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## Lifestyles and gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests among Irish adolescents

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**Lifestyles and gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests among Irish adolescents**

Abstract

This paper strives to provide an insight into the multifaceted relationships that young people have, examining the social, cultural and institutional discourses which shape their lives. We set out to discuss, from an empirical poststructuralist perspective, the way in which Irish adolescents write about the reality of their lives and privilege certain practices and forms of subjectivity. We are particularly interested in the role and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people, asking what institutional and cultural discourses are brought into play to construct particular identities and social practices associated with leisure and sporting interests. In an effort to generate more complex understandings of patterns of leisure and sporting interests, we combine two forms of analysis to explore the *hows* (discourse analysis) and *whats* (content analysis) of the narratives (Smith & Sparkes, 2005). This paper focuses on a purposeful sample of 168 written narratives of Irish post-primary students (14 to 17 years of age), chosen to represent the gender of students, a range of rural and urban school locales from different geographic locations and single-sex and co-educational schools. We focus on the inter-relationships between (1) school, (2) family and friends, (3) community - localism and tradition, (4) commodification and globalisation, (5) popular culture, (6) paid employment, and (7) gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests. The family is a strong focal point for these young people as are their friends and being part of a community. The young people (boys in particular) are significant consumers of 'media sport' and both girls and boys were knowledgeable of national and international politics. We also comment on the extent to which

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female and male adolescents negotiate, similarly or differently, culturally dominant discourses within physical activity and sport, with significantly more boys choosing to write about physical activity and sport in their narratives.

Key words: adolescents; poststructuralist; Ireland; lifestyles; narratives

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Introduction

In an earlier paper (Collier, MacPhail & O'Sullivan, 2007), we explored the accounts of student discourse related to the role of physical activity and sport in the lives of Irish children and youth. The paper primarily relied on the narratives of primary-aged students and, where we did focus on adolescent-related trends from the narratives, our attention was limited to physical activity and sport, acknowledging that the discourse on sport and physical activity for the adolescent students was much more complex and diverse than those of the primary-aged students. The paper we present here draws on the advice of Sandford and Rich (2006), Wright (2006) and Wright, Macdonald and Groom (2003) who encourage investigation into providing more complex insight into the multifaceted relationships that young people have, examining the social, cultural and institutional discourses which shape their lives. We set out to discuss, from an empirical poststructuralist perspective, the way in which Irish adolescents write about the reality of their lives and privilege certain practices and forms of subjectivity. Similar to Wright et al., (2003), we are interested in the role and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people, asking what institutional and cultural discourses are brought into play to construct particular identities and social practices associated with leisure and sporting interests.

Using the narrative paradigm and discourse and content analysis we examine and convey our understanding of physical activity from the point of view of young people in relation to other aspects of their lives. Informed by Lupton's (1999) investigation (cited in Wright, 2006), we examine how students represent themselves and others in their narratives, the dominant principles conveyed, what notion of physical activity and sport is privileged in the texts and the

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broader discourses structuring these representations. We also examine the extent to which students' perspectives presented in their narratives match the official cultural and institutional discourses, and how this may challenge dominant discourses that function to discriminate or privilege certain young people (Azzarito & Solomon, 2006). We anticipate that by investigating and understanding young people's notions of 'knowing' and 'being' (Wright, 2006), suggestions for future practice (particularly in encouraging a greater interest and investment in physical activity participation) will be generated. It is anticipated that, due to the narratives being completed within the school context, we may be able to comment on the school environments' contribution to the participation in physical activity of girls and boys (Wright, 1995).

We critique and challenge the assumption that girls drop-out of physical activity as they progress through the teenage years due to lack of interest. However, evidence in the narrative may support the belief that these girls are in fact not disinterested in being involved in physical activity per se but rather are disengaged from the nature, structure and opportunities available to them (Sandford & Rich, 2006; Wright & King, 1990).

We are also conscious of the notion of 'choice' from a poststructuralist perspective, acknowledging that while young people may be in a position to make choices there are also instances where investment in a particular position and practice may limit the choice made (Wright, 1995). We are conscious that poststructuralism rejects the views that ideas formed in society are fixed, stable or universal and that meanings are not transcendent (Azzarito & Solomon, 2006). We endeavour not to undermine or mis-represent the complex meanings and identities that are conveyed through the narratives but rather keep with the theoretical basis of poststructuralism by not claiming to capture truths but rather examine how young people construct realities and with what effect (Wright, 2004).

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### Positioning of young people

Six core concepts have been suggested as central to positioning young people's social practice (Sandford & Rich, 2006), and these are habitus and physical capital, hidden curriculum, corporeal regulation, popular culture and physical culture, identity and subjectivities and situated learning and communities of practice. These concepts are a useful framework to build on as we believe our study can contribute to understanding young people's social practice. Due to the nature of our interest being in the role and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people, the concepts primarily of interest here are 'physical capital', 'popular culture' and 'physical culture'. 'Physical capital' (Bourdieu, 1986; Schilling, 1991) conveys the physical attributes and abilities that arise through engagement with sporting and social practices, with gender being a particular social characteristic that impacts an individual's physical capital. 'Popular culture' focuses on elements of popular youth experiences that are predominant and accessible to most people in society and includes elements such as media, music, fashion and sport. Popular culture arises not only by people living their lives but also by industries attempting to sell goods (Moje & van Helden, 2005). 'Physical culture' relates to aspects of the body as it engages in various forms of physical activity (Kirk, 1999). Physical culture (also referred to as 'movement culture', see Crum, 1994) has more recently become an appropriate means for making sense of young people's physical activity lifestyles, acknowledging that the physical activity contexts in which young people (do not) reside are not isolated from other social or cultural experiences (Macdonald, 2002).

