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Setting policy and student agency in physical education: students as policy actors

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Abstract

In turning a spotlight on students in physical education, this paper seeks to extend applications of policy enactment theory, and particularly, the policy actor framework. Following the lead of Stephen Ball and colleagues, the research that this paper draws on examined the various dimensions of context shaping policy enactment in different schools. The focus of the research was policy associated with ability grouping, and setting particularly, in physical education. The research involved case study work in three mixed-gender secondary schools in England, with 15 physical education teachers participating in semi-structured interviews and 63 students participating in semi-structured focus groups. This paper reports on the data arising from focus groups with students. The actor framework is used to bring to the fore differences in student responses to policy, their capacities to proactively engage with policy, and explore what shapes the differences observed. Notably, the data signalled that students were by no means passive recipients of policy. There were clear instances of students exercising agency in physical education, sometimes questioning and challenging how they were positioned within and by setting policies, and at other times, responding in ways that demonstrated their capacity to navigate and mediate policy and its impact on them as learners. This paper therefore explores some of the ways in which students are both positioned by and position themselves in relation to policy.

Key words: Ability grouping; Setting; Policy enactment; Policy actors; Physical education and sport pedagogy

Introduction

This paper puts a spotlight on physical education students as policy actors in schools, navigating and mediating their experiences and identities in the context of setting policies. As we explain below, ability grouping, and setting particularly, has been promoted by successive United Kingdom [UK] governments and is a policy adopted by many schools, across various subject areas with the purported intent of raising student achievement. The research reported in this paper specifically pursued the adoption and impact of setting in physical education in secondary (ages 11–18) schools in the north-east of England.

To clarify terminology and in turn, our research focus, we note that ‘ability grouping’ encompasses a wide range of practices, including setting, streaming, banding and mixed-ability grouping. ‘Setting’ is more nuanced, referring to the grouping of students *based on their attainment in a specific curriculum area*. Where setting is adopted as a school-wide policy, individual students may find themselves in a higher attaining set for some subjects and a lower attaining set for others. This practice is referred to as regrouping in the United States [US] and in parts of Australia, and as streaming in New Zealand [NZ] and in European and Asian school systems. Irrespective of the specific terminology used, the practice is a timely and important focus for inquiry. As we detail in sections that follow, a growing body of research points to the need for research that can extend understandings of how setting policies are being adopted and appropriated in different school contexts and subject areas, with what effect on teaching and learning. In this research, following Evans (2004), we reaffirm the importance of problematising normalised conceptualisations of ability in physical education, and pursuing the social, cultural and economic biases that they embody and perpetuate. Our research extends insight into how particular conceptualisations of ability are inherent in grouping practices in

physical education and are embedded in students' experiences of physical education amidst the enactment of setting policies. As Francis, Taylor and Tereshchenko (2019) have highlighted, student perspectives are vital to extending understanding of the impact of grouping practices that “conceptually and practically” remain “a critical issue for social justice” (p. 159).

Setting as a political and policy agenda

In England and Wales, as in many other countries, education policy is dominated by concerns to raise standards of academic achievement. These concerns have, amongst other things, led governments and education policymakers to consider the use of ability grouping in schools. Ability grouping, and specifically setting, has been at the fore of educational policy developments in England and Wales since the late 1990s (Labour Party, 1997; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997, 2001; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005; Conservative Party, 2007, 2010). The Labour government outlined its commitment to setting in their manifesto¹ for the 1997 general election (Labour Party, 1997). The manifesto stated that “children are not all of the same ability, nor do they learn at the same speed. That means setting children in classes to maximise progress, for the benefit of high-fliers and slower learners alike” (Labour Party, 1997, p. 7). The Labour government reiterated its commitment to setting in the White Papers², *Schools: Building on Success* (DfEE, 2001) and *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005). The White Papers exhorted primary (ages 4-11) and secondary (ages 11–18) schools in England and Wales to use setting to promote learning, build motivation and raise levels of attainment (DfEE, 2001; DfES, 2005).

¹ A manifesto is a published document wherein political parties outline their policy intentions ahead of a general election.

² In the British political system, a White Paper is a government report that declares new and intended policy direction.

