore the influence of the environment and neglect to appreciate that it may be this which creates the difficulty in the first place (Cooper, 2006). Each of these studies have merit in their own right; however, their unifying lack of ecological validity removes the conclusions which they make from being practical to the child’s educational needs. Moreover, these studies have not shown an appreciation of, or accounted for, the importance of listening to the voice of the child (‘student voice’); the increased use of which Visser (2002) cites as being a positive development. Not only is the participation and voice of the child advocated within the many diagnostic processes which children are involved in (Travell and Visser, 2006) but it is also embedded in the fact that it enables participants to bring themselves, their interests, energies, hopes and experiences (Lensmire, 1998) to their work and also to the research in question. Children are not simply passive objects who are reliant on adults to be heard. They are in fact capable of diligent, insightful, and moreover truthful explanations of their experiences.

The concept of student voice has received growing attention across a number of research agenda’s, predominantly those in education. “Voice research is firmly rooted in the notion that all children, like adults, are active agents in their own learning and are entitled, wherever possible, to democratic participation in research pertaining to their interests” (Ravet, 2007) p234. Evidence has accumulated to document the importance of this work, in that it facilitates the inclusion of the views, perceptions, and experiences of young people from which they can be heard and valued, and hence thus incorporated into research agenda’s. The multiple realities experienced by children in educational settings cannot be fully comprehended by either inference or assumption. Indeed, the meanings that students attach to experiences are not necessarily the meanings that their teachers would ascribe (Innes et al., 2001).

The desire to encourage young people to articulate their opinions has the potential to offer an important contribution to the education of a civic society (Fielding, 2004a), nevertheless it should be noted that Halsey et al (2006) have observed within their literature search that the engagement of the voice of young people can have diverse impacts on the young people involved. Caution has been raised as to the dangers of simplistic ‘surface compliance’, which has arose from the rapid popularisation of student voice (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006). Equally, as part of her conceptualisation of the aforementioned United Nations Convention, Lundy (2007) highlighted a report of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which, in 2002, cited that the UK Government should “Take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful, and effective participation of all groups of children in society, including in school” UNCRC (2002) p7 cited in (Lundy, 2007) p928

Despite these reservations, the strength of adopting a ‘narrative’ approach to research is in that it fosters a holistic understanding of the situation wherein this includes both the relationship between internalised thoughts and existential conditions whilst having an
appreciation for the temporal position of each individual situation (Groves and Laws, 2000). There have been concerns raised by Fielding (2004b) who cites that the outcomes of the process pay too little reference to the fact that young people are already indoctrinated into (and bound by) societal norms of what is ‘cool’ or customary. This is of course an issue that requires thought in the planning and execution of this process. “It is very clear that the actions and reactions of peers and teachers influence the child’s response both behaviourally and mentally, during the physical education lesson and on reflection of it” (Groves and Laws, 2000) p26.

It has been acknowledged that there is little published research which seeks to discuss the experiences and perspectives of children and young people with SEBD (Travell, 2005). One text, which has highlighted this, is that of Wise (2000), who worked to listen to the voices of pupils with SEBD. What research has yet to do is combine the appreciation of voice when working with children who are described as having SEBD, in physical education. Fitzgerald et al. (2003) went some way in attempting this, when researching the physical education experiences of students with severe learning difficulties. Where this research differs from that of Fitzgerald and colleagues is that their task-based approach to the research question does not offer (nor does it claim to offer) a longitudinal and grounded approach to the study of their views and experiences.

3.0 Methodology
The importance placed upon the notion of voice within this research is grounded in the requirements and purposes of the aims of this study. Hence, the methods contained within this research are grounded in naturalistic and interpretive methodologies. Underpinning the rationale is a belief that to understand the subjective world of human experiences requires a personal and unique interpretation, which goes beyond that of the positivist researcher. “Human behaviour cannot be predicted with the precision that is possible in the natural sciences because it varies according to people’s intentions, objectives, and the historically changing meanings which give them sense and context” (Layder, 2006) p 160.

