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# **Can Korfball Facilitate Mixed-PE in the UK? The Perspectives of Junior Korfball Players**

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## **Can Korfball Facilitate Mixed-PE in the UK? The Perspectives of Junior Korfball Players**

Korfball was invented in a mixed Primary School in Amsterdam in the early 1900s (IKF, 2006; Summerfield and White, 1989). The main catalyst for the development of korfball was a need for a competitive mixed sport that relied on cooperation and meant boys and girls could participate on a level playing field (Summerfield and White, 1989). Previous research into gender in physical education (PE) has found that young people gain gender-related understandings through PE (Azzarito, 2009; Azzarito and Solomon, 2009; Azzarito and Solomon, 2010; Chalabaev, et al., 2013; Wright, 1995). Thorne (1993) argues that to remove binary thinking and notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, PE lessons should promote equality between girls and boys, reflect cooperation and teamwork between all, and demonstrate to students that gender inclusivity is achievable.

This paper will consider findings from a larger ethnographic study, in order to discuss how junior korfball players understand gender within their individual PE settings. It will also seek to discover whether players believe gender discourses can be negotiated in PE through the use of korfball. Players frequently referred to the limitations of their current PE experiences and suggested that the mixed element of korfball could provide opportunities for boys and girls to come together in PE. Players described how the structure of the korfball game reflects a need to use both sexes, which could improve mixed PE lessons. Players also discussed preconceived ideas about boys' games and girls' games, which led to problematic actions and interactions in current mixed PE settings. Findings suggest that embodied practices which demonstrate the abilities of girls as well as boys, could lead to resistance of dominant discourses which reinforce gender difference and the physical inferiority of girls. They might provide a space which alters dominant discourse often reproduced in PE and sporting environments.

Keywords: korfball; PE; gender; mixed sport; children.

### **Introduction**

Physical education (PE) is a space influenced by broader social discourses related to gender norms and (in)equalities. From a young age, children tend to be aware of gender-appropriate physical activities, which can influence their participation in PE. The socialisation that takes place when PE teachers themselves are at school, influences later choices about activities within PE (Green, 2008), meaning that there tends to be a reproduction of traditional sporting activities as the basis for lessons. Additionally, PE structures, particularly at UK secondary schools, mean that boys and girls are often (but not always) separated during PE lessons and expected to take part in different activities. Common-sense assumptions about biological differences and therefore abilities between boys and girls mean that gender difference and inequality is reproduced within these contexts. Additionally, often within PE settings, girls and boys are seen as homogenous groups, with little critical consideration about individual activity choices and ability. In order to better consider the needs of all students, we need to listen to young people, with the desired outcome of learning and enthusiasm for all students in PE (Hill, 2015).

This paper will discuss how junior korfball players understand gender within their individual PE settings where korfball is not currently being played. It will also seek to discover whether players believe gender discourses can be negotiated in PE through the use of mixed-gender sports such as korfball, but it does not uncritically suggest that korfball is the conclusive answer to mixed PE

### ***The Significance of Korfball in an Educational Context***

The International Korfball Federation (IKF) describe korfball as a sport with characteristics which ‘encompass all-round skills, cooperative play, controlled physical contact and gender equality’ (IKF, 2017, p.1). Korfball, like netball and basketball, is a ball sport that is played by hand (IKF, 2006; Summerfield and White, 1989). The aim of the game is to score goals by shooting the ball through the basket, known as the korf

(IKF, 2006). To shoot for a goal, players must escape from their personal opponent with skills of passing the ball and moving quickly and efficiently (IKF, 2006). Teams are made up of eight players, with four women and four men on each team (Crum, 1988; IKF, 2006). Women only mark women and men only mark men, so players are only playing directly opposite their own sex (IKF, 2006). To add to the promotion of equality and teamwork, solo play is forbidden (IKF, 2006) and the rules make teamwork obligatory (Emmerik, et al., n.d.). Korfball is intended to be a sport in which anyone can participate, it is deemed straightforward to learn and play just for fun, and yet competitive enough to enjoy at an elite level (Crum, 2005). On the 20 August 2017, the IKF affiliated 69 countries; korfball is also recognised by the International Olympic Committee.

