

A space to play: the geographies of children's sport and physical activities

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Abstract

Children's geographies is an active and well-established sub-discipline of the wider subject of geography. Yet, despite the burgeoning interest in the geographies of sport, to date very little work has been done that brings these two fields together. This chapter will review the existing research that can be classified as children's sports geographies; research which falls broadly into four categories. First, geographers have investigated the spaces of children's physical activity, both in terms of informal play spaces and organised sport. Second, studies have explored the relationship between socio-economic status and access to sport and coaching. Third, there is a body of research that has considered issues relating to physical education in school settings. Lastly, geographers have developed research from a feminist perspective to shine a light on issues relating to children's bodies, gender and (dis)ability in a sports context. From this summary, the implications for sports coaching will be discussed, as well as providing suggestions for future directions and opportunities for contributions from research in the field of children's sports geography.

Keywords: space, education, bodies, play.

Introduction

Children's geographies is recognised to have emerged as a distinctive subdiscipline in the latter years of the twentieth century (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). The key features of the discipline are a focus on the core geographical concepts of space and place, whilst placing the voices of children and young people at the forefront of research. Consideration of children's geographies has always been inter- and multi-disciplinary (Robson *et al.*, 2013), yet there is comparatively little work that brings together geography and sport in relation to young people. More broadly, the geographies of sport remains a niche topic (Wise and Kohe, 2020), so the additional focus on children is perhaps unsurprising.

Despite this, there are lots of passing references to sport in geographical research on children; typically it appears within wider discussions around play and the leisure activities of young people. Children's geographers have typically focused on play (Woodyer *et al.*, 2016), rather than formal sports activities, although there are some blurred lines surrounding the terminology that is used. The literature that is reviewed in this chapter utilises a variety of terms including play, recreation, sport and physical activity. But, it is fair to suggest that sport involves some form of formal moderation to reflect the rules of game (Evans and Horton, 2016) and can therefore be coached or taught. At the outset of this chapter it is important to note that the research cited has primarily been conducted in the global north. It is acknowledged (Smith, 2013; Holloway, 2014; Holt *et al.*, 2020) that whilst children's geographies research takes place across the world, the global south is still under-represented. When drawing on the learning from this, readers should appreciate and reflect on how this may need to be adapted to suit majority world contexts.

Review of Current Research

Spaces of children's physical activity

Much geographical research is concerned with how activities are undertaken in space and this focus on the concept of space is evident in the published work on children's physical activity. There is a significant body of work on the space of the school, which is to be expected given the importance of education in the everyday lives of young people, and of interest here is the research that has specifically focused on school playgrounds in a global north context.

Reviewing the literature on this topic highlights the importance of the design of space and the extent to which it can encourage/discourage physical activity. Typically, school play areas are designed to promote traditional physical activity, which can be understood as formal, competitive and rule-bound sports, whilst this appeals to some young people, for many children this results in a lack of participatory desire (Dyment and Bell, 2007). The use of these traditional play spaces is dominated by physically competent boys (Dyment *et al.*, 2009) and reflects the cultural importance of masculine physicality (Newman *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, it is vital to ensure that these educational spaces are inclusive and encourage children to be physically active.

Several suggestions have been proposed to facilitate this, first, the creation of greenspace in school grounds has been shown to encourage physical activity in a way that goes beyond typical gender segregated and stereotyped activities (Dyment and Bell, 2007; Pawlowski *et al.*, 2019). Second, designs for both greenspaces and other play-spaces should encourage a balance between co-operative and competitive play (Tranter and Malone, 2004). Finally, geographical research has highlighted the importance of ensuring that children's voices are incorporated into the evaluation and design of play-spaces. Gustafson (2009) noted that explicit sports spaces in school playgrounds are perceived by children as boys' spaces, with girls indicating that it is space that they actively avoid. It is important therefore to consult with a diverse range of children in the design process to ensure that the spaces motivate all young people to be physically active (Pawlowski *et al.*, 2019).

Continuing to think about the role that space plays on children's physical activity, there is a body of work which has explored understandings of what comprises play and play-spaces. In order to best understand what spaces young people need to be able to access in order to participate in physical activity, there needs to be a more child-centred understanding of what they perceive play, including active play, to be (Thomson and Philo, 2004). Once in those spaces children's voices continue to be important as research has shown that, for them, participating in physical activity is as much about the social experiences, such as the chance to make new friends, as it is the overall act of participation (Lee and Abbott, 2009). Further, contrasts have been identified between children's desires and the best intentions of adults in moderating the use of space for physical activity. In some cases, adults have a clear role in controlling the use of space, for example the strict moderation of the boundaries of a soccer pitch within a school playground. But it is evident, that despite adults' best intentions, non-compliance and alternative applications of activities is widespread with outdoor physical activities (Thomson, 2005). Whilst this is prevalent in play-based situations, it is important that the potential for children to subvert adult discourses is both acknowledged (Wake, 2008) and incorporated by coaches when delivering more formal physical activity sessions.

