



Class matters—Children's perceptions of sports coaching

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to acquire an insight into the experiences of 84 children from two schools in the United Kingdom who were asked to describe their interpretation of 'excellent sports coaching'. Using visual and narrative research methods it was found that the influence of social class was significant. Children from higher socioeconomic groups described excellent sports coaching as a structured and adult-led process, whereas children from lower socioeconomic classes described it as being more play-like and self-determined. Reasons for this difference are explained through the contrasting attitudes to sport and physical activity present amongst different social classes.

KEYWORDS

Bourdieu, social class, sports coaching, visual and narrative research methods

INTRODUCTION

It has been evidenced that children's early experiences of sport are important in determining their future participation (Wheeler, 2012). Yet beyond this, there is still much to learn about children's engagement with sport, particularly the extent to which social class is a significant influence. Furthermore, children's voices remain largely absent and marginalised from many conversations, decisions and policies which affect their participation in sport.

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between social class and children's experiences of sport by listening to the views of children from different social and economic

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backgrounds in the UK. To pursue this task, two groups of children were provided with an opportunity to explain what they value about sport by describing their interpretation of 'excellent' sports coaching. This focus on sports coaching was adopted for three reasons. Firstly, children comprise a significant component of the coached population in sport (Stafford, 2011). Secondly, there is no previous research that directly examines the relationship between social class and children's perception of coaching, and thirdly because children's voices are almost entirely absent from debates about definitions of 'sports coaching'. Another reason for focusing on sports coaching relates to current debates about the structure and organisation of children's sport and the extent to which it has become increasingly serious, competitive and performance-orientated. This has been described as a form of 'premature professionalism' (Sweeney et al., 2021) and undermines opportunities for children to direct their own sport when they become increasingly reliant on adults to organise sport for them. This loss of agency is troubling and concerning and we still possess limited knowledge about the extent to which the issue is experienced by children generally, let alone by children from different social classes. Sports coaches are also integral to this debate, and evidence that only 45% of children who take part in sport and physical activity in England say they really enjoy it (Playtheirway.org, 2023) suggests that a transformation in the experiences of children is required to increase the levels of healthy exercise that every child can benefit from. Listening to children and ensuring what they say is heard by the right audience who have the power to make a difference and promote change, as the Lundy (2007) model would outline, is arguably more important now than ever before if sport for children is to be reclaimed from descending into an ever more identical version of professionalised adult sport. Listening to children from across all social classes express what they believe excellent sports coaching means to them may therefore not only inform policies but also enable sports coaches to better reflect on their coaching and question why they adopt certain behaviours that could have detrimental consequences for the social, psychological and physical development of children.

SPORT AND SOCIAL CLASS: A MATTER OF TASTE

Previous research has demonstrated that social class and access to financial resources is an important influence on children's engagement in sport (Dagkas & Stathi, 2007; Eyre et al., 2014; Quarumby & Dagkas, 2010). As Wiltshire et al. (2019) claim differences in physical activity based on social class are already evident by the age of 13 to 14, and there is a belief that children and young people's sporting habits could be formed even earlier than this (Birchwood et al., 2008; Wheeler & Green, 2014). Common across much of this research is a recognition that participation in sport is organised on the basis of parenting practices that differ significantly between the social classes (Lareau, 2000; Vincent & Ball, 2007). These differences are often determined by unequal access to the economic, cultural and social forms of capital that determine the position of individuals and families within stratified and hierarchical social structures.

It has been evidenced that middle-class families deploy their resources of economic, cultural and social capital to nurture the development of their children and promote their life chances (Giddens, 1991). Within sport Wheeler and Green (2014) conclude that middle-class parents make an early investment into the sporting activities of their children and this is typically represented by the membership of organised sports clubs and participation in competitive games and events (Nielsen et al., 2011; Stuij, 2015). This has been referred to as a process of 'concerted cultivation' by Lareau (2002) and operates as a strategy that is intended to enrich opportunities for middle-class children by understanding them as projects for development

(Vincent & Ball, 2007). In contrast, children from working-class families are less well supported and Lareau describes this as a process of ‘natural growth’ whereby children will thrive by themselves so long as they are provided with love, food and shelter. Theoretically observations such as these have tended to rest upon the ideas and concepts developed by Bourdieu following his research in the 1960s on the nature of the relationship between the social classes in France.

In his wide-ranging study Bourdieu (1984) included, and provided examples to illustrate, how sport was integral to the distinctive forms of cultural taste that existed between the social classes of French society. Drawing on the interconnected concepts of field, habitus and capital Bourdieu identified how social class influenced if not determined what sports people tended to participate in and how they participated in them. The middle classes, according to Bourdieu, favour sports that provide opportunities for the development of healthy, fit, refined and graceful bodies that require the deferment of immediate gratification. By contrast the working classes tend to participate in sports that cater for an immediate sense of gratification and visibly demonstrate the qualities of physical strength, power and aggression. As Bourdieu (1984, p. 217) notes, within the field of sport the; ‘relationships between the different groups and the different practices cannot be fully understood unless the different institutionalized practices, that is, the social uses which these practices encourage, discourage or exclude’ are accounted for. Sports, and how individuals participate in them, express specific embodied dispositions that are structured by a class-related habitus that also signifies the distinctive character and distance that exists between the social classes.