Korfball was invented in a mixed Primary School in Amsterdam at the beginning of the 1900s (IKF, 2006; Summerfield and White, 1989). The main catalyst for the development of korfball was a perceived need for a competitive mixed sport that relied on cooperation, where rules were designed to encourage boys and girls to participate on a level playing field, refute violence and form an egalitarian game (Summerfield and White, 1989). Korfball offered an innovative and radical alternative to single-sex team sports that had been introduced to, and developed in schools around the same time (IKF, 2006). All in all, when trying to promote the status and equality of women in sport, coeducational sports such as korfball arguably stand a better chance than sports where men and women are isolated, or more traditional male-dominated sports (Crum, 1988).

## **Review of Literature**

### ***PE is a Space to Learn and Perform Gender***

The idea that PE is an influential space for the construction of gender is considered by many academics (e.g. Azzarito, 2009; Azzarito and Solomon, 2009; Gerdin, 2017). Arguably, PE plays a powerful part in developing gender understandings and knowledge about related social constructs such as masculinities and femininities, highlighting its importance as an arena for investigating these ideas (Gerdin, 2017). PE provides an opportunity for young people to learn to interpret what high and low-status bodies look like and act like (Azzarito, 2009), and ‘the body, then, through young people’s negotiation of physical culture, becomes a *gender project*’ (Azzarito and Solomon, 2009, p. 174). PE discourses and discursive practices serve to develop notions of gender difference and aid the validation of normal representations of gender (Gerdin, 2017).

Studies have demonstrated how parents (Warner and Dixon, 2015; Wellard, 2009) and PE teachers (Chalabaev, et al., 2013) can impact upon gender-related understandings of children. Wrench and Garrett (2017) draw on their research findings and suggest that pre-service teachers also embody gender, they do ‘not arbitrarily adopt gendered subject positions but are constrained and influenced by discursive and non-discursive practices circulating within these spaces’ (Wrench and Garrett, 2017, p. 332). Nevertheless, within the same study, a pre-service teacher critically recognised PE as a space where gender is performed and influenced by hegemonic norms which dictate behaviours related to femininity and masculinity. PE classes are not enclosed spaces whereby the only transfer of knowledge is from the teacher to their students. Instead, PE provides a space where social norms and ideologies are learned and constructed, providing an intricate arena for development (Azzarito and Solomon, 2010; Wright, 1995). For example, research by Hill (2015) demonstrated how girls in her study internalised the gaze and also policed each other. They made judgements about girls

who did not conform to normative femininities, such as girls who they considered to be Tomboys or those girls with high sporting ability.

Nevertheless, PE may be seen as a positive space where dominant gender discourses can be challenged and children's bodies can be liberated. Azzarito and Solomon (2006, p. 221) conclude that 'PE can be empowering if it is constructed as an educational space for the body to be, to positively transform, and freely express the self'. Additionally, Wrench and Garrett (2017) suggest that teachers and teacher educators need to be critical about the projection of dominant discourses and discursive practices related to gender and pedagogies of PE. This can be difficult though when it is considered normal for girls and boys to be separated within PE pedagogy. Gerdin explains how PE within New Zealand is often based on 'a gender-differentiated curriculum where boys and girls are often encouraged to pursue different and distinct interests as a consequence of their biological differences' (Gerdin, 2017, p. 891). Often, extra-curricular provision within the UK further emphasises this distinction, and continues to reproduce the hidden curriculum related to performances of masculinities and femininities, and gender appropriate activities (Wilkinson and Penney, 2016). As a result, children are taught to recognise activities that are suitable for boys or girls (Adams, 2011; Azzarito and Solomon, 2009; Chalabaev, et al., 2013; Macdonald, Rodger, Abbott, Ziviani and Jones, 2005), and are treated as homogenous groups (Wilkinson and Penney, 2016).