These ideas about setting have also been embedded in the policies and rhetoric of the Conservative government in the UK (Conservative Party, 2007, 2010). In his keynote speech to Party members in 2007, the then Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron stated, “I want to see setting in every single school. Parents know it works. Teachers know it works. Tony Blair promised it in 1997. But it still hasn’t happened. We will keep up the pressure till it does” (Wintour, 2014a, para. 1). He further expressed his desire to see “*setting by each subject in every school* so that we actually do what I think is common sense, which is to help stretch the brightest pupils and help those who are in danger of falling behind” (Lightfoot, 2006, para. 1, our emphasis).

Following press speculation about government plans to make setting compulsory in secondary schools in England and Wales, (Wintour, 2014a; Press Association, 2014; Paton, 2014) and government denial of the rumours (Wintour, 2014b; Coughlan, 2014; Garner, 2014), there has been no further reference to setting in subsequent Conservative manifestos (Conservative Party, 2015, 2019). Notably, however, our own and others’ research shows that setting is an established policy in many schools and spans multiple subject areas (Hallam, Ireson, Lister, Chaudhury & Davies, 2003; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Wilkinson, Penney & Allin, 2016).

Research perspectives on setting

Somewhat in contrast with the claims made by successive UK governments, setting has long been shown to have little if any overall benefit in terms of students’ academic and affective outcomes in primary and secondary schools (Slavin, 1987, 1990; Ireson & Hallam, 1999;

Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Higgins et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2017). Indeed, most studies demonstrate that small achievement gains made by higher attaining students are often more than offset by losses made by lower attaining students (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Higgins et al., 2015). Students in higher and lower attaining sets have reported negative experiences such as feelings of inferiority, a lack of confidence in their ability, and frustration about their placement in a set (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Hallam & Deathe, 2002). There is also evidence to suggest that setting contributes to the persistence and widening of inequalities, especially those associated with social class and ethnic origin, because these groups of students are disproportionately found in lower attaining sets (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ireson et al., 2002; Wiliam & Bartholomew 2004; Muijs & Dunne, 2010; Taylor et al., 2019).

In terms of subject coverage, there is extensive research literature on setting in mathematics, English and science, particularly in terms of its achievement effects (Slavin, 1987, 1990; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Matthews, Ritchotte & McBee, 2013). In contrast, setting has received only cursory attention in the physical education literature, often appearing tangentially in studies of different topics, including mixed-ability grouping and outsourcing (Evans, 1985; Evans, Lopez, Duncan & Evans, 1987; Wilkinson & Penney, 2016), or in anecdotal accounts (Stidder, 2008; Fletcher, 2008) and theoretical discussions (Evans, 2004). Physical education has also featured in broader commentaries addressing subjects that are characterised as practically based, including art, music and drama (Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education³], 1998; Hallam, Rogers & Ireson, 2008). The limited empirical research specifically addressing setting in physical education has confirmed that some

³ Ofsted is an independent body responsible for inspecting and regulating schools throughout England.

secondary school physical education departments have adopted the practice to help meet students' perceived learning needs (Hallam et al., 2008; Croston, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2016). This trend was most evident in a survey of the grouping practices of 155 physical education departments in the north-east of England, with 96 using setting in the subject (Wilkinson et al., 2016). The survey also revealed a dimension of sex-differentiated ability grouping practice, with one mixed-gender school using setting in girls' physical education only and ten mixed-gender schools using setting in boys' physical education only (Wilkinson et al., 2016).

Croston's (2014) study of ability-based practices in a secondary school physical education department in England provided fresh insight into the practice of setting in the subject as well as its consequences for students in different sets. Physical education teachers in Croston's (2014) study tended to set students solely on their physical ability. They also noted that, once assigned to a set, movement between sets was limited for all students. Croston (2014) also observed that most students were in favour of setting in physical education, but that their perceptions varied according to their set placement and their experiences of setting and mixed-ability grouping. Students in the 'top set' felt that they were insufficiently challenged in mixed-ability groups and, as a consequence, viewed setting as a means for them to engage in more challenging tasks without being held back by less able students. Students in the 'lower set' recognised the potential for setting to negatively impact their access to educational opportunities within and beyond physical education and their potential achievement in the subject. Nonetheless, setting retained their support because they felt more comfortable working with others of a similar ability in physical education.

Croston's (2014) research remains a rare source of insight into the different impacts that setting can have upon students in physical education and was an important foundation for the research reported here. Theoretically, we also turned to education policy sociology as a source of concepts that spoke to the complexities associated with setting policies being variously enacted in secondary schools and in physical education particularly.

