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## The Voices of Children aged 10 and 11 years old: Their views on Physical Education and the implications for Policy, Practice and Research in England.

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### **Abstract**

This paper has evolved out of a much larger doctoral thesis which looked specifically at the voices of year 6 children in the Olympic borough of Hackney in east London. The data collected contributes to an existing body of knowledge where the vast majority of the work on pupil voice has been concerned with the core subjects and with secondary schooling. The re-emergence of pupil voice as a pedagogical approach to inform curriculum design is encouraged throughout. The data collected showed that children do value their health, and were asking for a greater range of physical activities to be made available to them.

*Key Words: Children, Physical Education, Pedagogy, Learning and teaching*

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### **Defining Physical Education**

Taking a constructivist-interpretivist stance, this mixed methods case study gave a voice to 236 children from four different schools between 2007 and 2010 through the use of questionnaires and interviews. The aim was to explore what the children thought about Physical Education (PE), with a view to illuminating and informing current policy, practice and research in relation to the aims which under-pin the national curriculum. The children's voices, conspicuously absent from any significant discussions about their physical education, over the last twenty years, give a view of the curriculum from the recipient's perspective. In addition to valuing children's voices, this paper shows that through democratising the discussion the children were more than just 'empty vessels' and were able to offer informed views at year 6 aged 10 and 11 years.

As Kirk (1992) acknowledges, defining PE is notoriously difficult. Whilst there are many more contemporary definitions for example, Kirk (2010), the Youth Sport Trust (YST) (2010), and The Association for Physical Education (afPE) (2010), none appear to be any more authoritative than another. Penney and Chandler (2000), have argued that the most enduring and resistant characteristics of PE is the focus on

physical activity, and the main issue is in relation to what people, that is teachers and coaches, do with these physical activities and how they are practised. Elsewhere Proctor (1984), argued that PE was 'amorphous' and would quite naturally mean different things to different groups of human beings. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this, because as Lawson (1991) argues:

Subject fields or disciplines have been invented; they are socially constructed and constituted by humans. (p.286)

The YST (2010) has made a distinction between PE and Sport and separated the terms. Likewise, through defining PE, the afPE (2010) has at its heart the desire that all young learners should be involved in physical activity, and experience positive beneficial learning experiences. These experiences should include personal well-being, achievement for all learners, and an understanding of what makes a healthy life style. Taking into account these informed views in defining PE, it is not unreasonable to summarise that PE is about giving children a broad range of physical experiences, presented in a positive way, where they can experience fun, enjoyment and success at whatever level they access the physical activity, sport or game. If this aspect of the process is executed well, then hopefully the children will continue to participate and be involved in their preferred activities, games or sports, thereby continuing to be physically active and involved at a variety of levels for the remainder of their lives. Moreover PE is also about helping young people to understand and value their physical selves, how the body works, and how to look after it for a lifetime.

### **The context of the research**

During the time that it took to complete the research, a number of government agencies, medical bodies and other interested parties have published their views on what helps contribute towards a healthy lifestyle. For example Palmer (2006) wrote about a Toxic Childhood, and Jamie Oliver told us all about School Dinners (2004). Elsewhere we have witnessed the Change 4 life project, the 5 a day initiative and the Healthy hearts happy lives programme amongst numerous other ventures. The debates surrounding 'healthy living', diet, nutrition, adult and children's decreasing activity levels and the apparent 'obesity epidemic' Department of Health (2008), amongst many others continues.