Inherent within Bourdieu’s theory of distinction is the premise that the tastes and preferences of the different social classes not only separate them but also reproduce forms of social inequality that persist across generations. For example, the accumulation of social and cultural capital generated by occupying employment within established professions enable the middle classes to perpetuate their economic advantage over the working classes. This flows through, and using Bourdieu’s terms, to the field of sport which is riven by persistent inequalities and exclusionary practices that affect the experience of individuals (Sheerder & Vandermeerschen, 2018). Participation in sport is therefore not just different between individuals from different social backgrounds but is often unequally different and this is compounded by other forms of social stratification such as gender and ethnicity. This offers an important insight for a study which seeks to understand how children from different social classes interpret the meaning of excellent sports coaching and what this reveals about their experiences of sport and what they value. Given the evidence from previous research it is arguable that the experiences of children from working-class families are not just different but unequal to children from middle-class families because their participation in sport is not so well supported and they subsequently lack the same opportunities to benefit from the social and physical benefits sport can provide. However, this can and should be situated in the context of current debates about the ‘premature professionalism’ and intensification of children’s sport. It could be speculated that if middle-class families ‘over-invest’ and pursue an excessive degree of concerted cultivation into organising their children’s participation in sport then their children could suffer from limited opportunities to experience and organise their own sport. In attempts by the middle classes to endow their children with what they perceive to be desirable levels of social and cultural capital via participation in sport they could be inadvertently alienating their children from their right to play. This line of thinking represents not so much a hypothesis but an observation that will be relevant to the analysis of the data gathered from the participating children.

METHOD

The study is methodologically premised on the belief that children can be active participants and competent co-constructors within the research process and possess the capability to act deliberately and speak for themselves. It is a position that argues why research should be undertaken *with* children and not *on* children. It is acknowledged that this belief is not without problems, not least the imbalances in power between adults and children which may influence how confident and willing children are to express themselves (Christensen & James, 2008; Stryker et al., 2019).

Despite these concerns innovative and creative research methods have been developed that seek to prioritise the voice of the child and ensure their views and opinions are faithfully represented. Several of these methods draw on visual approaches that encourage children to draw, write and narrate their experiences. Leitch (2008), for example, developed a method that involved children's drawings because they sensitively enable children to 'narrate aspects of their consciously lived experience as well as uncovering the unrecognized, unacknowledged or 'unsayable' stories that they hold' (Leitch 2008, p. 37). Coates and Coates (2006) also used children's drawings but observed children talking to themselves whilst drawing their pictures and therefore narrating their own story as they drew. They argued that the process of drawing and talking richly illuminated the children's lived thoughts.

Within sport, visual approaches to capturing children's ideas and opinions have been adopted to explore perceptions of a school-based sports programme (MacPhail & Kinchin, 2004) as well as capturing what sport means to children (Georgakis & Light, 2009). Another approach has been implemented by Enright & O'Sullivan (2017) which explored the barriers associated with participation in physical activity both in and out of school through children taking photographs and explaining what they thought these pictures meant to them. Meanwhile Cope et al. (2015) have reflected on the viability of using drawings and photovoice to understand children's perspectives and experiences of sports coaching although not what the children thought represented excellent coaching.

This study likewise adopted a visual approach by asking children to draw and write their response to the following question—'Excellent Sports Coaching': What does it mean to you and what would the perfect sports coaching session be like?'

The question was asked to 84 year 6 girls and boys selected from two junior schools in the south of England. 37 children—19 boys and 18 girls—participated in the study from Cedarwood and 47 children—24 boys and 22 girls—from Hindleap Park. Both schools, and all the children, were allocated a pseudonym to protect their identity. The two schools were selected because of notable differences in their socioeconomic status, characteristics and the profile of their pupils. This was indicated by the type of school (Independent and State) alongside the relative deprivation as measured by the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), and the proportion of children in receipt of free school meals or in the care of the local authority. The IMD score is a UK Government-produced measure of area deprivation that includes assessments of income, employment, health, education, crime, housing and living environment. The IMD therefore represents a measure of deprivation for the school catchment area and not the individual child.

Cedarwood is an Independent Preparatory School located within one of the 30% *least* deprived neighbourhoods in the UK and lies to the north of a small prosperous city. Hindleap Park is located within one of the 20% *most* deprived neighbourhoods and is situated on the outskirts of a large city within the same region. According to the school inspection report (Ofsted, 2013), Hindleap Park had at the time of the study an above average number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals or in the care of the local authority. Pupils at Cedarwood are known

to come from families across a range of professional and managerial backgrounds, mostly from white, British families living within a 10-mile radius of the school (Independent Schools Inspectorate, 2017).

The provision of physical education and sport also differs between the two schools in terms of space on the curriculum, facilities and staffing. The children at Hindleap have less curriculum time dedicated to PE, fewer extracurricular sporting activities and competitive opportunities, whilst most of the provision is taught by non-specialist staff. In contrast, PE and sport for the children at Cedarwood involves more dedicated time within the curriculum, more formal, organised and competitive extracurricular opportunities and specialist staff including qualified sports coaches.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Chichester ethics committee and involved written consent from the headteachers and class teachers at both schools. Once the research had been explained to the children, both in writing and verbally, and any follow-up questions addressed, the children were invited to sign a consent form. Those not wishing to take part worked on an alternative school activity during the period when the research activity took place. The teachers at both schools helped to refine the phrasing of the question the children would be asked. The decision to establish a question focusing on positive outcomes as opposed to negative outcomes was designed to enthuse the children by enabling them to share and describe an enjoyable experience. Children at both schools also had previous experience of expressing their ideas through drawing and writing methods.