Policy enactment and policy actors

Ball and colleagues' work (Braun, Maguire & Ball, 2010; Braun, Ball & Maguire, 2011; Braun, Ball, Maguire & Hoskins, 2011; Ball, Maguire, Braun & Hoskins, 2011a, 2011b; Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) has advanced the notion of enactment, rather than implementation, to better reflect the complex, dynamic and multifaceted nature of policies, including the varied ways in which they are taken up, challenged, resisted and/or ignored by a range of policy actors located within and beyond schools. Following others who have explored enactment in physical education and sport contexts (Penney 2013; MacLean, Mulholland, Gray & Horrell, 2014; Alfrey, O'Connor & Jeanes, 2017; Brown & Penney, 2017; Simmons & MacLean, 2018; Hammond, Penney & Jeanes, 2019; Lambert & Penney, 2019), our interest is in extending insights into, and understandings of, the various ways in which individuals consciously and inadvertently interact with policy, to shape the form it takes as pedagogic practice in physical education. We reaffirm policy conceptualised as a process with many points of contestation, negotiation and mediation, and the accompanying need for closer examination of the dynamic between what Gale (2003) termed the "*who and how of policy*" (original emphasis). As indicated above, our particular interest is in how students engage with setting policy in physical education.

One of the key facets of Ball et al.'s (2011a, 2011b, 2012) work was the identification of eight different types of actor roles and positions that school leaders and teachers may variously adopt during the interpretation and translation of policies. The roles of *narrators*, *entrepreneurs*, *outsiders*, *transactors*, *enthusiasts*, *translators*, *critics* and *receivers* were associated with different sorts of “policy work” that variously shaped, inhibited and enabled particular expressions of policy (see Appendix 1). While Ball et al. (2011a, 2011b, 2012) identified some positional associations with specific roles, including union representatives identified as critics, and junior teachers as receivers, it is important to note their accompanying emphasis that the actor positions should not be regarded as fixed, mutually exclusive or exhaustive. Furthermore, Ball et al.'s (2011a, 2011b) research revealed important fluidity, with school leaders and teachers playing differing roles over time and in relation to different kinds of policies, and thus engaging in various types of policy work. Other research has examined the complexities of enactment in schools (Alfrey et al., 2017; Golding, 2017; Woodcock & Hardy, 2019), teacher education (Lambert & O'Connor, 2018; Lambert & Penney, 2019), and sport coaching contexts (Hammond et al., 2019), with some authors extending the descriptors of actor roles to include *survivor* (Golding, 2017), *initiator*, *disruptor*, *motivator*, *connector*, *change maker* and *innovator* (Lambert & O'Connor, 2018), and *provocateur* (Lambert & Penney, 2019).

In comparison to the attention given to teachers enacting policy, there has been little investigation of the roles and positions that students may take in relation to policy in different schools, and how these roles and positions are shaped by contextual factors. In one of the few enactment studies to focus on student perspectives, Löfgren, Löfgren and Prieto (2018) identified the various ways in which students engage with the policy of national testing in Sweden. Löfgren et al. (2018) observed “that pupils (re-)acted differently depending on the degree to which they were involved in the processes of ‘decoding’ how the national tests

‘worked’ or were designed” (p. 683), and within the same school context, also displayed notably diverse actor positions. They recognised *copers*, collaborative *decoders*, *survivors* and *ponderers*, alongside *enthusiasts*, *receivers*, *entrepreneurs* and *critics*.

Given that the enactment of setting policy may vary both across and within schools, we draw particular attention to Löfgren et al.’s (2018) emphasis that different enactments of policy “shape different opportunities for pupils to prepare and create different pupil positions as actors at different schools” (p. 692). In seeking to extend understanding of the varied and creative ways in which students think about and respond to the enactment of setting policy in schools, we further emphasise the need to locate analysis of actor positions, roles and policy work amidst accompanying examination of *different types of policy* (Ball et al., 2011b) and *dimensions of policy context* (Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2012). In relation to the former, Ball et al. (2011b) contrast imperative/disciplinary policies and exhortative/developmental policies and highlight their implications for the kinds of policy positions and roles that school leaders and teachers may adopt in schools. Imperative/disciplinary policies are those which produce a primarily passive subject “whose practice is heavily determined by the requirements of performance and delivery” (Ball et al., 2011b, p. 612). Exhortative/developmental policies, by comparison, are those which enable school leaders and teachers to be active policy actors who can use their judgement and creativity in the policy process. Setting can be described as an exhortative/developmental policy because it is recommended rather than compulsory in schools in England.