### **Physical Education (PE) and the National Curriculum in England (NC)**

Notwithstanding present plans to review the Physical Education Curriculum for 2013, (see for example the Westminster Education Forum's National Curriculum Seminar Series and the various discussions on the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> March 2012 at <http://www.westminsterforulprojects.co.uk>.) state schools have to teach the National Curriculum, with the programmes of study clearly delineated (NCPE 2000:6). However, PE is a foundation subject in the NC as opposed to a core subject. A core subject in the NC has greater importance than a foundation subject, for there is a very clear and acknowledged hierarchy present. English mathematics and science are core subjects and dominate the primary school curriculum particularly at Key Stage Two. Many of the strategies now used to overcome an overloaded curriculum are not new to experienced primary school teachers, since many of these, given validation and encouragement by the Plowden Report as long ago as 1967, were reluctantly discarded by some teachers with the introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1988 which encouraged a subject-based as opposed to a child-centred approach. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, Mick Waters, former Director of The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority stated that pupils were 'turned off' by the curriculum, cited in Belshaw (2006). I wondered how the

children of east London felt about the NC and how their views might be used as an evaluative tool for curriculum development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Giving Pupils a voice and ethical considerations - Methodology**

Prior to commencing the data collection in 2007 and in 2010, written agreement from the head teachers and the boards of governors was sought and gained. All children and parents/guardians were given, and were required to complete, an informed consent form detailing the nature of the proposal and relevant background information. All involved had the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice. All parties involved were assured that all information collected, would remain strictly confidential and only used for the purpose of this research.

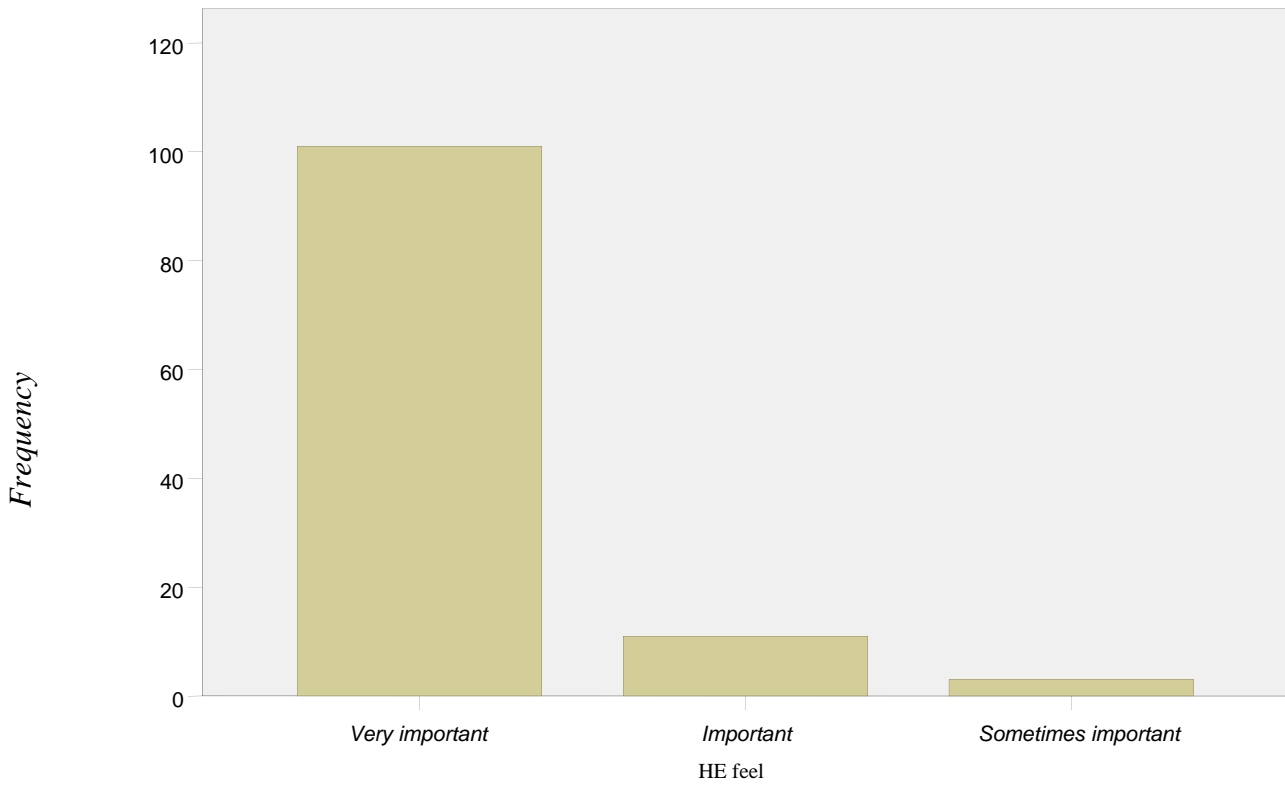
Data was collected from eight classes totalling 236 children in Year 6, aged ten or eleven years old. A decision was taken to work with this year group because it was the children's last year of primary schooling and much would change in their lives when they started secondary schools. Most children in year 6 would also be able to draw upon at least seven years experience of primary school PE. The children's first names are used to demonstrate the very rich cultural make up of the area in which the research was carried out, but school names have been changed. Equally the voices and views of the children are presented exactly as they were recorded or written, their own language is used and nothing has been changed or edited.