Before the children took part in the activity the question was piloted with a small group of four children from one of the selected schools. This was undertaken to check that the children understood the question as well as being aware that for the purposes of the task they could convey their experiences of sports coaching beyond the immediacy of the school environment. Following the pilot children were invited to take part in a 40-min classroom-based activity conducted as part of a teacher-led task akin to a normal lesson. The children were provided with a variety of writing and drawing materials that could be used to assist them in communicating their response to the question. The first author and the class teachers were careful not to define, pre-empt or provide ideas to the children that might influence their response to the question beyond indicating that the question was not just about their experiences at school. Likewise, the children were not made aware or advised of any current definition of sports coaching or provided with lists of phrases and adjectives that might commonly describe excellent sports coaching. The absence of guidance as to what excellent sports coaching might look like was purposeful so that the most intuitive responses could be captured from the children.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Analysis and interpretation of the content produced by the children was undertaken by creating a series of thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic categories were determined by the first author through an initial analysis of the drawings and words contained in the content submitted by the children. To ensure methodological rigour, the experience of the second author was enlisted on a regular basis throughout the analytical process. The role of this colleague was to act as a 'critical friend' and a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection and interpretation of the data by the first author (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

Following this process eight thematic categories were identified and subsequently labelled alphabetically and assigned a colour; the eight thematic categories are described in [Table 1](#)

TABLE 1 Thematic categories.

Code	Thematic content areas	Examples of characteristics/items within thematic content area
A	Organisation and Structure of session	Written evidence and/or illustrations of equipment, structure of session; warm up /cool down/ practices/drills/variety/class size
B	Personal characteristics and Professional competency of the sports coach	Written or visual examples of traits and characteristics of the sports coach; firm/strict/fair/does not shout/does not get angry, Reference to the coach encouraging/praising us/push you to your limits/giving teaching points/tips
C	Competition	Reference to winning/losing/matches/trophies/scoring/pressure/game
D	Fun and Enjoyment	Smiling faces/laughing/words associated with positive experiences
E	Personal/Educational/Cultural, Value	Reference to enhancement of confidence, self- esteem, ability, fitness, concentration, intrinsic rewards, teamwork, achieving short/long term goals, value of sport other than the activity itself, extrinsic rewards.
F	Non-traditional sports/lifestyle sports	Reference to sports such as, skate boarding, skiing, surfing, climbing, parkour, sailing, windsurfing
G	Presence of others; Friends/Family/Celebrities	With my friends, Mum, Dad.
H	Other	Any notable inclusions in drawings and written work not covered by A-G codes

minus the colour coding. Once the thematic categories had been determined, each child's content was re-examined and colour-coded according to the definitional characteristics of each category and the themes present in each of the drawings. Each child's content was analysed by the first author and further analysed independently by the second author. For each of the two schools a composite analysis was constructed highlighting the proportion of the content that had been coded across the eight categories. This was designed to reveal any significant differences across the two schools. Once this process had been completed it was possible to examine the extent of the commonalities and differences as to how the children had responded to and interpreted the question.

The thematic categorisation derived does not necessarily fully represent the intricacies of the content produced by the children. The complex nature of children's drawings should not be underestimated, and there are still many methodological questions and considerations about the interpretation of image-based techniques and drawings used to obtain information from children (Di Leo, 2013). Examples of the content produced by the children are presented in [Figures 1-1 to 1-5](#).



FIGURE 1-1 Picture and text by Hattie at Hindleap Park explaining why Football is her favourite sport.