An interpretive methodology pays reference to the fact that the human sciences should be steeped in hermeneutics (interpretation) for the purpose of recognising the meanings and perspectives of the people being studied. This methodology is congruent with the fundamental epistemological and methodological characteristic that social organisations are constructed on purposeful actions of individuals as they negotiate their social roles and define status within a group. The rubric of such an approach is to aim for an understanding of another person’s world through appreciating how others construct meanings of their world. Humans act (behave) in accordance with their individual and subjective understanding of their world (Pope, 2006), and, as such, the truths and associated meanings with which they make reference to are deemed to be socially constructed. On such grounds, the interpretive
orientation conceives multiple realities, each of which is relative to a particular individual context (Pope, 2006). By exploring these individual contexts and truths, research within an interpretive framework most commonly involves an intensely interactive and personal process of engagement (Sparkes, 1994), to which the methods of this study reflect. This is most effectively achieved through methods which afford the opportunity to watch, listen, empathise, learn about perspectives, make sense of experiences, and share understanding of meaningful interpretations.

“Traditional positivist researchers are frequently working to find a single, testable truth. Interpretive researchers, however, support the notion of multiple truths. That is, truth is seen as a social construction and inextricably linked to the meanings of the study’s participants.”

(Macdonald et al., 2002) p. 140

4.0 Case Study Methods
As an important constituent part of the planning for the case study schools, I embarked on a period of familiarisation in two maintained secondary schools different from those being used as sites for case study participants. My intentions were to become conversant with the idiosyncrasies that exist within a department of physical education. By familiarising myself with particular conventions, my goal was to attempt to grasp an understanding of the nuances, the language, and the interpersonal intricacies, which might likely be encountered during future case studies. This is more than just a linear pilot of the efficacy of a method. Time spent in these two schools enables an objective exploration in engagement with students. Each school provided an opportunity for familiarisation with the intricacies of field work, and the responses which my behaviours were likely to receive. I gained invaluable first hand objective and empirical evidence of the suitability of these methods within a PE environment. I was able to refine my interaction with pupils when discussing their experiences. I found that I was beginning to understand and interpret some of the subjective meanings which they themselves were describing in their attempts to appreciate their own experiences of PE.

In consciousness of a methodology which is embedded in their design, critical appraisal of the appropriateness of the methods used within these familiarisation schools, and the quality of the data herewith, has informed those to be used in case studies thereafter. In keeping with an interpretive and naturalistic application of the research aims, these methods were to act as a framework within which each participant’s affinity to a range of methods would guide the regularity and consistency of their use. They are highly dependent upon an individualised approach; neither the cited methods nor my own behaviours during lessons are ensconced in theory. The regularity of their use is allied to the receptiveness of each individual participant. It is not an aim of this research design to strive for congruency between cases. Its purpose is to
seek receptiveness to and understanding of the individual case in hand. We are interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality (Stake, 1995).

This case study style design accounts for, and pays reference to, the fact that each child remains an individual case in his/her own right and worthy of discussion like such. However, it also offers an opportunity to compare these cases on a like for like basis with the aim of highlighting any recurrent themes and any relationships that these themes may have with various experimental factors across samples. As noted by Layder (2006), such comparisons should, however, be treated with caution in that if it appears possible to make generalisations about social life, then these will always be limited by their particular times, places and circumstances.

In full cognition of sampling concepts and processes, the selection of participating case study schools was a pragmatic result of convenience, in that twelve weeks were to be spent in each case study school. A dedicated time of this length demands that the locality of the school is an important factor in their inclusion. In the planning of this research it was decided that this length of time per case was necessary for a number of reasons. The experiences of the time in familiarisation schools taught me that a vital element of any interpretive research is the development of trust between participant and researcher. Twelve consecutive weeks in each of the three schools is conducive to the development of mutual respect and familiarity and helps in yielding a greater depth of mutual trust and understanding.