While current trends report high involvement of school-aged children in physical activity and sport, with the majority of young people having high levels of intrinsic motivation in relation

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to leisure participation (Office of the Minister for Children / Department of Health and Children, 2006), strong differences between females and males with respect to their participation in active leisure pursuits are well documented (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Younger adolescents and male adolescents are most likely to be involved in physical activities and sport and there is a 'drop off' in involvement as adolescents (particularly girls) progress through post-primary school. While females tend to emphasise friendships and close relationships in small groups, the decision to participate in sport is linked to how young people perceive their feminine / masculine role in society and gender is a barrier to participation in recreation due to more recreational activities and opportunities being available to boys than to girls. It is anticipated that by examining young people's experiences of physical culture we will gain a richer understanding of the place physical activity and sport currently has in their lives. Wright (2004) points out that discourse alone does not provide an explanation of why some discourses are taken up by particular individuals and not others and why the same discourses can be taken up in different ways by different individuals.

### Demographics of young people living in Ireland and educational trends

The following demographics are taken from The 'State of the Nation's Children' report (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006), an updated statement of key indicators of Irish children's well-being. Ireland has a higher percentage of children under 18 than any other European Union Member State, with 25% of the population in Ireland under 18 years. Eighty-six percent of children live with both parents/guardians while 14% live with a lone parent or guardian.

Traveller children and non-Irish children account for 1% and 4% of the total child population respectively. Irish children's mean scores show they perform equivalent or higher than 29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries means scores with

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respect to reading literacy, mathematics and science. Ireland ranked third among 33 countries when reporting involvement in binge drinking. A higher than average number of children reported being physically active in comparison to 34 World Health Organisation (WHO) countries.

Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith (2005) conducted an innovative and in-depth piece of Irish research to establish and better understand young people's impression of well-being. Using photography and subsequent discussion through schema development with young people from urban and rural post-primary girls', boys' and mixed schools, they found a 'degree of complexity with which young people understand the influences on their well-being to be interrelated' (Nic Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005, p. 64). While the young people were able to identify what they considered to be the most influential factors for their own well-being (e.g., home, family and friends), complexity arose in the different ways in which they perceived the categories to be connected to one another.

In presenting findings from over 1,000 essays written by Irish post-primary students from twelve schools, Lynch (1999) commented that there were a number of notable differences between single-sex girls' and boys' schools. Students were asked to write about any time or place where they believed they had been unfairly or unequally treated since attending their current school. Stress and control (of behaviour and appearance) along with examination results and attainment of college places (also evident in the UK, see Flintoff & Scraton, 1991) were prominent issues from girls' schools while physical strength and sporting ability were highly appreciated in the boys' schools. It was more difficult to comment on co-educational second level schools in Ireland as they tend to be very diverse in character. In reporting the percentage of essays within the different school types that commented on issues relating to school sport, the

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percentage ranged from zero to six percent in single-sex girls' schools and from zero to 31 percent in single-sex boys' schools. Co-educational secondary schools ranged from one percent to 19 percent.

### **Irish physical activity rates outside of formal school time**

As reported by MacPhail, O'Sullivan and Halbert (2007), physical activity provision after school is a major source of sport participation for Irish children. Over 60% of post-primary students participate in after school sport at least once a week and 52% participate 2-4 days a week.

Almost 30% of girls and 16% of boys indicated no participation in extra curricular sport on a weekly basis (Fahey et al., 2005). Rates of extra-curricular participation decline as students move up through post-primary with 61% of 2nd year pupils and 41% of 6th year pupils participating 2 or more days a week. The rate of non-participation in extra curricular sport doubles from 15% in year 2 to 30% in year 6. The fall off in some sports however is less pronounced but these are sports played mainly by boys (hurling and Gaelic football) while the largest declines are in sports played more by girls (basketball and hockey) (Fahey et al., 2005).

Over half (52%) of the students in Fahey et al.'s (2005) study reported they participated in non-school sports at least 2 or more days a week. The differences in participation rates out of school for boys (64%) and girls (41%) were as dramatic as the data reported for extra curricular sport participation. Gaelic football (14%) and dance (13%) were the most popular out of school activities for girls with swimming and camogie (9%) a joint third. Boys preferred soccer (31%) and Gaelic football (29%) with hurling (18%) a distant third. More students have access to physical activity sessions per week in non-physical education settings than they have for physical education classes. While Fahey and colleagues (2005) note that participation rates are higher

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overall for adolescents in after-school sport than in either physical education or for extra-curricular activity in school, the differentiated rates of participation between boys and girls is most noticeable here (MacPhail et al., 2007).

### **Narrative paradigm**

Central to poststructural analysis is a focus on discourses which make up social institutions and cultural products. Narratives act as the discursive practice through which we examine how young people construct their identity in relation to their school context and the larger sociocultural context outside the school (Collier et al., 2006; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). Discourses are values, beliefs and attitudes that take concrete forms in institutions such as schools and impact young people's construction of identity. Dominant discourses shape youths' processes of normalisation which in turn influence young people's (leisure) participation in and out of school (Azzarito & Solomon, 2006).