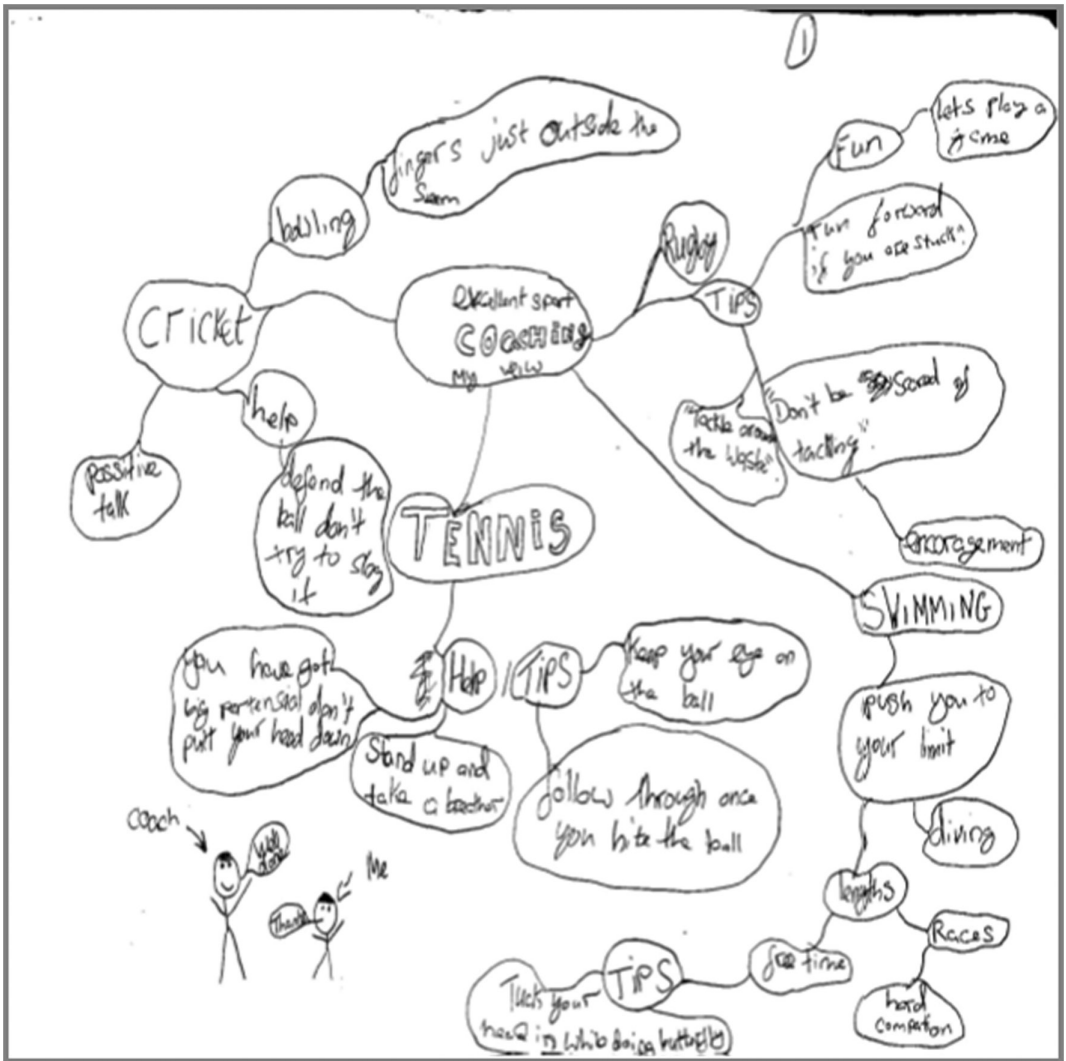


FIGURE 1-2 Bubble diagram by Dominic at Cedarwood identifies 'tips' and help to improve performance in different sports.

This is my idea of a perfect sports coaching session.
 Sports coaching sounds excellent.
 Please, everyone should do sports coaching.
 On a sports coaching day always listen.
 Running is a type of sport.
 Tell the sports coach your ideas.
 Swimming is a type of sport as well.

Climbing is a type of exercise.
 Olympics could be a sports coaching session.
 Always give your ideas to sports coaches.
 Clever is what you need to be a sports coach.
 However you also need to be fit.
 I think it would be that the coach is nice.
 Never give up on your coach.
 Giving up is never ok.

A perfect session
 would be fun
 types of sports.

A perfect session would
 also be for the teacher
 to be kind and for
 the children to listen.

There's lots of different
 types of sports.

My favourite sport
 is swimming
 because it involves
 water + is really
 fun.

SPORTS COACHING

FIGURE 1-3 Text by Libby at Hindleap Park describes why sports coaching should be fun with lots of different sports, taught by a 'kind teacher' and for all children to listen.

Excellent Sports Coaching 00.4.13

A excellent sport coach would be very firm and strict but be lovely and move about alot in netball a coach should make sure there on the line and ready to start. With net ball you have to be aware, what is going on and clearly teach everyone to shoot the goal well.

In Swimming a Excellent sports coach should wait something water boys just in case the have to save someone. you would have to put most of you interchion on the gaitness for races, you would have to make sure the dring there moves right from begining till end so they dont get disorientated.

To be a excellent sports coach in rounders you have to teach really well for batting so it goes safe. The tactics are very important in rounders so you need to teach us so the batting team dont do well. make sure that the baller is very good so every 3 times they dont give a point to the other team.

you would have to have good Equipment for netball you would need good balls properly open post. the rope in the middle should be firm and strong the water should be the right temature. this is how Excellent coaches should be and make us better.

FIGURE 1-4 Text by Jodie from Cederwood describing the attributes of a sports coach who delivers excellent sports coaching.

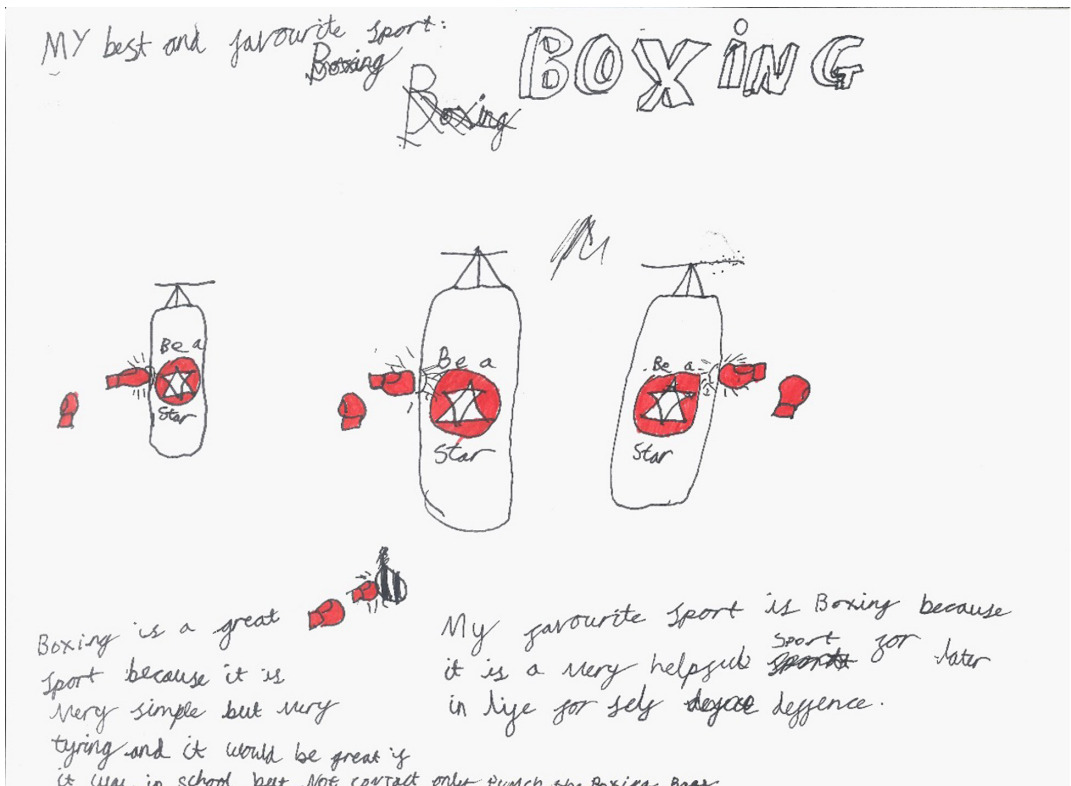


FIGURE 1-5 Picture and Text by Daniel at Hindleap Park describes how Boxing is his favourite sport as it is a helpful sport for later in life for self-defence.