### ***Girls Feel Disadvantaged in Male Dominated PE***

Research within PE settings often shows how girls feel disadvantaged (Evans, 2006) or reluctant to abide by traditionally masculine characteristics required within most sporting competitions (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). Within a primary school setting it has been discovered that as girls get older, they find an increased pressure to present

themselves in appropriately feminine ways and disassociate themselves from a tomboy image (Paechter, 2010). Clarke and Paechter (2007) also explain how girls within their study thought that playground football was rough, and since 'being nice' was a strong factor in securing female friends, the roughness of football became a deterrent for girls' participation. Additionally, the perception that girls are physically less able in PE activities is internalised by female students (Hill, 2015). Evans (2006) asserted that when girls felt disconnected from PE lessons, it was often due to a feeling of inadequacy when fulfilling the tasks at hand; a physical inability. Clark's (2012) research into young secondary school girls also agreed that ability was often the perceived cause of marginalisation of girls in physical activity. Clark (2012, p. 1181) argues that 'the current emphases of youth sport on 'talent' and 'ability' may be particularly exclusionary for young women as they operate within the gendered contexts of school and peer settings'. Within Hill's (2015) study, even when girls critically discussed the dominance of boys and supported the need for equality, they tended to relapse back into arguments about 'natural' embodied advantages of boys.

In a study by Hills and Croston (2012) several girls, including girls with a lower ability, discussed mixed PE as being preferable, and suggested this works best when games are played that hold little significance as a 'boys' game' or a 'girls' game'. For example, Dutch rounders was suggested by a female student, rather than football or netball. Therefore, it may be that coed sports that are not pre-assigned a gender, may offer better chances of integration.

### ***Impact of PE Teachers***

Research has demonstrated that particular values and dominant discourses related to gender are projected within PE, and are rarely critically questioned. Nutt and Clarke (2002) suggest that the (not so) hidden curriculum fosters particular understandings of

gender within PE, which both teachers and pupils take for granted as normal. These understandings of gender legitimise the organisation of PE, and teachers tend to follow normalised processes without any critical thought. Wilkinson and Penney (2016) suggest that this is also true of extra-curricular coaches. When coaches in their study were interviewed, they talked about notions of inclusivity, yet, when children deviated from normal gendered actions and behaviours, they tended to respond negatively. For example, when girls were displaying aggression during netball they were reprimanded for acting like boys, and when boys were playing football the male coach used the phrase 'you are playing like a girl' (p. 751) for bad play, and commended players displaying game aggression. Therefore, to create equal opportunities for participation for both sexes is not enough, as coaches, teachers and parents within these settings have understandings that they transmit to the participants (Parker and Curtner-Smith, 2012). PE teachers should lead a movement where PE can provide a space to critique normalised gender and resist stereotypes and encourage children to problematise dominant gender (Gerdin, 2017). Gerdin (2017) argues that 'PE should be about offering young people experiences which can be transformative that will help them to see alternative identities which step outside and destabilise the traditional gender binary' (Gerdin, 2017, p. 893).

### ***Mixed Sport in PE can Change Social Thinking***

Within an English school environment, PE (PE) is often the only, or at least the most frequently reoccurring subject to be taught to boys and girls separately (Hills and Croston, 2012). While single-sex classes may be preferable for some girls, this division can aid notions of 'gender dualism' (Hill, 2015, p. 676). Conversely, mixed or coed sport could arguably aspire to demonstrate intersections of equal gender performance and ability (Messner, 2011; Wachs, 2002). If boys have the opportunity to think of girls

and women as equals, rather than subordinate others, then society as a whole could begin to improve (Messner, 2011). Thorne (1993) argues that to remove binary thinking and notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, PE lessons should promote inclusive practice, equality between girls and boys, reflect cooperation and teamwork between all, and in turn visibly demonstrate to students that gender inclusivity is achievable, thus leaning towards a change in social thinking. This paper endeavors to investigate whether mixed-sports such as korfbal, which was invented as a mixed gender activity and arguably enforces rules which promote gender integration, can potentially provide an opportunity for successful mixed PE.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws on the findings from a larger ethnographic study which investigated the gender perceptions of junior korfbal players (aged 11-13). A qualitative approach was taken as the study aimed to uncover subjective experiences of individuals (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). A relativist ontological position was adopted since it recognises that the world and how we understand it is constructed by people (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008). This approach allows for multiple subjective realities to exist (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). In terms of epistemology, this research proposed a '*subjectivist, transactional and constructionist*' position (Sparkes and Smith, 2014, p. 13; emphasis in original). This epistemological position recognises that research is not value-free, instead, knowledge is co-constructed by the researcher and participant.