Lewis (2007) and Doyle and Carter (2003) list a number of elements related to a narrative perspective, including human beings having a predisposition to 'story' their experience, (i.e., to impose a narrative interpretation on information and experience) and that a story resists singular interpretation. Clough (2002) presents the use of narratives in educational research as one way of carrying out research under postmodern conditions, 'Though postmodern inquiry is often described by commentators, it is surely given with its nature that it cannot be prescribed. So the task becomes less one of counting up quotations than of determining for oneself the meaning, process and significance of postmodern inquiry' (p. 5). In particular, we are interested in identifying 'regularities of meaning' (Wright, 2006). That is, how the patterns in language use in the narratives convey discourses constituting young people's lives and how particular social

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practices and social relations identify their (individual and group) systems of beliefs and values. Our particular interest is in the place and meaning of physical activity and physical culture in young people's lives. Fundamental questions still exist about the relationship between involvement in school physical activity and the physical culture that young people (involved in what Tinning and Fitzclarence (1992) refer to as a 'postmodern youth culture') are drawn to and practice outside of school. It is anticipated that our use of the narrative paradigm, discourse analysis and content analysis will address such questions.

### **Sample selection**

In 1999, as part of an initiative aimed at involving young people in millennium celebrations, a national sample of young people (approximately 34,000 young people aged between 10-12 years and 14-17 years) were invited, in the school context, to write a single page about their lives, the future and their vision of Ireland in the new millennium (O'Connor, 2005). This paper focuses on the narratives of the Transition Year students (14 to 17 years of age). Transition Year is a non-examinable year after the Junior Certificate examination (three year junior cycle for those from 12 to 15 years of age) and before proceeding to senior cycle (catering for 16 to 19 years of age). A 'Transition Year' enables students to make the transition from a highly structured environment to one where they take greater responsibility for their own learning and decision-making ([www.ncte.ie/transition/guidelines.html](http://www.ncte.ie/transition/guidelines.html)) before embarking on the strong examination focus of the remaining senior school years. The activity-based learning ethos of the year allows students the opportunity to (1) engage in independent, self-directed learning, (2) develop general, technical and academic skills and, (3) mature and develop without the pressure of an examination. For this study we chose a purposeful sample of 168 narratives (116 girls and 52

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boys) that were chosen to represent the gender of students, a range of rural and urban school locales from different geographic locations and single-sex and co-educational schools.

### Data analysis

In an effort to generate more complex understandings of patterns of leisure and sporting interests we combine two forms of analysis to explore the *hows* (discourse analysis) and *whats* (content analysis) of the narratives (Smith & Sparkes, 2005).

Discourse analysis is a useful and viable way to help understand the adolescent lives in the domains of sport and physical activity (Smith & Sparkes, 2005). Discourse analysis is composed of two main dimensions, textual and contextual, 'Textual dimensions are those which account for the *structures* of discourses, while contextual dimensions relate these structural descriptions to various properties of the *social, political or cultural context* in which they take place' (Lupton, 1992, p. 145). A poststructuralist approach allows for all forms of meaning production, including narratives, to be analysed as texts and to identify social and cultural hegemony and the manner by which it is reproduced (Lupton, 1992; Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Wright, 2004). Theory formation, and the way in which ideology is reproduced, is a particular focus of discourse analysis, allowing one to 'delve below the surface of texts and talk, to critically reveal the meanings and ideologies which are reproduced within' (Lupton, 1992, p. 146). In analysing the narratives, we are also interested in what the young people do not write about, what Kirk (1999) refers to as 'the gaps or silences in their communications' (p. 66).

Approaching the project inductively, each of the three researchers randomly selected and analysed twenty narratives from the sample of 168. The initial analysis employed an 'open' coding system, whereby we considered the data in minute detail while developing the initial

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categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Content analysis was used in the initial coding of the narratives by coding and assigning particular sections of content from each narrative to defined categories that were informed by themes evident in the narratives. Content analysis allowed us to examine the thematic similarities and differences between narratives provided by the young people. The thirteen categories consisted of family (demographic, size, role and occupation), aspirations (personal and professional), hobbies (music, sport, leisure / physical activity, films / cinema, reading, singing / acting, shopping, video / television, having fun, going out), locality (identity with Ireland and home), friends, work, political commentary (social and economic / military), school, popular culture (films / cinema, fashion, events, religion, music, television, language, media, sport), identity, significant events, health and fitness, role models and philosophy of life. In addition, particular narratives that favoured engaging with only one category were noted. For example, one young person spoke only of a particular family member and another focused solely on being an Irish Traveller.

While being conscious of retaining some degree of cultural identity among the voices but also protecting the anonymity of the young people and their schools, abbreviations were assigned to each narrative using numbers and labels that reflect gender and school type. The abbreviations used are GCS (girl in a co-educational post primary school), GSS (girl in a single-sex post primary school) and BCS ( boy in a co-educational post primary school).