With regard to context, Braun et al. (2011) and Ball et al. (2012) drew attention to the differential impact of four dimensions of context on schools’ enactment of policy; situated,

professional, material and external. While the limitations of space preclude in-depth commentary addressing each of these, we reaffirm their individual and collective impact, firstly in relation to the particular approach to setting adopted in different schools and secondly, in the ways in which students in different schools experience and engage with setting in physical education. The influence, for example, of different school and subject traditions, histories, and approaches to ‘managing’ setting policy, have all been evidenced in our research, together with the over-arching contextual impact of wider dominant discourses of accountability and performativity in education policy in the UK (Wilkinson, 2019). In this paper we bring to the fore the need for student data, and students ‘as policy actors’ to be viewed and understood in context; that is, with an appreciation of the multi-faceted, multi-layered nature of context that any analysis of enactment needs to acknowledge (Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2012). Below we bring this complexity to the fore in introducing the case study schools involved in this research.

Research context and approach

This study draws on data collected from a qualitative case study of setting policy in three mixed-gender secondary schools in the north-east of England (Wilkinson, 2019). Here we provide detail of the school contexts, research methods and procedures.

The case study schools

The schools were recruited purposively to seek variation in relation to school size, grade received in the last Ofsted inspection⁴, and approach to setting students in physical education.

⁴ Schools can be rated as outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate by Ofsted inspectors.

Table 1 provides an overview of these features of the three schools. To preserve anonymity, the schools are referred to by pseudonyms and their sizes have been rounded to the nearest 50.

Insert Table 1 here

Oakside and Sandwest taught students in sets in physical education from Year 7 (age 11-12). Oakside used a three-set format (top, middle and bottom set) and Sandwest used a two-set format (top and bottom set) in physical education. Burnway taught boys in sets after year 7, using a two-set format (top and bottom set), while girls remained in mixed-ability groups in physical education for the duration of their secondary schooling. Burnway thus also provided a point of contrast in relation to interest in the gendered dimensions of setting in physical education (Wilkinson et al., 2016; Wilkinson, 2019). Top, middle and bottom were the terms that many of the research participants used to describe members of different sets in physical education. They also occasionally used the terms set 1, set 2 and set 3. In the reporting of data that follows, we use the terms that were adopted by students in the study.

Data collection and analysis

The study consisted of a two-phase research design. In the first phase, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 15 physical education teachers to explore how they interpreted, translated and enacted the policy of setting in physical education. In the second phase, 14 semi-structured focus groups were conducted with students to examine how they responded to the enactment of setting policy in physical education. This involved 63 Year 9 students (age 13-14) in total (30 boys and 33 girls). The focus of this paper is the second phase

of this study. Students in Year 9 were selected for the study because most of them had been taught physical education in sets for at least one year. The exception was girls at Burnway who were taught physical education in mixed-ability groups from Year 7 onwards. It seemed likely, therefore, that most students in the sample would have developed their understanding of setting and their sense of being members of a particular set in physical education by Year 9.

Physical education teachers in each school were asked to identify five students from each Year 9 set for the study, assist in securing parental permission for participation, and arrange a suitable time and location for the focus groups to be conducted. No specific instructions were given as to how the students should be selected. Table 2 details the focus groups convened in each of the case study schools.

Insert Table 2 here

Once students had been selected, the first author met with them to explain clearly the study, including its purposes and the requirements of participation, and provide them with an opportunity to ask any question or raise concerns. Participant information sheets and consent forms were then distributed for students to take home. Most parents or guardians (63 out of 70) gave their written informed consent for their child's participation in the study and assent was obtained in written and verbal form from students.

A semi-structured interview guide was used for the focus groups, covering two main topics: perceptions of setting policy and experiences of the enactment of setting policy in physical

education. The interview guide was informed by relevant literature and the data arising from interviews with the physical education teachers in phase 1. Interview questions were tailored to each school and a pilot study was conducted with two groups of students in each school who were not participants in the main research study. Focus groups were conducted in a quiet classroom during physical education lessons and lasted between 42 and 56 minutes, with the average time being 49 minutes.