### **Presentation of the data – an Overview**

Through the use of questionnaire and follow up interviews, responses from the children were sought and gained to a number of key questions, all of which could not be included here. For example, please see figure 1 below, where the children of 2007 and 2010 were asked to tell me about the importance of their health, and their understanding of health education. Every child except one from both data sets offered an opinion about what they thought health education was, and in some cases more than one definition was offered. Almost half of the children felt that health education was all about understanding what being healthy is. Others felt that it was about diet and doing exercise. However what is explicitly clear is that, as figure 1 below demonstrates, the children do understand the importance of their health and indeed value it. The views of individual children are most illuminative. For example Ahmed at Green Park thought that: 'health education is teaching about your health and how important it is.' Anisha at Abney Park wrote that: 'health education is when you learn to be healthy for when you grow up.' Luke at Central Park felt quite strongly that: 'Health Education is a lesson where children learn about the body, how to keep fit, and what we need to survive.' Luke also made the connection that it could include learning and understanding about the body.

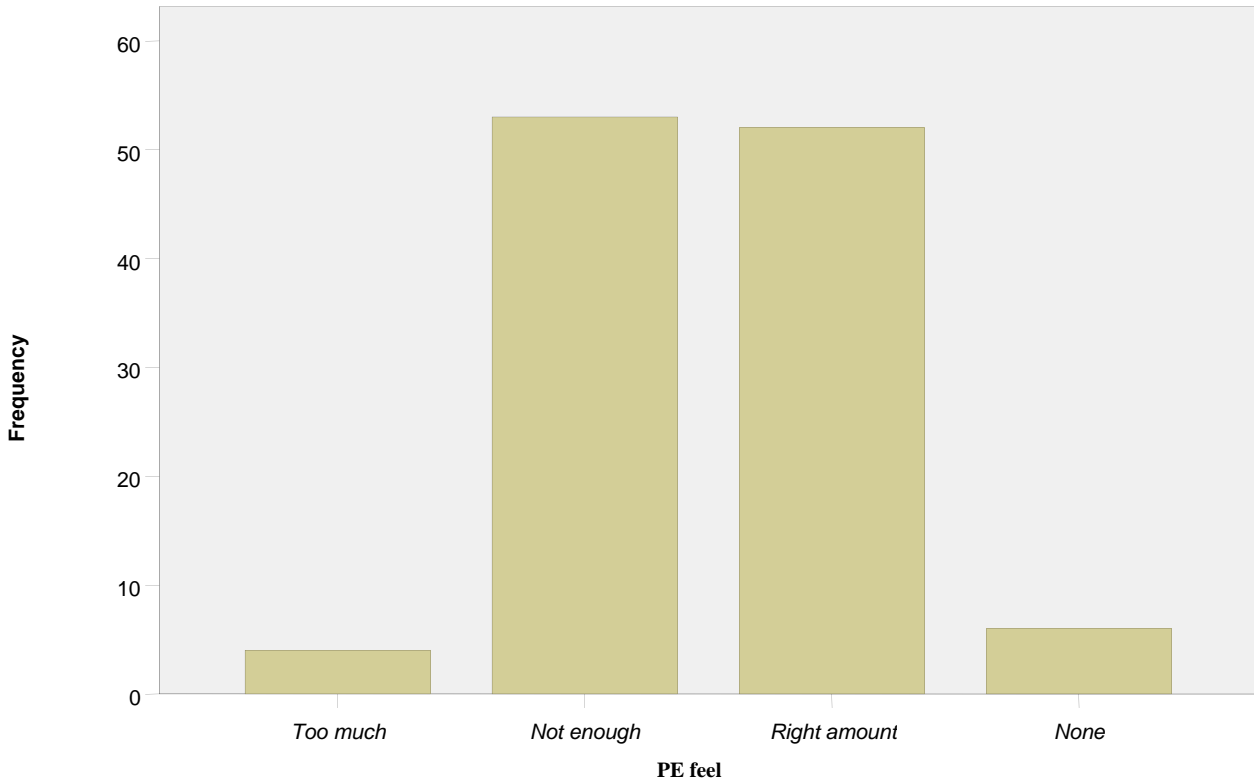
Responses from the children were both interesting and informative and showed a genuine level of care about their health. For example, Terrance at Abney Park felt that his health was very important because: 'If you keep healthy you can live longer.' In the same discussion Izzy added that his health was important because: 'It can expand your life span and you will live longer if you keep healthy.' Ozenc at Green Park offered the view that his health was very important to him because: 'if you are healthy you will be able to do lots of things. You can do other things when you are older. If you don't care about your health you can have a heart attack.' These examples show the children making connections with 'life-long physical activity' afPE (2010), and one of the key components in my defining of PE, Costas (2011)