### **Trustworthiness and credibility**

The narratives were written within the school day in response to a specific task and may therefore be positioned within a particular social and cultural context. Our own engagement in the research process, and how we each interpret the texts, is positioned by the current situations

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we occupy. The lead author is British and has been working in Ireland for five years while the second author is American and spent a year in Ireland working on the same project as reported here. The third author is Irish and has returned to work in Ireland after over two decades in North America. All three currently work within physical education teacher education and have a strong interest in sport pedagogy, including youth sport provision. There was no influence from the researcher(s) in collecting these data as none of the authors were involved. The initiative from which this material evolved is explained elsewhere (O’Conner et al., 2005).

We do not suggest that the narrative extracts / quotes we use in this paper are illustrative of the collective narratives as we recognise the ‘complex, interrelationships’ and ‘qualitative differences’ (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001) between individual choices and different aspects of the young people’s lives. The narratives convey the specific circumstances in which these young people live. Narrative extracts are selected to illustrate particular themes or individual issues and are not intended as generalisations.

### Findings and discussion

This section incorporates the *hows* and *whats* of young people’s narrative telling (Smith and Sparkes, 2005). That is, in examining the ‘hows’ of the discourse we examine similarities and difference in the way young people speak about their lives. In exploring the ‘what’, we are interested in the content of their narratives, what they choose to include or exclude. In an attempt to provide insight into the multifaceted relationships that young people have and how such practices position their leisure and sporting interests, we have chosen to focus on the inter-relationships between (1) school, (2) family and friends, (3) community - localism and tradition, (4) commodification and globalisation, (5) popular culture, (6) paid employment, and (7)

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gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests. With physical culture as the lens we attempt to understand and interpret the leisure and sporting interests and engagement conveyed in their narratives.

In examining 'sporting interests' we are interested in all forms of physical activity, a category that commonly encompasses the sport, recreation and exercise components of physical culture. Guided by Kirk's (1999) discursive practices for each, sport refers to a set of practices governed by techniques and strategies that lead to competition and require specialised facilities. Physical recreational activities are alternatives to work used to revitalise and are usually informal and non-competitive. Exercise tends to refer to activities that contribute to explicit health outcomes and includes walking, swimming and gym work.

### **(1) School**

The relationship between culture, education and sport is seen as 'inevitable and symbiotic' (Laker, 2002). The school as an important and social site for young people is perhaps heightened in these narratives as they were completed during class time at school which, unsurprisingly, resulted in fore-fronting the school in a percentage of narratives. However, this does not mean that other social and cultural discourses which shape their lives are not evident in the narratives, acknowledging that it is imperative that we are aware of factors or discourses beyond school that reflect and engage young people's lives (Macdonald, 2002; Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Sandford & Rich, 2006; Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992).

Being in Transition Year the young people subsequently noted a number of activities that they had experienced throughout the 'vocational' year including musicals, fashion shows, establishing mini companies, variety shows, learning how to swim, work experience and trips to

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other countries. Transition Year was enjoyed by most students who valued the fun, experience and confidence they gained from the year;

‘(...) being in Transition Year, has been a major up for me. It has given me the experience and the confidence for the long road that lies ahead of me. It has given me the freedom to explore my interests and has taught me many lessons, both good and bad. It has given me the chance to work in career areas that I am interested in and enabled me to choose my future career. Every day is a new experience (...)’ (GSS, 10).

School was acknowledged as a place to meet friends and socialize. Teachers, the curriculum, school uniforms and the school building were mentioned infrequently.

### **(2) Family and friends**

Young people consistently reported being one of between three and seven siblings in a family and there were instances of a significant age spectrum across siblings. One eighteen-year old boy reported being one of thirteen children, ‘My father and mother had two boys and eleven girls (...) We have different views on things in my house as my eldest brother is 34 and my youngest sister is 16’ (BCS, 49). Contrary to popular belief, many young people get on well with their parents, and look to them for guidance and support (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). This is endorsed with young people making it clear that they respect their parents and the support that they continue to offer, acknowledging that some of their closest relationships are with family members. The family was a strong focal point and numerous examples of the support structure provided by the family were evident, ‘Pull together when one of us needs it’ (GCS, 8) and, ‘My life was an easy one, where everything was provided by my parents (...) anything I needed or wanted was provided by them. They are exceptional people’ (BCS, 25). One girls’ narrative

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focused solely on the role of her mother in her life (GSS, 49). There was evidence that stereotypical roles of the mother as a housewife, home help and childminder and the father as a farmer were in existence. There were sporadic references to tense family relationships, parents splitting up and 'broken homes' and one girl articulated a moving portrayal of dealing with a mother who was an alcoholic (GCS, 14).

A noticeable difference between the girls' and boys' narratives was the boys' link with family members' involvement in the same sports as they were now involved. For example, one boy who strived to become a professional football player wrote that his father almost played for an Irish football team (BCS, 43) and another spoke about how his brother who had been boxing for 15 years began training him before he joined a club (BCS, 17). Friends were closely connected with family as being important, more so in girls' lives, 'The most important thing in my life is my family and friends. Both my family and friends mean so much to me' (GSS, 18).

Friendships appear very important to Irish children ranking first among 35 WHO countries when asked if they have three or more friends of the same gender (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). There was evidence that friendship groups provided support, companionship and mutual activity interests and that young people were members of different groups of friends, such as school-based and / or sports-based groups. Friends were frequently named in narratives as those who were trustworthy, listened, helped and made them laugh. Girls also mentioned boyfriends who were conveyed as providing a loving relationship (GCS, 32; GCS, 43). One boy mentioned his girlfriend.