The analysis of the content produced by the children demonstrated important differences in their understanding of excellent sports coaching and what they believed is meant by the perfect sports coaching session. Of the eight thematic categories, three themes were identified as demonstrating a significant disparity between the two sets of data from the schools.

These three themes were:

- Code B—Personal characteristics and professional competency of the sports coach
- Code A—Organisation and structure of the activity
- Code C—Competition

The significant differences in these thematic categories are now explained further.

Personal characteristics and professional competency of the sports coach

The content produced by the children at Cedarwood contained numerous references to the role of the sports coach. The majority of children either drew or articulated not only the presence of the sports coach but a detailed description of the nature and role of this person. In contrast, there

was a distinct absence of a sports coach, or any kind of adult figure resembling a sports coach, in the content produced by the children at Hindleap Park. Significantly, the children at Cedarwood portrayed the coach as the orchestrator of the acquisition of skills and techniques, and this is represented in the children's content through extensive references to the delivery of 'tips' or 'tactics'. Notably, there is considerable evidence that the characteristics and competency of the sports coach is an important factor in relation to their perception of excellent coaching. Most pupils used written text to highlight the particular features of the coach, and this was often represented within bubble diagrams or mind maps. This is depicted in the following verbatim excerpts from the children at Cedarwood:

Sports Coaches:

Highly experienced, eager to teach, push children to get better.

(Seb)

give tips e.g. try and keep a straight arm, comments on how you play but does not criticize you, encourages you when you make a mistake, make other people excited to have them coached by him, cares about the sport but not too strict.

(Jake)

The coaches need to check that children understand the task before they move on..., The coaches shouldn't explain in too much detail because they could bore their audiences, The children need to be assured. To make them feel that they want to carry on.

(Tilly)

Furthermore, other children draw pictures of the sports coach with written text in a speech bubble describing what best can be described as 'tips', as this example illustrates:

keep your eye on the ball, defend the ball don't try to slog it, you have got big potential don't put your head down, keep your eye on the ball, don't be scared of tackling, fingers just outside the seam.

(Dominic)

Lily also wrote at the top of her paper that excellent sports coaching; 'To me it means helping everyone regularly to help them understand', and in Jodie's written work she primarily focuses on the coach by specifying the nature and characteristics of the netball, swimming and rounders coach who are:

very firm and strict but be lovely and move around a lot. To be an excellent sports coach in rounders you have to teach really well for batting so it goes fine. The tactics are very important.

(Jodie)

The following bubble diagram by Imogen ([Figure 1-6](#)) also illustrates the prominence of the coach in the depiction of a perfect sports coaching session:

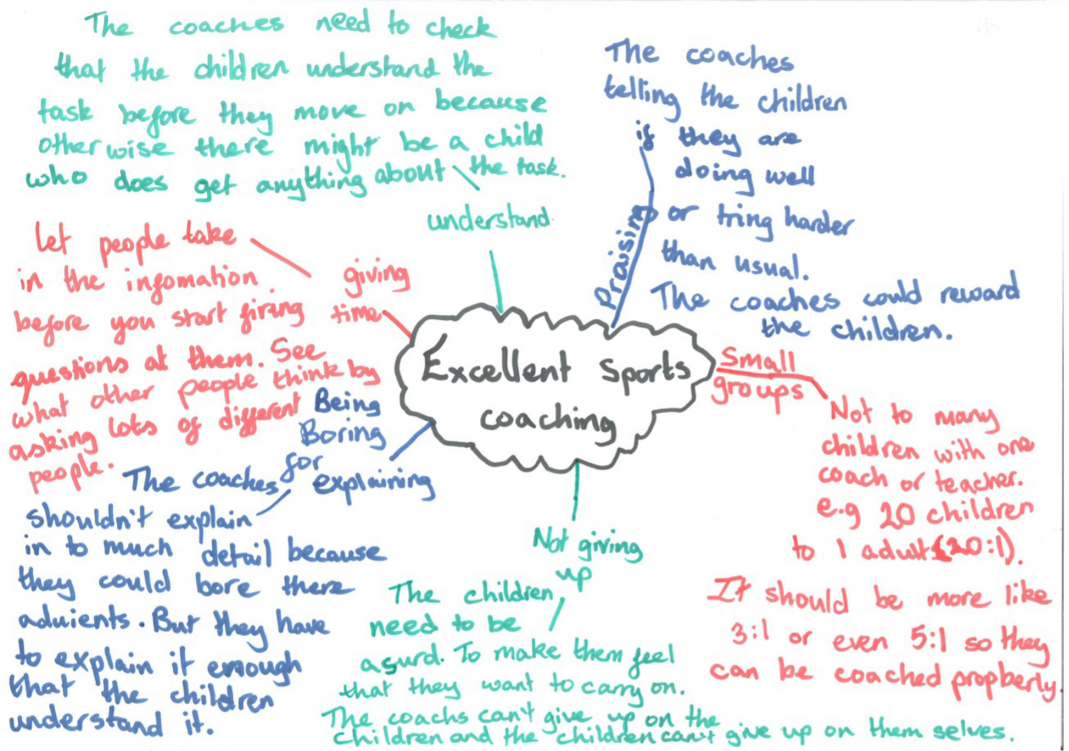


FIGURE 1-6 Bubble diagram by Imogen at Cedarwood represents the importance and prominence of the Coach.