How important is your health? (Figure 1)



I also wanted to know the children's views on the amount of time that they spent doing PE, Please see figure 2 below, and what this looked and felt like from their perspective. Every child who took part in the research offered an opinion as to what PE actually meant to them. Shakeela at Abney Park thought that PE should take place: 'Everyday for like half an hour after lunch because children feel sleepy and they can't concentrate. They need to let their food digest.' Jack C at Lea Park offered an interesting and differing view that: 'It should be more optional like after school.' Regarding PE curriculum content I invited the children to tell me about activities that they 'loved' doing and 'hated' doing. These two terms were chosen by children from a school in a pilot study who did not take part in the substantive research. Again the responses were both informative and fascinating and I include only a few examples here to represent both sets of feelings. The children's answers were not surprisingly very varied. For example, Annika at Abney Park wrote: 'I love doing athletics, basketball and any other outdoor activity.'

How do you feel about the amount of PE that you do? (Figure 2)



Ahia at Abney Park appeared to enjoy most Sports and stated 'football, cricket, swimming, badminton, tennis 100%.' Mohammed at Central Park admitted that: 'I love doing football because you get to have a bit of a laugh and run around.' Another point interesting to note here was that twenty-seven children, 23.5% nearly a quarter of the cohort in 2007, stated that they did not 'hate' or dislike anything. By contrast however, Alphonso at Green Park had very clear reasons as to his choice, because he wrote: 'I really hate dancing because sometimes you have to dance with a girl.' Anna also disliked dancing but for a very different reason: 'Dancing, because I'm not good.' Hafiz at the same school wrote: 'I hate gymnastics because you can easily pull a muscle and you cannot run for a moment.' For some children the teachers and how the lessons were taught were significant factors in making a judgement. This was especially the case if the teacher was seen as impatient and bad tempered. Having gained an insight of pupils' views on PE, I then turned my attention to how pupils viewed PE in relation to other curriculum subjects, and asked them to tell me about their favourite subject and why they had made the choice.