### **(3) Community**

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Many of the young people convey happiness to be living in Ireland with a mix of students living in a rural community, on a farm, by the sea or in a housing estate. Young people were aware of drugs, drug dealers and crime impacting on some communities. Their actual homes were conveyed as being special to them and allowing them to feel safe, in one instance being referred to as a 'haven' (GSS, 38). In a previous paper exploring issues related to local embeddedness of the same young people surveyed here, O'Conner et al. (2005) noted that boys being more likely than the girls to refer to their local area and boys were associated with greater embeddedness in the local area through sporting activities and interests.

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) (which promotes the national games of Gaelic football, hurling, handball, and camogie) is the dominant sporting body in Ireland. Gaelic games provide an important focus for Irish young people's perceptions of national identity (Waldron & Pike, 2006). This is perhaps heightened by an absence of a significant international aspect to Gaelic games, although there is a North American County Board of the GAA which promotes the related games in the US. The GAA stronghold areas tended to be portrayed as small, rural communities. The community allegiance to, and provision of, GAA was strongly evidenced in the narratives, 'I hope that Meath win the All Ireland Final in Gaelic Football in September this year. It would be great to have a new title of All Ireland Champions for the new millenium' (GCS, 11) and 'When I get home from school I get my dinner and watch T.V. I then usually go and play camogie with a local village then come home and go to bed' (GSS, 55). Young people were also critical of local community sports facilities, 'Sport is all good but around here in [name of town] sport's facilities are very rare and nobody gets to do anything but hang around the streets' (BCS, 26).

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### (4) Commodification and globalisation

Young people have become significant consumers of media products and information technology, which in turn has become an important source of socialisation for youth (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992). Similar to Tinning and Fitzclarence's (1992) example of 'active choice within an expanded frame of social stimulants', there appears to be growing popularity for soccer and rugby (de Roiste & Dineen, 2005; Fahey et al., 2005; Connor, 2003), and both receive a huge amount of media coverage not only in televised games and tournaments but also in advertising merchandise. In positioning this statement it is important to note the historical location of such comments. At the time these narratives were written in 1999, soccer was at its zenith, with Ireland's performance in the 1998 World Cup (reaching the quarter finals) likely to still be prominent in young people's minds due to the amount of coverage the tournament received through the national and international media. While there continues to be a huge interest in international soccer, the investment in advertising by the GAA in recent years and the opening of Croke Park to sporting activities other than GAA maintains the stronghold of media attention and young people's sporting interest and opportunity in GAA games.

There is a rise in popularity of national and international soccer and rugby, evidenced in the narratives. Many boys documented an allegiance to following English and Spanish soccer clubs, particularly Liverpool, Manchester United and AC Milan, and conveyed their investment through knowledge of the clubs' management and players, 'I'm a big Liverpool fan for many years. At the moment Liverpool ain't doing the best for us supporters. Our new manager is Gerard Houiller and he's bringing in a lot of new faces. Hopefully things will change for us in the New Year' (BCS, 4). Boys also conveyed admiration for the amount of money to be made from soccer, 'I admire many people who make this sport [soccer] as a professional and get wages of

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20 to 40 thousand a week' (BCS, 22). Formula One was another popularised commercial sport, 'I follow Formula 1 and Schumacher is the best driver ever (...). Micheal Schumacher is a German Driver who races for Ferrari. He gets paid almost £60,000 a day for being in the team' (BCS, 26). The soccer and Formula One interest were conveyed only by boys. One boy clearly acknowledged sport as a consumer item, 'Sport is an increasing industry in Ireland and I wonder what will it be like in 1000 years time' (BCS, 40).

Connections between the intensity of media sport coverage and sustained involvement and improvement in young people's sporting activity remain tenuous (Lines, 2007). It was clear that for some of the young people's sport participation was not as central a feature in everyday life as media consumption of physical activity. Girls were also less likely to convey an interest in media sport coverage and did not appear particularly troubled about the fact that they were not subject to the same sport 'media drenching' (Lines, 2007) as boys.

The impact of media is not only evident in how the young people choose to spend their leisure time but also in their awareness and knowledge of local and national (political) issues and events (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Such an awareness and knowledge may also be contributed to by schools (Waldron & Pike, 2006). A number of narratives engaged with weighty social political issues that included violence, abortion, homelessness, hunger, rape, drugs, crime, alcohol, environmental issues (greenhouse effect / melting of polar ice-caps), teenage pregnancies, influence of world leaders, cloning, technology, extra-terrestrial intelligence and an over-crowded and polluted world. In discussing more economic and military issues there was an awareness of what was happening in other countries, including Northern Ireland, the Gulf war and Saddam Hussein, Kosovo refugees, Albania, NATO, third world debt, nuclear weapons and a growing economy in Ireland (Celtic Tiger).