It is evident that the children at Cedarwood embody an understanding of the sports coach as a person who provides coaching 'tips', as well as being a source of encouragement and motivation. Furthermore, sports coaching to these children means facilitating the enhancement of technical skills and decision-making attributes that support improvements in performance, and it is these characteristics that appear to be important in underpinning their interpretation of excellent sports coaching.

In contrast, the children from Hindleap Park more commonly depicted the perfect sports coaching session without a sports coach or any other adult being present. Where an adult was visible, they were described as being nice, funny and clever, as these comments made by the children at Hindleap Park demonstrate.

Clever is what you need to be a sports coach. However, you also need to be fit. I think it would be that the coach is nice.

(Holly)

Coach is funny and does not shout.

(Jenny)

I would want to be like my coaches and so so clever and play that good.

(Jane)

The difference evident in how the children at the two schools described the role and qualities of a sports coach was significant. The content produced by the children from Hindleap Park did not contain references about the sports coach providing information regarding technical and decision-making skills that support the development of performance to anywhere near the same extent as the children at Cedarwood. Furthermore, the children at Cedarwood used the term ‘teacher’ more often in their content and described the sports coach as an individual who ‘taught’ them far more frequently when compared to the children at Hindleap Park.

Organisation and structure

The prominence attributed to thematic category A—Structure and Organisation of the coaching session was also distinctly different. The children at Cedarwood drew or wrote about a more methodical approach to the organisation of not just one but a programme of coaching sessions highlighting elements pertaining to different activities and sports, phases of the coaching session (warm up, cool down, skills practice, ball skills, stretch, game time), timings (weekly/daily timetable) and ratio of children to coach. It is evident that the children have developed a clearly defined concept about the structure, organisation and types of activities which they believe contribute to the perfect sports coaching session and a programme of consecutive sessions. For example:

we could have different options of sports to play each lesson.

(Charlotte)

varied activities throughout the week through all terms and sports.

(Lenny)

The perfect sports session would be over 7 days and would include: Football, rugby, a fitness day, a learning day where you can learn about keeping healthy, cricket, skiing, athletics.

(Stanley)

Some children represented this by scheduling a structured timetable of activities either by day, week or session. For example:

Day 1 in the gym, Day 2 is the circuit day, Day 3 rest ‘n’ stretch, Day 4 cross country run, Day 5 have lie in (optional), Day 6 swimming morning session, afternoon play, Day 7 football, Day 8 rugby coaching and match, Day 9 squash and match, Day 10 cricket and match, Day 10 cricket and match, Day 21 Tennis coaching and match play.

(Josh)

There are many other examples of this structured approach to the question the children were asked, and some pupils specified timings for different elements of a coaching session. For example, in Ellie’s work (see [Figure 1-7](#)) she sectioned off six parts of the A3 page to represent different parts of a coaching session:

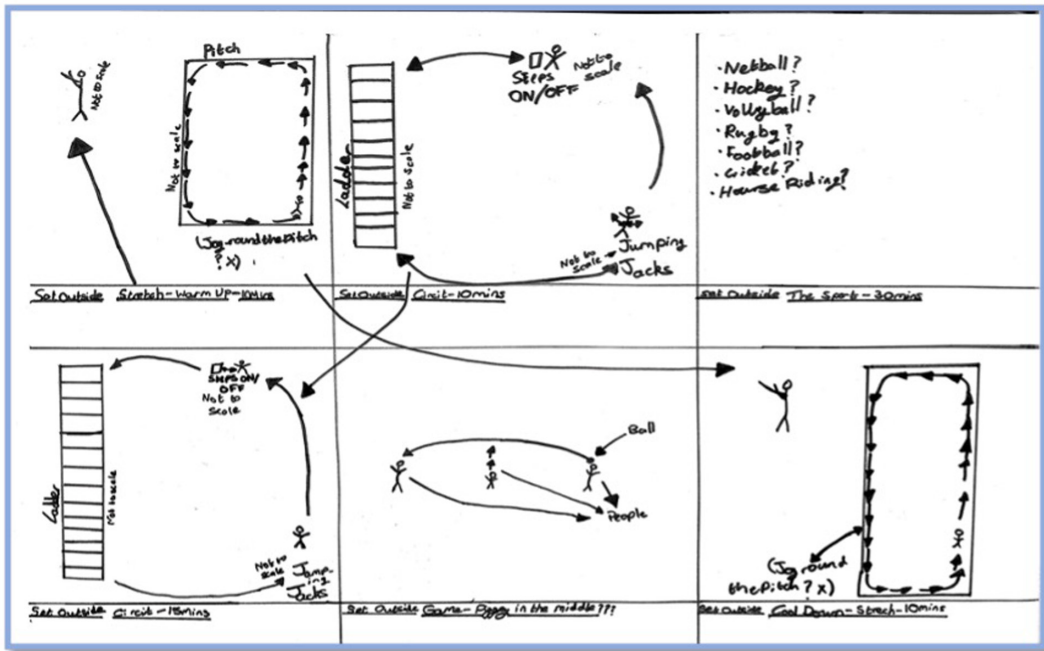


FIGURE 1-7 Diagram by Ellie at Cedarwood which conveys the organisation and structure of a traditional coaching session.

Set outside Stretch – warm up – 10mins, Set outside – circuit – 10mins, Set outside The sport – 30 mins, Set outside Circuit 15mins, Set outside Game – Piggy in the middle, Set outside Cool down – stretch 10mins.