Within this ethnography, multiple methods were used such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations on the field. Ethnography is an investigative practice used to describe a group of people or culture. The researcher immerses themselves in the worlds of those being studied for a

sustained period of time in order to produce ‘rich, sensitive and credible stories’ (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 3). Within this study, the researcher was ‘coach’s helper’, but made an exaggerated effort to talk and mingle with children during downtime, and developed alternative relationships with them which were less formal than other coach relationships with players. The researcher asked players about school and their weekends, looked at photos on their mobile phones, laughed and empathised with them. This approach was particularly useful as it allowed the researcher to conduct research *with* children, rather than *upon them*, which has been a critique of previous investigations (Barker and Weller, 2003). Additionally, as the researcher began to further understand the accepted norms within the korfbal culture, they stopped standing out (they were not unnoticed as such, as they were still visible as an adult/coach). Sands (2002, p. 22) describes this process as becoming ‘culturally invisible by becoming culturally similar’, which meant that participants became comfortable with the presence of the researcher.

### ***The Setting***

The main field site for this research was a junior korfbal club in the South East of England in which the researcher immersed herself for 12 months. The team was chosen as the researcher was playing for one of the club’s adult teams at the time, meaning that the junior coach was already known by the researcher. The team were labelled as ‘under 13s’, and those raising issues for this paper were between 11 and 13 years old. The under 13’s team had six girls and six boys regularly attending training. All players interviewed had played together since the beginning of the season at least (ten months prior to interviews). Research for this study was conducted during training which took place once a week for an hour and a half, matches which took place on sporadic Sundays during league time (October to May), and tournaments

which took place occasionally over weekends during 'out of season' months.

### ***Methods***

The data gained for this paper emerged from semi-structured interviews which aimed to reveal individuals' 'thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and experiences' by asking questions (Taylor, 2005, p. 39). In addition to informal conversations on the field, more formal interviews were useful as they provided an opportunity to check interpretations, allow for sensitive topics to be discussed, and create settings where differences between articulated opinions and actions became evident (Kvale, 2007). Interviews were made up of eight questions which started by asking why the children played korfball, and then went on to ask whether participants would like to play korfball in school (the researcher was not part of their school or PE experiences). They were then asked questions related to playing a mixed sport, kit, effort and attributes, coaches, and opinions of non-korfball players. These questions had probing questions which were utilised depending on responses. The semi-structured nature meant that the researcher was free to deviate from the interview schedule. Interviews were completed face-to-face with six girls and four boys and were recorded using a dictaphone. Although, the season started with six regular male players, by the time the interviews took place, two of the regular male players had started to attend less and interviews were not possible. Participants were formally interviewed once, approximately 10 months into the study. This timeframe was useful as rapport had been built with the players, and with knowledge of each child, the researcher could act in a way that would mean they felt at ease. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and took place either before training or, most frequently, during breaks between games at tournaments. Interviews were transcribed verbatim at the first opportunity after each interview.

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. Data were identified and analysed into themes that could be richly described. This was not done by addressing how many times phenomena occurred, or searching for the 'right' themes, but recognising them for what they were; links between particular segments of data and the categories used for conceptualization (Wolcott, 2005). To systematically analyse transcribed notes from interviews, a methodical process of coding took place, and important themes were then chunked together. Interpretation was approached inductively as themes emerged from the analysis of data (Patton, 2002). PE was something that organically emerged in a number of these themes.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings related to PE which emerged from data analysis will be presented in three themes: the dominance of boys and traditional sports within PE, differences between boys and girls in PE, and the use of korfbal within mixed-gender PE. Previous literature is considered within the discussion of themes in order to compare findings with previous studies, and aid explanation of findings. It is useful to consider the perceptions of current club-based korfbal players regarding their PE experiences and their understanding of the potential for korfbal to be used in schools, as these children have knowledge of the game and a contemporary lived experience of PE. It is therefore interesting to recognise their reflections on the possibility of its usefulness, and to consider how these findings relate to previous research in the broader area of gender and PE. Additionally, within a wider field where research suggests that PE is frequently gender segregated (Hills and Croston, 2012), children tend to hold gender preconceptions about most traditional mainstream sports (Hills and Croston, 2012) and PE promotes an understanding of an advantage of boys over girls (Evans, 2006; Hills and Croston, 2012), korfbal may offer a solution to successful gender integration