The data generated by the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a rigorous process of inductive thematic coding (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The entire corpus of data was read multiple times to detect initial patterns, relationships and inconsistencies. Text segments that appeared to carry similar meaning were then assigned a provisional category label (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and data further interrogated to critically assess the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the category labels. Themes comprising similar category labels were often merged to form an overarching category label and themes that were incompatible with the identified category labels were assigned a new category label (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of analysis continued until the data were exhausted and no further category labels emerged. Reporting and discussion of findings is organised in relation to two main themes evident in the data set, that spoke to students conceptualised as simultaneously, policy subjects and actors. Our data illustrates the various ways in which students think about themselves and their ability through their set placement and experiences in physical education.

Findings: Students and setting policy in physical education

Students being 'positioned by setting policy' (and not necessarily positively)

The differential impact of setting on students in different sets was very apparent, together with evidence of an important interplay between discourses of gender and ability in physical education playing out in the enactment and experience of setting policy. Boys in the top sets in each of the case study schools explained that setting shaped and supported their perception that they were high ability in physical education. They also noted that there were a range of benefits to be gained from being in the top set in physical education, including the opportunity to represent the school in inter-school competitions and to study General Certificate of School Education⁵ [GCSE] physical education. These links between setting and opportunities in physical education and school sport meant that most of the boys in the top set felt positive about themselves and their ability in physical education. Their comments indicated that they were *enthusiastic* (see above and Appendix 1) and supportive of the policy of setting in physical education:

“I’m happy about being in the top set. It makes us feel that we’re better than everyone else. We’re the role models. Everyone else looks up to us” (Josh, Top set, Oakside)

“I think that setting is great. We get loads of benefits too. The teachers let us miss lessons to compete against other schools” (Noah, Top set, Burnway)

In contrast, comments from most of the girls in the top set at Sandwest and some of the girls in the top set at Oakside talked of anxiety, challenges and dilemmas arising from their top set position. For these girls, the top set was positioned as outside conventional modes of femininity, such that they struggled to manage the contradiction between being seen to be able and being seen to be feminine in physical education. Melissa remarked:

⁵ GCSEs are academic qualifications assessed mainly on written examinations, although in PE there are also elements of coursework and practical activities.

“Boys are supposed to be good at sport. It’s a stereotypical thing. It’s different for girls. There’s more pressure on us if we’re good at sport. I’m in the top set and the other girls tease me all the time” (Melissa, Top set, Sandwest)

Both the boys and girls who were in the bottom sets at Oakside and Sandwest explained that setting contributed to their perception that they were low ability in physical education. At Sandwest, girls expressed contentment with being in the bottom set in physical education because they felt that it accorded with traditional gender expectations and meant that they were less stigmatised than girls in the top set. Andrea explained:

“There’s pressure on the girls in the top set. They get called all sorts or names by the rest of us for been in the top set. We don’t get any of that” (Andrea, Bottom set, Sandwest)

The girls in the bottom set at Oakside were more concerned about their set placement in physical education because of the status attached to physical education in the school. When asked how being in the bottom set in physical education made them feel, Maya remarked:

“PE is important in the school. It just means I’ve got to try harder. I think there’s more pressure to be good at PE in this school. Even for the girls” (Maya, Bottom set, Oakside)

Most of the boys in the bottom sets at Oakside and Sandwest highlighted the contradiction between being a boy and being seen to be less able in physical education. This tension led some of the boys in the bottom sets to experience strong feelings of anxiety and inadequacy in physical education. Billy commented:

“We’re boys and we’re supposed to be good at PE and sport. So, it’s really embarrassing being in the bottom set” (Billy, Bottom set, Oakside)

Feelings such as those above were compounded by students' belief that they were unable to move between sets in physical education. A common view held by students across the case study schools was that they were firmly positioned in their set, leading to feelings of disillusionment and futility for some students. This was particularly so for some of the boys in the bottom set who, amongst other things, wanted to move to the middle or top set to receive more challenging work and enhance their status among their peers. As the following comments illustrate, these boys reluctantly accepted their position in the bottom set, not because they believed it to be a true reflection of their ability, but because they felt that there was little they could do to change the situation:

“I didn't mind setting in PE. I was trying really hard, but it didn't get me into the top set. So, I just give up. What's the point in trying if you can't improve your set? I don't think it's fair that we can't move if we try really hard” (Omar, Bottom set, Sandwest)

“You can't move sets. I asked the teachers if I could and they told me they would think about it. They didn't move me though. I put in loads of effort and there still wasn't any action. I've not bothered anymore. It's put me right off” (Stuart, Bottom Set, Oakside)

Omar and Stuart's comments speak to their policy positions shifting over time, from *entrepreneurs* creatively attempting to negotiate how they were positioned by setting policy, to *receivers* whose failed attempts to move between sets left them feeling that they had limited capacity amidst setting policy in physical education. In the context of this research, Omar and Stuart are also identified as *critics*, raising concerns about the inequitable nature of setting policy in physical education.

Not all students sought to challenge their set placement in physical education. Some of the boys and girls at both Oakside and Sandwest expressed a lack of concern about being in the middle and bottom sets in physical education because the subject was less important to their sense of self and was of little consequence to their educational and vocational futures. These sentiments were reflected in Ellie and Liz's comments that pointed to a *coping* approach towards setting policy:

"I focus more on other subjects. It is more important that I'm good at the core subjects. You get jobs based on core subjects. I don't want to do anything with PE in the future. So, it doesn't really matter that I'm in the bottom set" (Ellie, Bottom set, Oakside)

"I suppose it doesn't matter how good I am at PE because I'm good at other subjects. So, if someone tells me that I'm bottom set in PE, I don't really care because I'm good at maths. That's what matters to me" (Liz, Bottom set, Sandwest)

The boys in the bottom set at Burnway were content with their set placement in physical education because they felt involved in the decision-making process. This was a public exercise where the boys selected their preferred set by sitting in one of two lines in the sports hall and physical education teachers guided them based on judgements about their physical abilities. This was explained by Mark, who, like all other boys in the bottom set at Burnway, suggested that he took the opportunity to select his set based on friendship:

"The teachers sat us down in the sports hall and asked us to pick the set we wanted to be in. They guided us but we made the decision. So, I made sure I was in a set with my friends. I think we all just see them as friendship groups rather than ability groups really. I'm happy with the set I'm in and wouldn't want to move" (Mark, Bottom set, Burnway).

The boys in the bottom set at Burnway also indicated that they did not feel stigmatised by the label of 'bottom set' because they believed that set placements in physical education were not based on ability differences. Thomas, for example, commented:

“I think with us picking the sets it means that you're less likely to be called names. You haven't been put there because you're bad at PE. It's your choice” (Thomas, Bottom set, Burnway)

The significance of friendship groups also came through in responses from the girls at Burnway. They were supportive of the policy of mixed-ability grouping because it allowed them to be with their friends in physical education. They also drew on gender-related discourses to argue that there was a lack of difference in ability between girls in physical education. In this regard, the girls at Burnway felt that it would be inappropriate to separate them into sets in physical education. Isla and Evie explained:

“We don't need to be set in PE because I think we're all pretty similar. I suppose it's harder to position yourself with mixed. I think with sets you would know, and you might get labelled. I'm happy with mixed to be honest” (Evie, Mixed-ability, Burnway)

“I'm not sure anyone really stands out in lessons. You might get a few who are good because they are in clubs outside of PE. The rest of us are just the same. Maybe that means we're average. I'm not really sure” (Evie, Mixed-ability, Burnway)

In the next section we turn to other instances of students demonstrating agency while acting in conditions that were, in some respects, powerfully shaped by policy.

Students 'positioning themselves' in relation to policy

In all three case study schools, there were clear instances of students questioning and challenging how they were positioned within and by setting policies and responding in ways that demonstrated varying capacity to navigate and negotiate policy and its impact on them as learners. Students demonstrated differing degrees of agency and expressed resistance in varied ways, with the specific policy context of their schools and gender discourses coming into play.