(5) Popular culture

Music was popular with these young people, with few reporting the ability to play a musical instrument. Music references included naming the kind of music they liked, songs (with a number of narratives consisting only of verses to particular songs), bands (Bon Jovi, Westlife, The Corrs) and artists (Celine Dion, Robbie Williams, Britney Spears) along with references to attending discos and concerts and buying CDs. One narrative was entirely dedicated to the issue of music (BCS, 5). Boys conveyed an appreciation of music (rather than just noting the lyrics of songs as girls did) by listening to music at home, from the internet and in discos / clubs as well as reporting an interest in being involved in disc jockeying. One boy believed that music has the power to ‘represents my culture and what I believe in’ with an awareness that ‘different types of music represents different types of lifestyle’ (BCS, 5). Another reported that writing music was one of the most important aspects of his life, with an ambition to become a ‘famous rap artist’ (BCS, 30).

Fashion was mentioned, particularly but not exclusively by girls, as becoming more important as they became older, ‘I am influenced a lot by music and fashion particularly music. Music is a very big and important part in my life and that’s where most of my money goes but fashion is becoming more and more important to me’ (GCS, 46). Sandford and Rich (2006) note that appropriate clothing is a means by which young people can gain significant physical capital among their peers and this was more prevalent in girls’ narratives, ‘I went shopping yesterday to buy clothes for my brothers confirmation. This summer I hope to go to London to do some shopping for my cousins wedding. Shopping is one of my favourite pastimes’ (GCS, 22).

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Television was acknowledged as having a presence in teenagers' lives. Young people listed their favourite television programmes (Dawson's Creek, Friends, The X-Files), with one boy reporting, 'Television is one of the most important things in my generation and I spend my day's watching television well as least most of the day' (BCS, 12).

### **(6) Paid employment**

The prevalence of part-time work, particularly at upper secondary level, has become a common pattern due to the growth in employment levels in Ireland (McCoy & Smyth, 2007). Previous findings of young females' use of leisure time being more diverse than that of young men and the reduction in time for involvement in physical activity due to paid employment (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Wright et al., 2003; Wright et al., 2005) is evidenced here. One girl chose to spend her limited 'free time' taking part in physical activity related experiences, 'I work a lot so therefore I have very little spare time but in my spare time I play football, rounders & listen to music & go to dance lessons' (GSS, 26). An array of paid work was conveyed through the narratives and included working in shops, factories, babysitting, pubs, restaurants and hotels.

### **(7) Gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests**

While acknowledging the work that has been carried out around gendered discursive constructs within physical education (Azzarito & Ennis, C., 2003; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Gorely et al., 2003; Hills, 2007; Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Penney & Evans, 2002; Wright, 2004 & 1995), the narratives do not allow us to comment on the dominant gendered discourses, power relations or socially accepted norms and behaviour embedded in Irish physical education classes. However, it is possible to comment on the extent to which female and male adolescents negotiate, similarly

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or differently, culturally dominant discourses within physical activity and sport. Physical education was not mentioned in the narratives even though we know that the time allocation for physical education in Irish post-primary schools is highest during the non-examinable one-year Transition Year programme (MacPhail & Halbert, 2005).

### Girls' sport involvement

Less than 25% of the 116 narratives from girls conveyed an interest and involvement in sport, mirroring data from a national quantitative survey (Kelleher et al., 2003). In referencing involvement in sport it was apparent that for those girls who were active they were involved in a number of sports at school and club level;

‘My hobbies are horse-riding, hockey, gaelic football and running. (...) play on the ladies football team. I do hockey and tennis in school. (...) I would like to proceed in my showjumping career and hopefully compete on the junior [circuit] this season. I hunt regularly’ (GCS, 3)

Walking and swimming were more popular forms of leisure physical activity for girls than going to the gym. An example of a more passive involvement in sport was evidenced by one girl who allocated a large proportion of her narrative to the topic;

‘I’m really interested in sport and follow most championships; leagues and cups. I can’t wait for the olympics and thought the World Cup was great. I was a bit disappointed Holland didn’t win but at least they got to the semi-final. Edgar Davids is definitely their best player. He plays with Juventus also. I’m also interested in GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association] and looking forward to the rest of the championship which began last week. As far as playing sport I don’t play much unfortunately. I used play with the local girls

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football team (gaelic) – “[name of club]” but the clubs no longer exists as of this year.

Last year we won the [title of championship] championship and got to the county final, but lost’ (GSS, 44).

Health and fitness references were minimal with girls favouring a more holistic notion of health commenting ‘I have my life, health and people who love me’ (GSS, 2). Only two girls made reference to being involved in sport for fitness benefits, ‘I love swimming and I go to the pool every week. I also do aerobics. I like to keep myself fit’ (GCS, 40) and ‘Sport helps to keep me fit and healthy and I enjoy it’ (GSS, 38).

A number of comments portray the particular competing interests that girls have on their time involved in sport, ‘I play a lot of sports including hockey, tennis, swimming and horse-riding (...) I love shopping and socialising’ (GSS, 37) and, ‘I love to sail, play sports and I’m not a sports fanatic and I absolutely love to go to the beach or out with my friends’ (GSS, 52).

Horseriding was a consistent interest of the girls and this may be due to the high percentage of girls who reference living on a farm and having their own horse. In listing memories that would remain with her forever, one girl included ‘sports – volleyball, soccer and table tennis’ along with ‘music – Robbie Williams, Celine Dion, Westlife and Abba’ and ‘history – Cease-fire in Northern Ireland, Death of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa, Ireland hosting the Eurovision for 5 years and also the film Titanic’ (GSS, 56). This example only heightens the competing interests and experiences with which sport involvement must compete.