within PE. With rules that arguably enforce gender integration for successful play, and as a sport invented as a mixed gender activity without an associated gender label, korfbal and other sports that fulfil these characteristics may offer something different to traditional mainstream sports within a PE setting.

### ***The Dominance of Boys and Traditional Sports in PE***

Participants within this study recognised a number of problems with the current state of PE. Firstly, two players described a preconceived idea that boys and girls have a natural preference for types of activity, or have expectations that particular sports are suited more to one sex or another:

[Boys think] things like they [girls] shouldn't play football or boys' sports like football, boys' cricket... (Gemma)

Boys are not very interested in netball because they couldn't play it anyway, because it's only a girls sport. But like some of the girls didn't really like football because it's football, they don't like football. (Sophie)

Sophie explained how girls do not really like football, and boys do not really like netball, and Gemma explains how boys do not like the idea of girls participating in 'boys' sports demonstrating a knowledge of particular sports being more suited to boys or girls (With-Nielson and Pfister, 2011), but also raising a problem for the acceptance of mixed PE utilising these already 'loaded' activities. Sophie further problematised existing PE structures, by suggesting that PE teachers do not try to get girls equally involved in football, and they do not try to get boys equally involved in netball, even though both genders have to play both of these types of activities within PE. Velija and Kumar (2009, p. 394) explain this by suggesting it is as a result of 'tradition and teacher ideologies' about gender-appropriate sports.

Secondly, participants argued that traditional sports like football, rugby and netball dominate PE classes, despite the idea that sports such as korfbal provide a great

opportunity for girls and boys to play together in PE. Charlie explained how ‘football and rugby sort of dominate other sports at our school’, and Sophie explained, ‘we [girls] have netball and gym’. The primary use of traditional sports within PE can be attributed to the socialisation of teachers during their time as students within their own school PE lessons, meaning that they reproduce these social norms (Green, 2008). Lee critically discusses the single-sex sports he participates in within PE by comparing them to korfbal and suggesting that korfbal is ‘less aggressive, it’s definitely less aggressive. Yeah, it’s less aggressive.’

Additionally, Sophie explained how, within mixed PE, the boys tend to exclude girls: ‘they would usually block us out. They’d like usually just pass amongst each other’ (Sophie), and Gemma also asserted that, within PE, boys consider girls to have less sporting ability than boys:

Interviewer: What about boys do you think they act like differently when they’re playing sports with girls?

Gemma: They [boys] try and show off in front of the girls or not pass to the girls, they [boys] think they’re [girls] rubbish or something

Interviewer: Why is that do you think?

Gemma: It’s what the boys are like

Interviewer: Do you think that all boys think that girls are not very good at sport?

Gemma: Most boys pretty much

Interviewer: OK

Gemma: Well at our school

These comments demonstrate that even when PE is conducted within a mixed setting, a separation between girls and boys still exists, with the boys dominating and prioritising play amongst themselves. This finding aligns with research by Evans (2006) which suggests that girls feel disadvantaged in PE lessons, and Hills and Croston (2012), who suggest that boys in their study deemed themselves as superior to girls in PE classes.

To combat this inequality, Sophie described how the structure of the korfbal game reflects a need to use both sexes in order to be successful, which might improve mixed PE lessons: ‘they [boys] have to use the girls and they usually wouldn’t’ (Sophie). It may be that this mixed environment leads boys to be respectful of the athletic performances of girls since they are working so closely with them, in a similar way that male cheerleaders respected female athletes in Anderson’s (2008) study, because they had to work directly with them in order to succeed. This would suggest that embodied practices which demonstrate the abilities of girls as well as boys, could lead to alterations in the dominant discourses which reinforce gender difference and the physical inferiority of females.