Some of the boys in the top set at Burnway felt a sense of agency in their ability to impact teachers' decision-making about setting in physical education. The process for students selecting a set at Burnway meant that all the boys participating in the focus groups felt a strong sense of responsibility for their set placement. Paul and William's comments below demonstrate how Burnway's emphasis on student choice and voice mediated and framed the ways in which students responded to the policy of setting in physical education. The data pointed towards students as *influencers* and *enthusiasts* in the policy of setting at Burnway:

"The school is all about student voice and we tell teachers if we aren't happy with something. If we aren't happy with something, they do things differently. I mean we wanted to have a say in the set we are in and they let us do that" (Paul, Top set, Burnway)

"The school gives us choice. It's the same with setting. We got to pick the set we wanted to be in. I picked the bottom set, but I didn't really see it as a bottom set. It's just all my friends. So, setting makes me feel comfortable in PE" (William, Bottom set, Burnway)

Some of the students at Oakside and Sandwest used their agency to resist and subvert being positioned as average or low ability in physical education. For example, Aimee at Oakside and

James at Sandwest respectively defined themselves as high ability, irrespective of the fact that they were in the middle and bottom sets in physical education. Aimee and James both drew attention to the variable and contextual nature of their ability-related identities, pointing out that outside of school, they excelled in activities that were not in the physical education curriculum, including climbing, fishing and swimming. Aimee and James believed that they were in the middle and bottom sets in physical education because the curriculum and the decision making of physical education teachers were not inclusive of their interests and abilities. Hence, they expressed *resistance*, rationalising their policy positioning with reference to their own, broader vision of ability in physical education:

“I like doing stuff outside of PE. I do loads of swimming. We don’t get the chance to do swimming though. I think they only really set us on team games. So, I’m not in the top set because I don’t do netball. It’s very annoying and it isn’t fair. If we were tested on swimming, I would be in the top set instead of others” (Aimee, Middle set, Oakside)

“I’m in the bottom set but it doesn’t mean I’m not very good. I’m just good at things that we don’t do in PE, like climbing and fishing” (James, Bottom set, Sandwest)

Other students also adopted a *critic* position in relation to the enactment of setting policy, while at the same time, seemingly acknowledging power-relations at play in the policy process that positioned them as *receivers*. This was particularly the case at Oakside, where students highlighted aspects of setting policy that, in their view, were inequitable, including the distribution of teachers’ time, attention and resources, and the link between setting and access to learning and participation opportunities. Students in the middle and bottom sets at Oakside identified that their set placement excluded them from the opportunity to study GCSE physical education and restricted them from attending after-school sports clubs. Sasha expressed her frustration at her inability to influence policy enactment in this regard:

“The top set is prioritised because they take GCSE PE. I wanted to take GCSE PE, but I’m stuck in the middle set and I can’t move. I think everyone should be given the same opportunities. I just think what’s the point in PE anymore. There’s no point in saying anything. Nothing will change because we’re not top set” (Sasha, Middle set, Oakside)

Students in the middle and bottom sets at Sandwest also articulated a range of concerns about the impact of setting on how they were perceived by others in physical education lessons. Jamie expressed some students’ preference for different setting arrangements and their ongoing desire to influence policy enactment:

“I don’t like that setting makes us aware of our abilities in PE. I’ve told the teachers this as well. I want us to be mixed. A few of us do and we’ve made our thoughts known. We will continue to as well” (Jamie, Bottom set, Sandwest)

Thus, as a *critic* Jamie appeared committed to continuing to active engagement as a policy actor, while Sasha (at Oakside) appeared resigned to a passive role in a policy context that, from her perspective, denied her opportunities and agency.

Data from other students further illustrated various strategies being employed to counter the negative aspects of positioning by setting policy in physical education. For example, some of the boys in the bottom sets at Oakside and Sandwest misbehaved and acted aggressively and competitively in physical education lessons to validate their masculinity to teachers and boys in the top set. Some of the girls in the top set at Sandwest expressed their femininity by putting in minimal effort in physical education lessons and others struck a balance between performing femininity and ability by investing in activities that they believed were consistent with gender-

based ability expectations, including dance and aerobics. Thus, in some instances, there was evidence of creativity amidst *coping* with policy positioning in physical education.

Meanwhile, at Oakside, it was evident that girls in the top set for physical education could express agency in different ways to girls at the other schools, by virtue of the elevated status of the subject in the school. At Oakside, they could legitimately and safely position themselves as high ability and in doing so, avoid ridicule and censure. Harley explained:

“There’s more emphasis on sport in the school. We’re a sports college, so PE is focussed on more. I think that takes the pressure off being in the top set. We don’t get abuse for it. I think the other sets respect us” (Harley, Top set, Oakside)

Below we further explore the complex dynamics between setting, ability, gender and school contexts that emerged from this study as collectively and differentially impacting how students engaged as policy actors in physical education.