(Ellie)

Some children used the term warm up and/or cool down in their work and scheduled in practice time and free time. Some children also stated the significance of small class sizes and further provided detail as to what constitutes a small class size:

Not too many children with one coach or teacher e.g 20 children to 1 adult. It should be more like 3:1 or even 5:1 so they can be coached properly.

(Imogen)

A small rasheo like 3:1 makes it a lot easier because the coach can help everyone properly.

(Lily)

It is evident that the children at Cedarwood created a ‘scaffold of structure’ (Jones & Thomas, 2015) in relation to the perfect sports coaching session and provided data relating to specific elements and phases of the organisation and structure not just of a singular sports coaching session, but also the features of a programme of sessions as well (see Figure 1-7).

In contrast, the children from Hindleap Park made very few references to any kind of methodical structure and organisation in their interpretation and perception of a perfect sports coaching session. Instead, their work tended to depict pictures and words associated with less formality, and no child from the school articulated, either through words or pictures, a programme of sessions like that expressed by the children at Cedarwood. Instead, the children from Hindleap Park represented the perfect sports coaching session as a more play-like activity that was generally self-directed and, aside from football, featured non-competitive, leisure focused games and activities. (see [Figures 1-8](#) and [1-9](#)). For example, images and words associated with swimming were often portrayed in the children's work, but this featured pool equipment such as rubber rings, balls and lilos with words such as great, fun, friendly, exciting attached to them (see [Figure 1-10](#)). Dancing, street dance and ballet sessions were also depicted in several of the girl's drawings, and this presents interesting responses given the task was to respond to their interpretation of the perfect sports coaching session and excellent sports coaching (see [Figure 1-11](#)). Other examples of this response to the question include activities such as scootering, tree climbing, rock climbing, abseiling, boxing and skating. Furthermore, some pupils have made up their own sport—long, bounce and splash, hop skip jump, swim jump—while others have referred to games that have been introduced by their classroom teacher: foxes and hounds, manhunt, traffic lights, capture the flag, ball dog. It is undoubtedly significant that there is an absence of traditional sports, featured in the content created by the children at Hindleap Park.



FIGURE 1-8 Picture by Leon at Hindleap Park of a motorcycle—an example of a leisure-focussed activity.



FIGURE 1-9 Picture by Ben at Hindleap Park of himself on his scooter.



FIGURE 1-10 Picture by Flo of a swimming pool with a lilo, rubber ring, suntan cream and towel.



FIGURE 1-11 Picture by Jodie at Hindleap Park of 'Jo Jo's Hot Steppers' dance group—an activity where she has a great time and makes up her own new dances and routines.

Competition

With reference to thematic category C—Competition, it was observed that many of the children from Cedarwood focused on competition as an integral component of the perfect sports coaching session. Some children suggested that the perfect session would be: 'A big match', 'The whole lesson as a match' furthermore, some children drew a picture of a game with players represented by both sides, additional detail is also present in the score, with the name of local school rivals stated and reference to trophies and cups. Some of the pupils highlighted the significance of a challenge and pressure which is reflected in these extracts:

All of the players are as good as you or better so it is more of a challenge.

(Jake)

The team you are playing with are as good or better than you.

(Finn)

confidence building, decreases pressure.

(Seb)

Races, Hard competition.

(Dominic)

Further evidence of facing challenges is depicted in the following extract from Jake:

My perfect sports session would have to be rugby because of the harsh weather you get and the contact of the game. It is probably one of the most violent games ever to be played’.

(Jake)

Other pupils also referred to playing in muddy, wet, and cold conditions:

muddy and wet but really fun.

(Bailey)

A significant feature of a perfect sports coaching session for many of the children at Cedarwood clearly involves competition and the notion of winning. Again there is a distinct absence of any reference to competition in the children’s work at Hindleap Park. Very few pupils drew or wrote about notions of winning or losing, there was little depiction of obtaining medals and trophies and citing competition against other teams as integral to their definition of the perfect sports coaching session.

To summarise, the children at Cedarwood described and understood excellent sports coaching and the perfect coaching session as a process characterised by improving performance in a planned, formalised and structured environment in which the sports coach mainly directed and facilitated the process. By contrast the children at Hindleap Park possessed a very different understanding of what excellent sports coaching meant to them. The coach was not so fundamental to their experience and what they valued about coaching. Competition, achievement and improving performance was also less visibly present, and the children at Hindleap Park appeared to associate forms of play as part of their understanding of what they believed to be excellent sports coaching. Furthermore, whilst the children at Cedarwood were able to draw out a programme of activities the children at Hindleap Park focused exclusively on describing singular events.

DISCUSSION

To develop a deeper understanding of the contrast evident in the content produced by the children Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital and field remain useful and relevant. We would contend that the themes present within the children’s content demonstrate the extent to which they have embodied different dispositions towards the meaning of excellent sports coaching, and these are associated with their class-related habitus. Given previous research and existing knowledge (see for example Stuij, 2015) this is not unsurprising and confirms the existence of significant class-related differences in the experiences of children and young people within sport. However, the findings also support a further layer of analysis that problematises the experiences of both groups of children albeit in different ways.