### ***Differences between Girls and Boys within PE***

During this study, players had a tendency to describe boys and girls in different ways, sometimes homogenising groups of boys and groups of girls. One female participant gave an example of gender difference in PE as she explained that during a mixed rugby activity at her school, the girls ‘were, like, running around screaming’ (Lucy). Another female participant suggested that mixed PE led girls to ‘get a bit more shy around the boys because the girls at our school are all into boys and everything’ (Gemma). In these examples, girls can be seen to reproduce gender norms related to competitive physical activity. They were not taking the activity seriously, and, instead, embodied gender through their screams and enacted fear within this male-dominated sport focussed activity, or through their shyness and reserved nature. Whitson (2002, p. 227) explains how his research found that childhoods differed between girls and boys as they are shaped ‘by discourses of femininity and masculinity and by gendered practices of play that teach us to inhabit and experience our bodies in profoundly different ways’. In this instance, Lucy and Gemma both describe the girls in a way which presents them as

conforming to traditional gender stereotypes, and performing gender (Butler, 1990, 1993). Additionally, another female participant also made generalisations about girls playing sport in PE and argued that ‘the girls are all like, “I don’t want to get my shoes dirty”, and things like that’ (Lilly). The girls being described by the participants may have internalised appropriate actions under the panoptic surveillance of wider society (Foucault, 1979), whereby girls should perform in a different way to boys, particularly in sporting environments. Conversely, the same participant explained how girls who play korfbal are different to other girls and suggested that girls act differently when playing korfbal. She further explained by suggesting that mixed sport, such as korfbal, is better than single-sex female sport or PE since girls can be ‘wussy’, implying that single-sex female sport is gendered and weak:

Interviewer: Do you like it that it [korfbal] is boys and girls? Or do you think it would be just as good if it was all girls, for example?

Lucy: I think it’s better [mixed] because sometimes girls are a bit wussy

Nevertheless, she did not seem aware that the girls playing korfbal in her example, were those that had decided to participate in sport in their own time, and they may present an alternative to the girls who participate in compulsory PE.

Players presented boys in a different manner, problematising the gender norms and seeming to dislike the aggressive way that boys act in PE:

Sometimes the girls get a bit bitchy if you don’t do it right, or get all stropky. Whereas boys, it’s the same thing as well, but they get aggressive, so they will hurt you, and girls don’t really like pull you on the floor or anything (Gemma)

Gemma also went on to suggest that ‘they [boys] might be holding your shirt and everything’. Another female player suggested that ‘the boys play too rough’ (Lilly), and a male player generalised about boys who play sport and explained how boys’ basketball has a lot of ‘rough and tumble’ (Ralph) because it only involves boys.

Additionally, another male player (James) implied that boys are more aggressive in sporting spaces, by asserting that girls are usually gentler, and he preferred this:

James: I mean girls, as they're like girls they don't really like to punch and kick each other in football and all that, so they're much more gentle

Interviewer: And you prefer not to have that punching and kicking, you prefer the gentle part of it?

James: Yeah

The underlying implications here are that boys and girls have an understanding of the way that boys participate in physical activity, and in this case, PE. They implied a difference between the way that boys play and act compared to girls, and Ralph suggested that boys would find it inhibiting to play in this way if girls were playing too. They portray girls and boys within PE in a homogenous way, implying that all girls are likely to act one way, whilst all boys are likely to act a different way. They did not problematise these generalisations, even though a number of players did not embody traditional gender norms when playing korfball. Yet, despite drawing differences between boys and girls in PE by proposing that girls get 'bitchy' if you do not get it right in PE, and boys get 'aggressive', another female player (Gemma) suggested that people that play korfball are not like that: 'they don't act aggressive because they're like different' (Gemma). Although there is not an explicit problematisation of gender norms and binary differences, there is evidence here that this participant did not assume that all girls and boys innately possess the same traits, as she recognises that korfball players act differently, removing the homogenisation of boys or girls.