Only two girls conveyed a high level of commitment to sport (sailing and gymnastics respectively) in their narrative, the sailing narrative stating;

‘The thing I enjoy doing most is sailing. I try to be the best I can be at anything I care about, and I take sailing very seriously. I’ve been on the under sixteen sailing team for

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the last two years and both years were really good fun. I was especially pleased with my results last season because I got to represent Ireland at the European Championships. I hope to still be sailing for many years to come because I enjoy it so much and I'd like to be able to achieve a lot in this sport. Whenever I am not sailing (I've probably bored you enough on that subject!) I'm usually doing other sports or going out with my friends' (GSS, 30).

### **Boys' sport involvement**

Almost half of the fifty-two narratives from boys conveyed an interest and involvement in sport. It was also noticeable that when sport was referenced in a narrative, boys engaged more fully with their experiences of sport, conveying a richer experience and involvement with sport. One boy dedicated his narrative to his hopes and ambitions for the next millennium in sport and these were concerned with Jordan Grand Prix, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland football teams merging and Tipperary winning the All-Ireland final (BCS, 16). Another narrative conveying only a sporting interest focused on the boy's allegiance to watching soccer and his preferred team (BCS, 45) and a football poem constituted the narrative of another boy (BCS, 50).

Boys also appeared more inherently aware of sporting opportunities with a tendency to want to be active a lot of the time, 'I am into many things which include soccer, swimming, basketball (...) I'm a very energetic sort of person who likes to keep active. This is probably why I love sports, so much' (BCS, 27). A number of boys' narratives began with a focus on sport;

'Im sitting in English class writing this note at 11.35am. I'm looking forward to our football match against King's Hospital. I'm really big into sports and Im so glad that

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Leeds beat Arsenal last night because that gives Manchester United (my team) a great chance to win the premiership' (BCS, 52).

Boys named a wide spectrum of sports in which they were involved, including football, GAA, soccer, Tae-kwon-do, rugby, golf, outdoor activities, pool, boxing, snooker, basketball, rock climbing, rowing, skating and swimming. Soccer, football and hurling were the most frequently mentioned and were mostly played as club sports, 'I play G.A.A. and hurling for my local club Kildavin, I play soccer for Bunclody' (BCS, 4). There was also evidence of boys playing sport for the school and with friends as well as club commitment;

'I love to play hurling and at the moment we are in the under 15 final (...) I play with Ennistymon and hope to play for Clare some day (...) I play hurling, soccer, and football for the school. Every weekend I play football with my brother, two sisters, and my neighbour' (BCS, 9).

The competitive outcomes of involvement in sport were also evident;

'I have won many medals and trophies for hurling and dancing. In 1995 the set which I was a part of won the All Ireland-set dancing competition in Listowel. (...) In April just gone Inagh won the U21 C county final and I was a part of that panel as well as the minor C last year. We have an intermediate team and we are hoping to win this out as we were beaten in the final last year by neighbours Kilnemonen' (BCS, 10).

In discussing sporting role models, boys mentioned football players and Formula One drivers and on a number of instances conveyed in their narrative that their role models were Irish sporting personalities (from football, Roy Keane and from Formula One, Eddie Irvine).

Future orientation

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The image individuals have of the future, what Seigner (2003) refers to as ‘future orientations’, are evident in a number of narratives. Although there is an acknowledgement that future orientation is the outcome of both universal and culture-specific processes, previous research has identified a common core of three future life domains for adolescents; education, career, and (marriage and) family and in addition, concerns with the self (e.g., “to be happy”)  
([www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/Seigner.htm](http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/Seigner.htm)).

Having a husband and children, along with a career and / or house, was a personal aspiration for many girls, ‘I would like to be married by the age of 35 and have at least two children. I hope to be married to a rich man and own a big house in the city. We would have a massive house out in the country’ (GCS, 12) and, ‘In the future I hope to have a great career, a wonderful husband and children’ (GCS, 40). Other aspirations of girls included doing well in school, going to college / university, travelling and staying in contact with friends. Personal aspirations of boys tended to focus on a college education and striving to stay involved in sport. One boy noted that when he left school he wanted to play senior rugby or play for Ireland (BCS, 37) and another conveyed his professional aspiration of playing professional football;

‘My future ambitions are to play Professional Football in England or Italy. I’m working on my game alot and my team are in the league Finals U16 on Thursday (...) I’d love to play pro-football for myself and the money would help me help my brother and his sight. I’ve been told how hard it is to get pro-football but I’m sticking at it’ (BCS, 43).

In 2002, almost 90% of Irish children reported that they were happy with their life at present (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). A number of young people were happy and content with their lives and appreciated that they were grateful for the quality of life they had in

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Ireland, '(...) happiness is the most important thing to me because without happiness life would be quite meaningless and boring' (GCS, 9).

### **Conclusion**

Students conveyed the development of personal capacities through involvement in Transition Year, frequently recording how the experiences they had gained in the year had increased their confidence in themselves and opportunities for their future. Transition Year allowed them a certain degree of freedom in negotiating decisions on how to use their time, putting them in a position to make choices. It appeared, more so for girls, that engagement with school friends (perhaps enhanced and encouraged more in a non-examination year) converted into social capital, with strong connections to friends being conveyed through narratives. Clothing was also conveyed as a form of social capital, with (predominantly) girls conveying the importance of shopping for the latest fashions. It is difficult to comment on the physical attributes and abilities embodied through sporting practices as the discourses of health and well-being were not dominant in the young people's narratives, with very few conveying health benefits as a reason for being physically active.