The purposive selection of pupils from KS3 within each maintained secondary school will emanate from discussions with the school and any other relevant parties. The subjective nature of behaviour makes it difficult to make meaningful decisions in the sampling of participants, which as such affects the ability to make inter- and intra-case comparisons. However, it is not the intention of this study to, once having studied a ‘case’, then generalise these findings. Our first obligation is to understand this one case, we do not study a case primarily to understand other cases (Stake, 1995).

As this research is grounded in interpretive methods, it is not the aim to generalise behaviour, events, or actions, and thus the findings of one case study are difficult to compare with the findings of another (Macdonald et al., 2002). This research aims to do this thematically. As such, the subjects chosen will illustrate the case for children with behavioural difficulties. Hence, the only requirement of these pupils stipulated for inclusion in this study is that they have some form of special educational need relating to their behavioural needs. As a result, they should more than likely have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which needs their behavioural difficulties and thus maybe also be at either ‘School Action’, ‘School Action Plus’ or have a ‘Statement of SEN’. This process will undoubtedly yield a heterogeneous cohort of
students who will have mixed abilities in, and varying affinities for, PE. Pseudonyms will be used for participants throughout.

During case studies I shall keep a research diary, which will be a formal record of my feelings and intuitions as the research is progressed. It will not only document important events as they occur during this time, but will also afford the opportunity to record my thoughts and reflections, which will be used to give context to, and supplement, the analysis of interview data. Derived from this diary, I shall be recording my interactions with each of the participants individually. This will develop into a chronological record of my relationship with each of them, and will provide a foundation for the content of weekly interviews. Interview continuation reports will be completed prior to each interview, with the aim of maintaining coherence between interviews. Here I shall bring together content from the most recently transcribed previous interview and the content of the participant interaction sheets derived from lesson observations since.

The observations which will be made in relation to each participant's PE lessons will be done so with the aim of informing the content of interview discussions. They will not be taken in an intrusive or obvious manner. There is not the need for a strict coding of fixed behaviours, whose intrusive nature could potentially compromise both the dynamics of the lesson and the relationship of trust between the teaching group and myself. Notations on lesson content, and my interpretation of them, will be made within a post-lesson research diary entry, out of the view of participants and their peers.

An important part of the twelve week process during case studies, alongside the continuing observations, will be the participants’ involvement in photo elicitation protocols during the latter stages of the case study. This method has been used previously and has resulted in the conclusions that it is a useful device for communicating that which cannot be made visible (Radley and Taylor, 2003), can contribute to the development of inductively derived constructions (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007), and is a methodological tool with which it is possible to generate research conversations in a way that can enrich the more traditional of empirical research processes (Dean, 2007). Rather than analysing the content of these photos, they will be used as a pictorial mediating artefact used to aid the continued discussion of experiences in PE.

Interviews will be grounded in the participants' experiences of the previous week, and will last for twenty minutes. This is practical in that it will fit in with most school timetables, for example during a period of registration, and is proportionate to the expected attention span of the participants. These will take place during the final six weeks of the case study, once rapport has been built and trust gained. Factors of significance to be discussed within these sessions will remain partly in the control of the participants as subsequently if this is not the case,
‘voice’ is limited to opinion on specific issues pinpointed by the researcher rather than the child (Groves and Laws, 2003).

Implicit in these methods is the opportunity for these participants to guide discussions through a reflective analysis of their experiences in PE both on a micro (weekly) and a macro (autobiographic) level. Questions are to be generated by my curriculum time observations of their experiences and they will be encouraged to lead the discussions around these lessons and the incidents within. Observation and discussion will be ‘re-directed’ to refine and substantiate experience based meanings (Stake, 1995). As such, discussions shall be (in the most part) informed by observation, but will also be supplemented by core set of questions used to support any potential gaps in the discussion, all of which are grounded in either previous research or the familiarisation period outcomes previously highlighted.

On a weekly basis, traditional manual thematic analysis of each interview (both whilst listening to and once transcribed) will be completed, which will inform any forthcoming ensuing observations and interviews. This will enable each of the weekly interviews to be grounded in the lessons learnt from the previous week. On completion of the twelve weeks, I will make use of QSR International’s Nvivo7 to aid greater depth of analysis of each individual’s interviews. This will allow me to begin to make inter- and intra-comparisons of each child’s experiences, which will not be possible during the time in school.