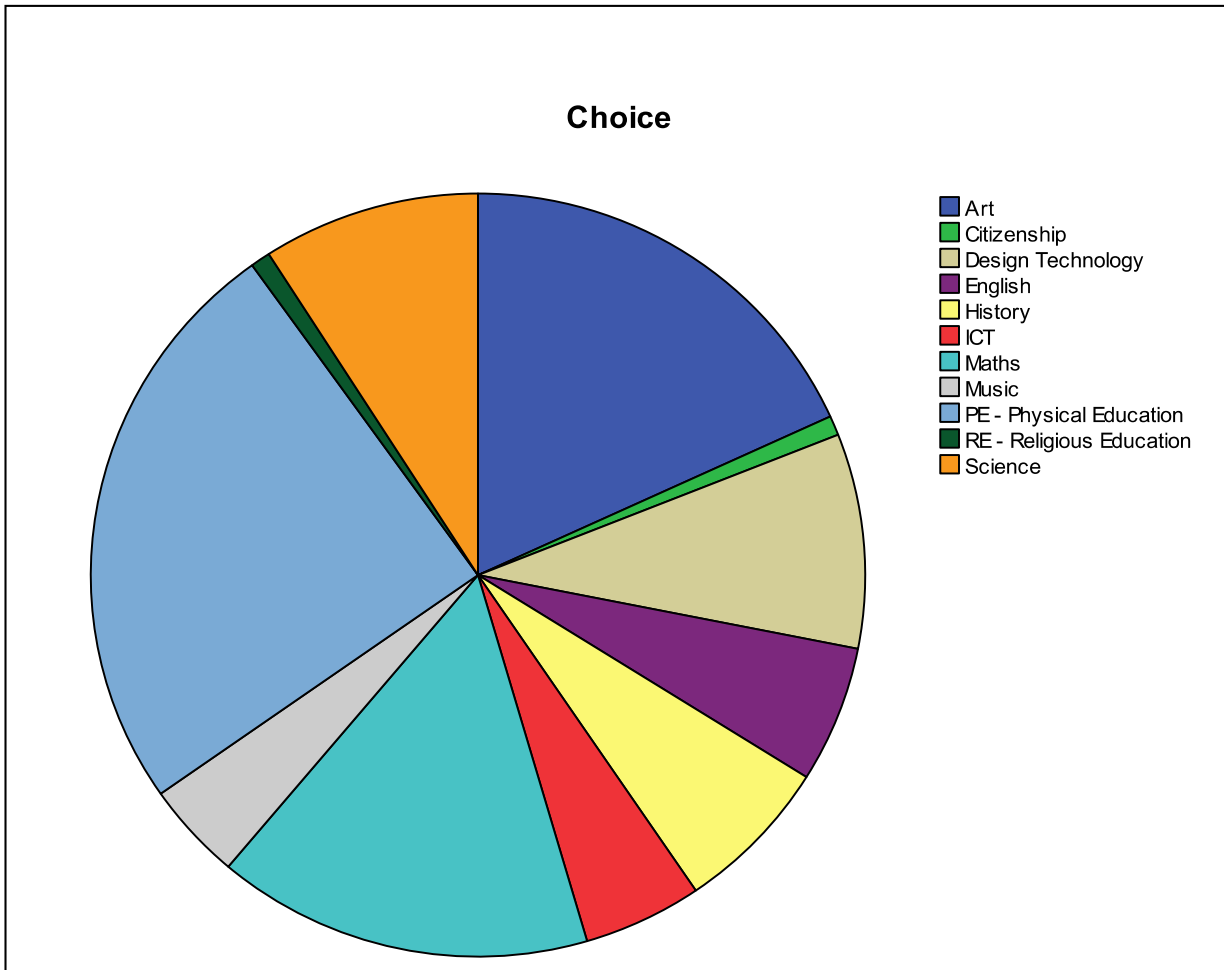
As figure 3 below shows, just under a quarter of the cohort in 2010 chose PE as their favourite subject, followed by Art with 22, and Maths with 19 selections.

Calvin at Lea Park wrote that he chose PE as his favourite subject because, 'it can make you have exercise and you can have lots of fun.'

Michelle at Green Park chose PE, 'because we get to learn new sports and have fun, but most importantly you learn how to play the game.'