Concluding discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that students are, in the main, not passive recipients or victims of policy. Rather, our data speaks to students as readers of policy and policy contexts, engaging with setting as an important dimension of their experience of physical education, and exploring opportunities to challenge and negotiate their own positioning in relation to it. Equally apparent is the simultaneous positioning of students as both actors and subjects in setting policy enactment in physical education, with students’ capacity to adopt particular actor roles, and do different types of policy work (Ball et al., 2012) in physical education, shown to

be mediated by the complex interplay of individual and contextual factors (including gender, set placement, educational and vocational aspirations, and school ethos and specialism), and the intersection of discourses of ability, gender, and performativity.

Thus, neither the varied enactment of setting policy, its differential impact upon students' experiences and identities in physical education, nor the different capacities for agency that students enjoy in physical education, can be explained simply. We highlight particularly that *'how schools do policy'* (Ball et al., 2012), matters for student experiences and learning opportunities in physical education. Across the case study schools, the impact of setting as currently enacted in physical education reaffirms sustained calls for greater sophistication and criticality in relation to discourses of ability in physical education, and indicates that there is still much work to do to counter gender discourses that negatively impact some students' engagement with the subject. More broadly, our research supports wider educational research literature that has repeatedly drawn attention to the negative impact of setting for students positioned in lower sets and the inequities that arise from setting arrangements that restrict student mobility between sets and in turn, restrict some students' educational opportunities.

There is very little theorising and research centring on students' responses to education policy, and in this regard this study has provided an arguably important foundation for further work. Although students are not formally responsible for the enactment of policy in schools, this research has shown the various ways in which they are, nonetheless, active in enactment. We suggest that Ball et al.'s (2011a) policy actor framework can usefully be applied to the analysis of students' roles and influence in enactment. Students in the case study schools adopted a range of actor positions including some suggested by Ball et al. (2011a), including

entrepreneurs, *enthusiasts*, *critics* and *receivers*, and others not clearly identified in Ball et al.'s (2011a) typology, including *influencers*, *copers* and *active* or *engaged policy critics*. These positions were fluid rather than fixed, with students moving between positions over time and in relation to different aspects of the enactment of setting policy in physical education. Students' positions were also very evidently contextually mediated by individual school contexts, and the specific set context (top, middle, bottom). We therefore reiterate Ball et al.'s (2012) emphasis that "the policy enactment work done in schools ... is unique to each school, however similar they may initially seem to be" (p. 40), and acknowledge that the findings of this study cannot therefore be taken as applying in any straight-forward sense to other school settings. More work needs to be done to extend the conceptual and empirical insights into students' engagement with grouping practices in physical education, and into their policy work more broadly in physical education.

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Tables

Table 1. The case study schools and their approaches to grouping students in physical education

School/ Type	Age range	Students on roll	Ofsted grade/ Year of inspection	How students were grouped in Year 9 physical education
Oakside/ Sports College ⁶	11-18	1300	Outstanding (2014)	Boys and girls: Three-set format (top, middle and bottom set)
Burnway/ Local Authority	11-18	850	Good (2017)	Boys: Two-set format (top and bottom set) Girls: Two mixed-ability groups
Sandwest/ Local Authority	11-18	450	Requires improvement (2016)	Boys and girls: Two-set format (top and bottom set)

Table 2. Breakdown of focus groups for each case study school

	Oakside		Burnway		Sandwest	
	No. Boys	No. Girls	No. Boys	No. Girls	No. Boys	No. Girls
Top set	5	5	5		4	5
Middle set	4	5				
Bottom set	5	4	4		4	4
Mixed-ability groups				4 & 5		
Total	14	14	9	9	8	9

⁶ Specialist sports colleges were introduced as part of the Specialist Schools Programme [SSP] in 1997. The SSP encouraged secondary schools in England to specialise in certain fields of the curriculum to improve standards in education (DfEE, 1997, 2000). They have an identified mission to raise standards (academic and sporting) of performance and achievement in PE and sport for all their pupils across the ability range, increase participation in PE and sport for pre-and post-16-year olds, and develop the potential of talented performers (DfEE, 2000). Although the SSP ended in 2010, many schools in England have retained their SSC status.