5.0 Case Study - Ben

Berkley High School (pseudonym) is an average sized comprehensive school served by a favourable socio-economic profile, which is reflected in below average number of pupils entitled to free school meals (Office for Standards in Education, 2006). Twelve weeks were spent in school at a time when the PE department was fully staffed and included both experienced teaching staff and a recently graduated Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT).

The analysis of this first case study school and the first participant within it has highlighted a number of core themes, which were each coded regularly during the analysis of interview transcripts. The ‘nodes’ which were transcribed in these interviews included ability, choice, enjoyment, environment, aggression, learning, peers, behaviour, curriculum, participation, and pedagogy. Attention has been given to the definitions of each of these coding categories, factors which underpin their use and selection, their meanings, and my interpretation of them. Each of these nodes is, to some extent, represented in the indicative analysis below. However, the length and depth of this suggestive analysis is not symptomatic of that which will be forthcoming once all case studies are complete.

Ben is a year nine pupil who joined Berkley from a local school after a managed move at the end of year 7. He is at School Action Plus and is believed to have ADHD and Tourettes.
syndrome for which he has medication. His IEP gives evidence that he has difficulty keeping quiet but works well alongside role models. He has very low self esteem and a strong sense of injustice. It records that he cannot cope with perceived confrontation. Possibly due to his Tourettes, he has a tendency to fiddle with objects on his desk and has a tendency to talk a lot. Consistency of classroom rules and a firm but fair approach will help him to understand the boundaries within which to work. CAT results are not available. His PASS data considers him neither to be at risk nor score highly; he is deemed average. His most recent school report indicates that he shows little curiosity and lacks motivation. It states that he fails to act upon advice given and demonstrates little responsibility for independent learning. He also is easily distracted when working within a group.

5.1 Discussion
Ben spoke freely during our interviews. He had a very good awareness of himself, his behaviour, and his relationship with PE, which made for some very interesting discussions during interviews. He spoke openly about his time in his previous school,

*Ben: When they did try to help me everything just collapsed, cos they like, you know they tried to cut my lunchtimes down and everything, which really if a kid has been stuck in a lesson and they try to help him by cutting his lunchtime down, it doesn’t work, because he wants to get out of that lesson and just go and get some fresh air and try and calm down, but to keep him in a, it was like a room no bigger than this*

He refers here to the root of his problems as being a lack of understanding in terms of his behaviour. He makes reference to the need for him to have space and fresh air to control his behavioural tendencies, something, which he was later able to place within the context of his PE lessons.

*Ben: Yeh its different cos like in math’s you can’t just get up and run around, but like in PE you’re running around and burning energy off, if you know what I mean, its just better*

He also went on to show a good understanding of how such freedom manifested itself in other lessons of the national curriculum,

*Ben: Its like drama in a way, like, it’s like something where you’re not so restricted, you can talk during PE as long as you’re running around. Well basically it’s just a good lesson really I like it*

*RM: Whereas PE is, are you saying that PE is kind of like an opportunity to also*

*Ben: Yeh, get back if you know what I mean*

In relation to this, Ben then showed an understanding of how a lack of participation also affected him,
Ben: Oh I like PE, it’s a shame I couldn’t do it today because I really wanted to, and, just getting a bit annoyed while they were doing it because I wanted to get in there

When we then spoke about what this previously mentioned lack of restriction does for him, Ben was able to describe how the freedom associated with his learning environment resulted in a cathartic type response in behaviours.

Ben: Well I like it, like if you’ve just been in a rubbish lesson it gives you chance to run it off, you think of something else and just run it off, plus it keeps me, well people, in shape. And like the sports we do in school I like

Ben: Just get to run around, burn some energy off

He went on again to contextualise this with an example from a sport, which he saw as a facilitator to these processes.