The drawings and text produced by the children at Cedarwood are indicative of what we would describe as the dominant discourse of sports coaching. Sports coaching is about developing individual and team performance in which the responsibility of the sports coach is to plan and organise coaching sessions to ensure they are productive and effective in supporting the development of every child’s skill and competence. The children at Cedarwood value this, they have embodied this dominant discourse, and it is present in their content. In contrast, the polarising differences evident within the drawings and text created by the children at Hindleap

Park signifies an interpretation of sports coaching that is very different to the dominant discourse of performing, developing and competing. For the children at Hindleap Park excellent sports coaching is understood in terms of using their bodies to play whereas for the children at Cedarwood sports coaching means pursuing the instrumental refinement of bodily performance. This contrast is grounded in the habitus and parental practices of families from different social class backgrounds, and both groups of children have reflected these differences within their responses to the question they were asked. The children at Cedarwood re-affirmed the 'cultural logic' of middle-class parents and the priority given to acts of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2002), whereas the children at Hindleap Park reflected the 'accomplishment of natural growth' that Lareau contends characterises the practice of working-class parents. Situated then within the general theory of *Distinction* developed by Bourdieu it is evident that the children's different understanding of excellent sports coaching is another element in the political, social and cultural struggle that exists between the social classes. Yet within this struggle, it remains questionable as to who, if anyone, is being advantaged or disadvantaged.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

There is significant evidence (Yogman et al., 2018) that self-directed, informal and unstructured play, whilst not only being a child's right, is important for their psychological and social development. It is also argued that play is being increasingly marginalised, even hi-jacked (Read, 2011) and there are fewer spaces and opportunities for children to engage in their own play. The content produced by the children at Cedarwood is arguably indicative of an approach to sport that is very different to the types of sport experienced by children when they organise it for themselves, as the evidence from the children at Hindleap Park would indicate. The children from Cedarwood offered no evidence of them managing and choosing what activities they could participate in and how they could participate in them. Their experiences were controlled and determined by an adult sports coach and the element of self-determined play-like activities, as described by the children at Hindleap Park, was absent. We would argue this is a concern because where do children, like those at Cedarwood, possess the opportunity to own and organise their own sport, and if they did have this opportunity what might it look like and what benefits would it have for their development? Furthermore, in the quest to enable their children to acquire what are thought to be valuable forms of social and cultural capital middle-class parents could be unintentionally undermining their children's development by not providing them with sufficient space and time to organise their own constructive and beneficial play. In the pursuit of being what the middle classes believe to be 'good parents' they are instead disadvantaging their own children. This is like the argument made by Elkind (2007) who argues that fear causes parents to over-invest, overprotect and over-programme the lives of their children such that opportunities to develop important life skills through play are eroded. Further research is no doubt required to develop this argument in more detail, but at least it can start to challenge current assumptions about class-related participation in sport among children.

It can also be argued that the children at Hindleap Park, while benefiting from their more play-like experience of sport, also miss out on the benefits that the type of sport experienced by the children at Cedarwood value. Within the competitive, individualistic and aspirational values of neo-liberal societies organised sport led by a sports coach possesses several potential benefits that can support the development of children. When success in the workplace is often measured

on performance, achieving goals and targets and working together as an effective and disciplined team then sport reproduces (Brohm, 1978) the values, demands and expectations of work. Whilst we accept the neo-Marxist critique that modern sport is integral to the system of exploitative capitalist societies the children at Hindleap Park, when compared with their peers at Cedarwood, are not so well prepared to participate in a competitive labour market. The extent to which this contributes to and perpetuates the social inequalities across generations that Bourdieu describes are important to understand and reflect on.

What we have described so far then is the extent to which the interpretation and understanding of excellent sports coaching, as expressed by the two groups of children, portrays a complicated picture. Whilst the children at Hindleap Park value the opportunities to organise what they understand as their own sport in their own way, the children at Cedarwood do not have the same experience. Instead, they value a planned and directed process which, whilst enjoyable, they have little control over. What we might conclude then is that both groups of children would benefit from experiencing and valuing aspects of each other's understanding of excellent sports coaching. The children at Cedarwood would benefit from opportunities to take responsibility and organise their own participation, whilst the children at Hindleap Park would benefit from the organisation and direction that comes from a sports coach. Neither group possess the 'right' type of experience in sport, instead they are exposed to aspects that have both beneficial and detrimental outcomes for their development as individuals. What we can better understand now is how these outcomes are rooted within a class-related habitus and reflect the structural properties of modern societies.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to assess the extent to which children from different social classes experience sport through examining their understanding of sports coaching. Capturing the child's voice, listening to this voice and letting them speak for themselves was an important methodological approach. This study subsequently provided an innovative platform for two distinct groups of children to communicate their ideas about their perception of excellent sports coaching using their own visual and narrative skills and competencies. The findings indicate that there are important and significant differences in how children experience sport, as revealed by their descriptions of excellent sports coaching and the perfect sports coaching session, and this can be associated with the influence and distinctions of social class values, attitudes and preferences.

Whilst this study has argued that there is a significant difference in the way that children from different social class backgrounds experience sport and sports coaching, it is important to note that a relatively simple concept of class has been employed. The study did not reach down into individual indicators of class such as parental educational background, occupation, income and cultural tastes and preferences. What has been observed in the data is a difference based on the inference of class drawn from geographically situated measures such as the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Further research would benefit from employing a more sophisticated concept of class to examine the influence of class factions on children and young people's participation in sport as opposed to a binary distinction between the working and middle classes.

Another finding of this study has highlighted the challenges of trying to define 'sports coaching' in a way that speaks to all participants. Policy-makers and practitioners must therefore be

mindful and sensitive to how participants, including children, interpret their own sense of sports coaching, which might not always follow dominant and established discourses.

Finally, the analysis we have undertaken indicates that sports coaches and parents should appreciate the benefits of competitive sport and play equally. Furthermore, sports coaches should reflect on their practice and ask themselves the question as to when, where and how they support children to own and control their participation in sport. This means that a coaching session should feel more like self-directed play and less like some form of premature professionalism.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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