### ***The use of Korfball within Mixed-Gender PE***

Despite most players' generalisations about PE and gender norms, some players asserted a positive need for mixed PE for various reasons. In addition, to James' suggestion that girls are gentler than boys in sporting spaces, which he preferred, and Lucy's suggestion

that when girls play a single-sex sport they tend to be 'wussy', and therefore it is better to play mixed sport where not all of the players are wussy, Lucy also suggested that girls might try harder in mixed PE:

- Lucy: We [girls] mess around sometimes
- Interviewer: What in PE?
- Lucy: Yeah, and I think if there's boys there then they'll [girls] probably try to impress them [boys] and be sensible and be good at the sport
- Interviewer: Oh really?
- Lucy: Instead of just messing around
- Interviewer: So you think that the girls will try harder?
- Lucy: Yeah, trying to impress them [boys]

Similarly, another female player (Lorraine) discussed a preference for mixed PE because boys are sportier than girls, and by playing with the boys too, she can push herself harder:

There's not many sporty girls [in PE]. I'm probably the sportiest girl in my class, that's not being big headed, but when we're doing athletics there is always one boy in front of me, I'm always second, and there's another boy behind me. Sometimes I like it being boys and girls, only so I can sort of challenge myself to beat that person in front of me, but like it might not be as hard for me because I'm quite sporty. If we [girls] do the 1500 metres I might always come first in my tutor. So I might like that, but I might not be able to progress as much because the other girls, they only get eight minutes and I normally get six minutes (Lorraine)

Lorraine showed traits of alpha femininity (Azzarito, 2010), where she desired success and physical accomplishments (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, and Bunuel Heras, 1999; Theberge, 2003). Both of these participants demonstrate a gendered thinking about boys being better at sport than girls, but also demonstrate that they did not have a problem with entering the 'boys' zone'. They welcomed the challenge of sport rather than acting in traditionally feminine ways, which contradicts dominant discourse. The willingness of these korfbal players to defy normalised gendered attitudes has the potential to disrupt accepted

embodied gender norms supported by dominant discourse. Azzarito and Solomon (2006) explain how resisting these dominant discourses, boys and girls can enjoy a positive experience where both genders can view their bodies as sites of empowerment.

It was clear from observation and interviews that a number of players had beliefs and understandings that complied with more traditional gender norms. Although not all players, a number of them did believe that boys had physical advantages in sport and were likely to be more physically assertive or aggressive than girls in the same situation. Some players also problematised PE classes, deeming them to be predominantly directed at boys and discouraging girls from sport in the process; korfbal was seen as a potential answer to this problem.

All participants within this study argued for korfbal to become an activity within PE lessons. A number of players attributed this need to the mixed-gender aspect of korfbal, which fuelled their love for the sport. For example, Sophie explained: ‘I think it’s good that you have two girls and two boys in the same section. You can’t have a section of girls and a section of boys, because I like to play with boys’ (Sophie). When asked if korfbal would be a good sport to do in PE, James recognised that boys and girls do not have very much interaction at school, and korfbal could help this: ‘Yeah I do, because at school you don’t really interact with the girls’ (James). Ralph suggested that korfbal should be played in PE as, ‘korfbal’s a mixture of netball and basketball, if they do want to play it, it will really help’ (Ralph). Ralph described basketball as a boys’ sport and netball as girls’ sport, so the likening of korfbal to both of these sports, meant that both girls and boys could both enjoy playing it and would both have some skills to bring to the game. Finally, when asked whether the korfbal club aided interaction of boys and girls, or whether it was the sport itself, Lucy argued: ‘I think it’s the sport that it is, because encourages people, because it’s mixed it encourages people’.

Lucy attributed the mixed-gender nature of the game to the successful interaction of boys and girls, implying that the rules and the ethos were incremental in this.