Ben: Yeh, it’s just like, and its one thing I like about PE, especially rugby, if someone has been annoying you, you just, you know you see a chance you know if they’ve got the ball then just take them out and then you like you get a good feeling. Not because, A. you can say oh “why did you do that” “well you had the ball so I can tackle you”. So it like relieves something out of me if you know what I mean?

He also spoke about these therapeutic qualities in relation to his anger, and his personal time.

Ben: Getting a boxing bag for Christmas hopefully

RM: Yeh

Ben: So I can just, if I’m annoyed I can keep my anger in, but sometimes if I keep it in too long I just go mental

Alongside these aggressive cathartic qualities, which he associated with participation in rugby and boxing, he spoke about these aggressive tendencies in relation to an incident with a peer.

Ben: Well I mean if would have mostly been a boy I would have mostly gone over and punched him and it would have been quits, but because it was a girl I can’t really go and punch a girl, that’s different

Ben was also able to describe his experiences of how he felt after practical lessons.

Ben: Well after athletics I’m just knackered so I don’t have any energy to terrorise or do anything afterwards, I just normally flop

On a separate occasion, he clarified this response.

RM: So does it ever wind you up, do you ever like come back from PE and you’re a bit hyper?
Ben: Not generally no, I don’t get hyper unless I’ve like had a bit to drink or something like that.

Ben was very comfortable verbalising his responses to PE, and was often able to cite examples which underpinned the discussions we were having. He also showed an enlightening depth of understanding to describe his responses to PE curricular.

RM: But it’s amazing isn’t it how like the sport which you’re playing can

Ben: changes the mood like that or

RM: Yeh

Ben: or your attitude or something

When comparing these responses to other curriculum lessons, he would often speak about the pedagogy, which he saw as being very different in PE.

Ben: It’s relaxed, the teachers are more relaxed. If you like get tackled and you swear, then they’ll just tell you off. But if you did that, if someone annoyed you in a lesson and you turned round and said f**k, then the teacher would get pretty annoyed and would mostly give you a detention. Whereas in PE, they would still be like annoyed with you but they would like, wouldn’t be so annoyed, they wouldn’t be so strict on it.

He was able to describe to me how these differences in pedagogies affected his own learning, and was very understanding of his own learning style.

Ben: Well I like to learn in quite exciting ways, not sitting writing

RM: Yeh

Ben: I think it’s called kinaesthetic or something

RM: Yeh yeh

We spoke indirectly about how this learning style which he himself recognised as affecting his time in PE.

Ben: I like to be doing

Ben: I like to learn how to play

Again, we spoke at length during his interviews about his relationships with the PE teaching staff, and how these went on to affect his behaviours.

Ben: I just, he’s got one of those attitudes where he goes “alright fine if you’re not joining in then you can get lost, if you don’t want to take part I’ve no time for you” sort of thing
Ben often related these perceptions of the teaching staff to his experiences of how lessons were planned.

*Ben:* Like rugby we do one game one week and training at the next, and like, which is good, but there they just put us into a game and didn’t bother to say anything, which was good at the time but now you look back on it and wish they did teach you a few things, cos then it would have like helped us.

He later showed further depth of understanding about how his lessons affected him,

*Ben:* I don’t like things changing from one to another.

*RM:* Do you ever get that from PE teachers, with them trying to do too much?

*Ben:* No not generally no.

Ben also related these responses to his experiences of a frantic indoor lesson,

*Ben:* But today it was like adrenaline, you’ve got to dodge people and the ball, you’ve to look back for the ball and everything and you’ve got to time it to run so, I like it.

Despite his previous recognition of the importance of pedagogy, he was able to contextualise this alongside other factors, again to include the environment in which he learnt.

*RM:* So are you saying that the reason you behave differently in PE than in other lessons is all down to the teacher?

*Ben:* Not all down to the teacher, the, not the strictness and the fact that your allowed to run around, whereas if your in the classroom you cant really run around cos you’ll fall over or hurt someone or some health and safety crap, but um, but like, generally with the teacher yes, and just the fact that that you’re allowed to run around and tackle people.