Ben recorded: 'because you learn about your muscles and move a lot of the time. And you learn new stuff like how to control a ball and dribble a ball. And it is good exercise.' In telling me 'why' they had chosen PE as their favourite subject, words and phrases like doing

**Figure 3: Curriculum choice**



exercise, being energetic, being active and moving were also mentioned. The data showed that the children were able to make the link between PE, physical activity, and health and fitness and therein understand the uniqueness of PE as a curriculum subject. Further examples included Ryan from Central Park who felt that, 'PE is my favourite subject because you learn to keep yourself active.' Tyreke went further

and noted how he valued PE, 'because you get to exercise your body and it makes your heart beat fast and quicker.' Elizabeth kept it simple and to the point and chose PE: 'because it's fun and it helps keep you fit healthy and feeling good.' Elizabeth summed it up rather well and this leads me into another area of my data analysis.

### **Pupil Voice and the implications for future policy and practice**

It was very clear when reading the children's questionnaires and talking to them that fun was very important to them in PE lessons. In both data sets the vast majority of responses were positive. Children talked and recorded continuously about 'having fun' 'enjoyment' and having the opportunity to work and 'play with friends.' Gul at Green Park wrote 'FUN' in capital letters, Gwen at the same school, also used the term, and Arlene at Lea Park wrote that she 'absolutely loved cycling.' In the data set of 2010, of the 30 children who chose PE as their favourite subject, 14 just under half of the group wrote the word fun on their questionnaire. Other words that they associated with PE were love, like, enjoy and exciting. For example Christine at Lea Park stated 'I like PE because I love playing games.' Jessie at Green Park wrote that she chose PE 'because it's fun and exciting. It also makes you exercise a lot.' Stanley at the same school selected PE: 'because I am a sporty person, and I love swimming.' Robert at Central Park wrote that it was 'because it gets me outside the classroom and the games are fun.' What was also very evident was the positivity in which the children talked about their favourite subjects, and although the reasons varied the language was always upbeat. The theme of fun, enjoyment, and positivity are areas that are never really far away for the children. This point was not lost on Wright (2004) where the concept of 'happiness' was explored in relation to children's learning in primary PE. The data provided in this overview have shown that children might have, and are able to hold, sensible views on PE and health issues; that they have their own thoughts and ideas on a range of things. The data that the children gave me with regard to what they thought about PE was very specific. For example, and just taking a further sample from the full data set collected, 80% said they loved games, 64.3% stated that they loved gymnastics, 80.9% loved outdoor and adventurous activities (OAA), 73% loved swimming, 38.3% loved dance, and 60.9% loved athletic activities.

The data provided by the children showed that , 46.1% of the cohort felt that they did not do enough PE, whereas only slightly less 45.2% were generally very happy with the amount of PE provision that they were receiving, and felt that they did the right amount of PE. What the children collectively recorded was that they wanted a larger variety of activities to be included in the PE curriculum, not more of the same traditional formats. These views are certainly in line with the work of Penney (2004) and Boorman (1998), where they explicitly show that different children like different sorts of activities and sports. This was substantiated by some of the things that the children wrote and recorded at interview. Shakeela noted 'We should have more choice of what we do in PE. We need more fun, a mix 'n' match of things.' Louisa at Lea Park said 'We should do more things, a bigger variety of sports, not only doing games.' Inez continued 'We don't do enough types of sport. Ok, we did Aussie rules which was fun, but we didn't even do like, cricket.' The question that does not go away easily, is that if *the children* in this research are recording that they do value their health and well being highly and enjoy PE, then why does PE continue to remain only a foundation subject in the NC? As Carney & Winkler (2008) have argued in their conclusion to the paper '*The Problem with Primary Physical Education*' the debate needs advancing. Giving pupils a voice is one way forward, and a re-consideration of the aims of education and