Players recognised the need for an inclusive mixed sport within PE, which aligns with the educational roots of korfbal (Van Bottenburg, 2003) and the initial aims to create a competitive mixed sport designed to encourage boys and girls to participate equally (Summerfield and White, 1989). Charlie thought that korfbal would enable PE to become a mixed-gender activity, which it currently is not at his school:

Charlie: Because of the mixed side to it, you can play with both sexes instead of just one

Interviewer: At the moment how does it work in your PE classes? Do you get split? Or do you all...

Charlie: We get split into different sexes

Sophie also described the benefits of korfbal within a PE context, arguing: 'both girls and boys can play so you haven't got to have like, an all-girls lesson, or only girls lesson, or only boys lesson, so you can play it throughout, as in both, two sets can join in' (Sophie). Sophie's and Charlie's comments highlight the understanding of sex-segregated PE within schools (Hills and Croston, 2012), and by recognising that boys and girls can both play korfbal, they imply that not all sports offer an inviting environment for both sexes (Adams, 2011; Azzarito and Solomon, 2009; Chalabaev, et al., 2013; Macdonald, et al., 2005). Gemma also acknowledged the prohibitive nature of sex-segregated PE and explained how her teacher wanted to use korfbal in PE, but the PE lessons were sex-segregated so it would not be possible. The sex separation in PE can be seen as a result of scientific classification; people are scientifically categorised by sex, which operates in a binary format, before dividing practices separate them (Foucault, 1982). Foucault (1990) recognises that this can be applied more generally to the separation of boys and girls within schools, but in these examples, children show

awareness of the way that PE functions as one of these practices, dividing children based on whether they are a boy or girl. In the example of sex-segregated PE lessons, by categorising school children by sex, difference is established and they are then separated from each other in this environment. Foucault explains how the human sciences create universal categories of people, objectifying them in the process (Smith Maguire, 2002). The mixed format of korfbal could offer an opportunity to create PE lessons suited to both sexes, without preconceived ideas regarding specific sports being suited to a specific sex. Although Gemma recognised that PE lessons are often separated by sex, she did not acknowledge that korfbal could remedy this, she only saw single-sex PE as a barrier to korfbal opportunities. Additionally, it is important to critically recognise that the rules of korfbal which assert that boys can only mark boys and girls can only mark girls, do reinforce gender difference at the same time as potentially aiding gender integration.

### **Conclusion**

It is valuable to emphasise that the problematisation of PE within this research was introduced by participants, illustrating the importance of this topic to them. However, the children within this study were those that were opting to participate in korfbal in a non-compulsory setting, which potentially presents a different opinion to those children that do not opt to participate in extracurricular activities. Additionally, although korfbal may help alleviate certain gender assumptions related to the ability of homogenous groups of boys or girls, and may provide the opportunity for boys and girls to play together, any radical change in gender norms is hindered by rules which maintain that boys mark boys and girls mark girls, which brings them into the same space, to mark them as different. Some players explained the need for gender marking, for example, Ralph, Lorraine and Charlie took a practical understanding of the separation rule and

explained how marking both sexes would tarnish the current rules and workings of the game. They did not focus on gender difference as the determinant for separation. They described how, for example, letting everyone mark everyone would mean that players would be extremely limited with regards to getting free from their defenders, and therefore, would not be able to take shots as there would always be someone ready to mark them.

Nevertheless, findings from this study suggest that these junior korfbal players were highly aware of gender norms and inequalities within PE. A number of players recognised a need for mixed sports such as korfbal so that girls and boys could play together on equal terms within PE lessons, rather than playing sports already shrouded in gender suitability. It was argued that this would remove perceived advantages of one sex over the other, and reduce the dominance of boys over girls when playing traditional sports within mixed PE lessons. Arguably, the need to work together in korfbal could help reduce this dominance and begin to disrupt accepted gender norms as boys and girls work alongside each other and realise that ability does not rely solely on gender. As Thorne (1993) suggests, PE lessons that promote inclusive practice, equality, and reflect teamwork, can demonstrate the viability of gender inclusivity and potentially lead to a change in wider understanding. This would imply that games such as korfbal, despite critical aspects which need further consideration, could provide a space which alters dominant discourse often reproduced in a PE and sporting environments.

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