This further shows the multiplicity of factors within a PE lesson, which he attributed to his behaviours. What he also did, when discussing the antecedents to his behaviours, was to give a very personal and thoughtful understanding of possible more global contexts around them.

*Ben:* No I didn’t do it because of the kids I hanged around with. I’ve had quite a rough, I live in a nice place and my parents are great they’ve bought me up right, but through my life I’ve had it quite rough. My, all my three grandparents died within the space of two years which had a knock on effect, and things like that and. My dad used to work away from home for a whole week, I’d only see him on weekends, and that used to upset me and I didn’t used to know how to handle it if you know what I mean, so that it always like effected me if you know what I mean.

He understood that there were a number of contributory factors, which affected these behaviours.
RM: So its, there’s a combination then of the people that you’re with like mates and stuff, or people being idiots in the group, do you think that they affect your time in PE as well as the teacher then?

Ben: Well sometimes it’s certain people, or its certain rooms, or teachers or sometime

Ben would often use his time in his old school as examples of the variations in behaviours, which he recognized in PE. He related the freedom (which he has previously spoke about) to the behaviours, which he himself and peers associate with participation in PE.

Ben: Well the thing is there are some rough kids at [school], and in PE they just used to muck around, so it was like a mucking around lesson. Which I’ve always seen PE as, well not like oh, “I’ll go to PE and muck around”, but like you can muck around whilst doing PE, so like that

Despite these admissions of seeing it as a subject with relative autonomy in terms of both behaviour and participation, Ben recognised the importance of performance in PE, and was able to explain the resultant feelings, which a lack of ability brings

Ben: Because like my half can’t play basketball to save their lives, well [name] can and [name] can and all that, they can, but like some of them just don’t know the rules where [name] is just jumping all over the place and elbowing all over the place and they just, I like to play basketball with people who know how to play basketball

We spoke about PE as being either a performance or participatory domain, and he spoke about how he sees it as being similar to sports, which he plays outside of curriculum time.

Ben: Well I like sport better than PE because well generally because, well you go and play football with your mates, as a sport, it like, you’re not taught not to do it first

RM: Yeh

Ben: and we just play a game and muck about and everything, whereas in school you have to go through well the basics, the boring stuff really, its not particularly great

RM: No

Ben: But once we get going I do see it as they same, and once we’re playing games

5.2 Summary
Ben was very astute in his descriptions of his relationship with PE and the experiences, which he has had in the subject. He spoke often about his perception that it was a subject, which enabled him to be free from the restrictions of others. He described how he often felt calmer as a result of participation, which helped him to channel his excess energies. He also spoke of it as a subject steeped in the opportunity for redemption! His affinity towards the physical nature of contact sports underpinned his beliefs in the subject as being one of lawlessness! He commented on how the teachers in PE were less strict than those he was taught by elsewhere.
There seemed to be a number of agendas in PE for Ben. In sports he enjoyed and in which he was proficient, the ability to perform was a most important factor. In others, his ability was irrespective to his experience; they simply served a purpose of freedom and catharsis.

6.0 Conclusions
There are a number of noteworthy outcomes from this case study based upon the initial analysis given above. Some of these experiences remain unique to the child with SEBD. However, many of the emergent themes do share common ground with the findings of previous more generic research findings such as those of Groves and Laws (2000) and Smith and Parr (2007). Such comparisons remain the focus of this work in progress. At this stage, it remains difficult to discuss the wider interpretations of this data further, without the need for the inclusion of other participant data sets.

What this research has shown thus far is that, to find out ‘why’, takes time, and trust. To do so with regard for each individual requires an interpretivist framework of methods that highlight the importance of the individuals’ experience. To do so meaningfully requires a naturalistic application of these methods that recognises the importance of the environment in which we study. Finally, to do so with rigour requires a grounded and prolonged series of thoughtful interactions that may well help contribute to an understanding of the rich and dynamic experiences of children with SEBD, in a physical education environment.
References