The principal role of popular culture is entertainment, channelled primarily through mass media (Sandford & Rich, 2006). Physically active role models are expected to influence young people to participate in physical activity and sport (Vescio, Wilde & Crosswhite, 2005). It was evident that family role models were most prominent in young people's narratives but not necessarily with respect to being physically active. While the young women rarely noted the name of a sporting role model, the young men not only named but were familiar with sporting role models that they admired and, in some cases, wished to emulate. Linked to this, it was

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evident that young men were more exposed to sport 'media drenching'. This may have ramifications for the sport media knowledge and information that girls do not hear in comparison to boys and its impact on gendered development of sporting identities (Lines, 2007). That is, sporting media is not targeted at girls and subsequently not heard by girls. There was evidence to support previous findings that there may be less diversity in the leisure choices of young men than young women with fewer competing options for leisure time as compared to the girls (Wright et al., 2003). The boys were predominantly involved in the team sports of Gaelic football, hurling and soccer and conveyed a sustained club investment in the activities of their choice. Girls reported a wider diversity of types of sporting activities (individual and team) and, in general, less investment in such activities as school- or club-affiliated participants. While boys had a more regular sport discourse, girls conveyed that friends and paid employment were competing for their sporting leisure time. Referring back to the findings of Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith (2005), it appears that the young people's narratives supported a similar affinity to family and home. Family involvement in sport was more of an interest for boys than girls and girls valued friendships and their perceived future lives as mothers and wives.

Female discourses could also be themed around the importance of family and friends (reported earlier) and the importance of school life and career aspirations. The latter consisted of both the social element that school provided and in the importance of performing well, 'ambition of mine for the new millennium would be to do better at school' (GCS, 11) and 'my education is very important to me because I am a very ambitious type of person and always aim for the top' (GCS, 13).

The number of movement culture references within these young people's narratives was limited in comparison with our previous analysis of narratives from primary-aged students

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(Collier et al., 2007). However, the narratives reported here do convey the complex and diverse cultural contexts in which young people engage with sport and physical activity. While girls conveyed limited involvement as participants in sport, boys practiced the roles of participant and consumer of sport. Young people develop and maintain a number of interests at a particular time and in writing these narratives there were other competing interests that they chose to share. In these instances, it is possible to pay attention to other youth leisure and lifestyle practices that may compete with or compliment participation in physical activity. Such practices include listening to music and socialising with friends. At the same time there were a number of boys who privileged the practice of sport by only engaging with sport.

Previous studies have reported that young women do make conscious choices about their physical activity involvement with the nature of the activity selected and the intensity and extent of their involvement varying greatly between individuals (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Hills, 2007; Wright et al., 2003). Contrary to concern about girls' perceived disinterest in physical activity and sport, a number of young women in this study challenge prevailing views of adolescent girls' dominant discourses by reporting their involvement in a range of physical activities, including more traditional sport forms such as Gaelic football and hockey.

Students' perspectives match the official cultural and institutional discourses with respect to the prominence of the GAA in their everyday lives, through their own involvement and that of their friends and / or family. The importance of national games in Ireland is clearly evident. Students' perspectives presented in their narratives do not necessarily match the dominant international discourse that assumes young people are 'at risk' in relation to their present and future health and in using their time unproductively, conceptualising 'adolescence as a developmental phase characterised by an increase in risky behaviour' (Wright et al., 2005). In

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fact, the narratives convey a backdrop of diverse leisure activities for both girls and boys and, while there was an awareness of the effects of smoking, drink and drugs on lifestyle, they were mentioned minimally as practices in which these young people were involved and more as issues that society needed to address. The young people were happy, content and appreciative of the (Irish) society in which they were living and clearly articulated their hopes and aspirations for the future, including an Ireland with no prejudices, divisions, poverty, unemployment or homelessness. While the narratives conveyed a privileged well-being of prosperity, supportive family and friends, health and happiness, one particular silence in the narratives is interesting to note. In Ireland there is a growing concern with adolescent suicide, especially among males. Ireland has the fifth highest suicide rate in Europe for the 15-25 year age group. Death by suicide is the number one cause of death among young Irish men (Houses of the Oireachtas / Joint Committee on Health and Children, July 2006).

While acknowledging that it is likely that schools inform young people's views towards leisure and sporting interests, it is difficult to comment on the explicitness of such a relationship from the narratives reviewed in this study. The narratives reported in this paper were constructed in response to a prompt asking young people to write about their lives, the future and their vision of Ireland in the new millennium. The direction given to students may have encouraged them to prioritise the reporting of discourses other than that of sport and physical activity. If we are to understand the place and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people in an attempt to facilitate the construction of more active lifestyles, student narratives directed to reporting the leisure and sporting interests of young people may be more insightful to this particular goal. There is wide support for developing recreational opportunities for young people through consulting and involving young people in the planning and organisational structure of

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such opportunities (Office of the Minister for Children / Department of Health and Children, 2006). Such consultations may determine the best ways in which families, schools and clubs can facilitate and contribute to developing and retaining leisure and sporting interests among Irish young people.

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