pedagogical approaches is another way of advancing the discussion. Elsewhere the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda is concerned with listening to children and what they have to tell us in order that they may feel valued and safe. It is also concerned with children enjoying *'healthy lifestyles and achieving and developing skills for adulthood.'* (ECM: 2003). As has been demonstrated so far, the children involved in this research were, perfectly willing and able to inform current debates on a range of issues. The data offered by the children suggests that they might be able to play a greater role in their own education and in curriculum design. As Lawton (1996, 2000), Fielding (2004, 2008) Simons (1987, 1999) argue and White argued so forcibly (2004, 2007), it does appear to be the case that there is a mismatch in terms of pedagogical approaches, between the NC (a transmission model), and the child's role in their own learning. Moreover, as White argues, the real problem lies in the lack of clarity regarding the basic aims that underpin education. What common goals and aspirations are we striving for? Should they include the views of the young people, the recipient group of our views and aspirations? That is to say, should they have a role to play in their own learning and should they be encouraged to enact this role and be given greater responsibility? Advocates like Mullan (2003) argued that an educational system, which focuses on the rights and responsibilities of the child, will involve children in decision making processes in all aspects of school life, and where the emphasis should not be on absorbing curriculum content alone.

### **Summary Findings and Recommendations**

It has been argued that there has been little or no dialogic relationship with regard to pupil voice, in year 6, PE, or their views on health when compared with the 'core' subjects or with secondary schooling. It could be argued that a focus on traditional team sport only, will be prohibitive for many primary children, and the positioning of PE within the NC framework has been challenged. Children are asking for a greater variety of activities to be offered to them, not more of the same, Costas (2011). This is crucial if they are to be encouraged to be physically active. If a curriculum that distinguishes between core and foundation subjects is to remain, then PE would need to be given core status, (and I understand that PE is to be a mandatory subject in the re-drafted NC – Westminster Forum PE 2012) if the children's own valuing of their health is to be acknowledged. Although the data did not show that the children were asking for a move towards cross curricular thematic teaching, (and why would they?) many of their responses did link subjects. This linking across subjects does of course give a distinct insight into how children view their world and is at odds with a subject centred curriculum. Indeed, vast areas of learning are inseparable and intrinsically linked in the young mind (see, e.g. Vygotsky's notion of the transferability of learning skills in Vygotsky, 1962, and Bernstein's conceptualisation of 'weak classification' in Bernstein 1971). It is, rather, the adults who place boundaries as to when one subject starts and another one finishes. This is not unlike the concept advocated earlier by Lawson (1991), where the difficulties in defining the term PE were explored. Notions of combining areas of learning, prioritising, and teaching through 'topics or themes' or addressing specific skills in different contexts is not a new concept (Bernstein's, 1971, 'weak classification' model) may well be familiar to older more experienced teachers and early years practitioners.

### **Conclusion**

Children do have a voice worth listening to if given the opportunity. The children have shown that the National Curriculum needs reviewing. A curriculum that is based on a model from 1904, and is not fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the under-pinning philosophical aims do not



take into account that children can be intrinsically involved in their own learning. If one of the emerging pedagogical approaches for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is for a greater emphasis on pupil voice in order to enlighten the debate surrounding restructuring the NC, then perhaps now is the time to give the children, the chief stake holders in education the opportunity to make up their own minds for themselves. It seems at best unwise at worst invidious not to include them in discussions surrounding their own education when as this research shows they are clearly fit able and willing to speak for themselves if given the opportunity.

### Post Script

On reflection, and following the submission of this paper and acceptance to present at the ACHPER International Conference in November 2013 I offer a number of observations that may further enhance my work. Firstly, the views expressed by the children in this research were overwhelmingly positive in terms of likes when compared to their dislikes. This should not be surprising when one considers the positivity created by the Olympic Games coming to their London Borough of Hackney in 2012, and since one of my objectives was to keep children's positive views on their health and physical activity at the heart of my research, my work reflects this I hope. Whether the Olympic legacy lives up their expectations and hopes remains to be seen. This is something that I hope to return to in the not too distant future. Whilst any piece of research is not without flaws and mine is no exception in terms of an emphasis on percentages and numbers which are representational of some of the children's views between 2007 and 2010, it is the warmth and vibrancy of their voices that I hope shine through. (Dr B.P.Costas 30<sup>th</sup> July 2013)

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