As would be expected, parents and guardians have a significant role in moderating children's use of space and their access to physical activity opportunities. It is widely recognised that across the global north there has been a shift from spontaneous and self-initiated play to planned, organised and adult-controlled activities (Skår and Krogh, 2009). This change can be partially attributed to the perception that organised sport is safer than the alternative of unsupervised play in neighbourhood spaces (Holt *et al.*, 2015; Russell and Stenning, 2020). Research has shown that parents facilitate participation in organised leisure activities as this is seen as learning time (Nordbakke 2019) and an opportunity for children to acquire social and cultural capital that can be a valuable future asset (Pynn *et al.*, 2019). Free play can be considered to lack purpose by parents, so leisure activities need to be adult moderated in order to have educational value (Parsons and Traunter, 2020); a finding drawn from research on the integration of

Forest School into Primary Education in England. Forest school exemplifies how geographical research has typically focused on the distinction between (in)formal education (Pimott-Wilson and Coates, 2019) and play, but still provides an opportunity for children to be physically active, so can be useful work for sports coaches to reflect upon. A key ethos of forest school is active learning through play in an environment where children do not need to suppress noise, movement and energy levels. Consequently, it has been shown to be more memorable and children to be more receptive to learning than they would be in more formal and controlled educational settings (Harris, 2018). Despite these benefits, Parsons and Traunter (2020) found that parents lack confidence in moderating purposeful outdoor play, as facilitated at Forest School and they see equipment provision and dealing with dirty clothing challenging. Whereas, a further evaluation of Forest School, focusing on the views of children, indicated that their desire to play outdoors exceeded possible barriers, including the weather or muddy conditions (Ridgers *et al.*, 2012); highlighting the importance of empowering children and incorporating their voices rather than relying on an adult perspective.

The final aspect of spatial research undertaken by geographers on physical activity relates to observable generational shifts in the extent of children's independent mobility (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). It is recognised that young people are spending an increasing amount of time at home, indoors and participating in sedentary activities. There is generally felt to be a good understanding of the factors that discourage children from playing outdoors, but this is more limited when considering the factors that pull children indoors (Maitland *et al.*, 2018). In urban areas there is a positive association between the presence of local public greenspace and participation in physical activity (Veitch *et al.*, 2007). Yet between generations of young people (Woolley and Griffin, 2015) outdoor space has been transformed from child-space to adult-space (Karsten, 2005) and perceptions of safety-risks mean that parents are increasingly limiting independent access to these spaces (Veitch *et al.*, 2007) and, consequently, the opportunity to be physically active in these spaces.

Socio-economic status and access to sport and coaching

Human geographers, and by extension, children's geographers, seek to understand social phenomena by considering how aspects of social identity can have an influence. This is evident in the literature on young people's participation in out-of-school enrichment activities, which includes formal sports coaching, where there is a large body of work on the impact of socio-economic status (SES) and ethnic background (Nordbakke, 2019). The declining participation in unstructured outdoor play has been mirrored by the increasing availability and formalization of extra-curricular activities (Witten *et al.*, 2013). Such activities have overall become easier to access, although a range of barriers to participation exist.

Enrichment activities come at a cost to parents, and for some these costs can be restrictive (Trussell and Shaw, 2012). The costs include the direct cost of the activity, as

well as the requirement to purchase equipment and the transport costs associated with participation (Holt *et al.*, 2015; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2018). Alongside these participation restrictions geographical research has highlighted how children of lower SES have a smaller spatial range for activity participation because they are more likely to be reliant on walking/cycling or public transport to attend activities (Dyment, 2005). This potential lack of access to spaces for physical activity is problematic given those from lower SES backgrounds are also likely to have smaller home spaces where they can spend their leisure time (Stenning and Russell, 2020). This is a particular issue that has been exposed by the Coronavirus pandemic in the early 2020s as young people from lower SES backgrounds had limited space for play and physical activity at home, as well as restricted access to both private (domestic gardens) and public outdoor space (Russell and Stenning, 2020). In contrast, young people from middle-class backgrounds typically have larger home spaces so that even if they are spending more of their leisure time indoors, they are still able to bring traditional outdoor activities inside e.g. soccer or den building. However, children of this SES have been labelled the ‘backseat generation’ as they are constantly being taken to formal leisure activities, of which sports coaching is typically the most popular (Karsten, 2005). As noted previously this is believed to allow children to acquire social and cultural capital for their future development and so it becomes an integral part of what may be perceived as the ideals of good parenting (Pynn *et al.*, 2019). Consideration is therefore required about how access to activities such as formal sports coaching can be made more equitable so that all children have the opportunity to acquire social and cultural capital.

Yet the extent of this participation can cause issues to arise. Research on enrichment activities has exposed problems of time scarcity for both parents and children (Witten *et al.*, 2013) and over-scheduling (Karsten, 2015). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that sibling activity can be a barrier to the participation of other family members in leisure activities. Since adults are required to transport children to activities, it may be that compromises must be made, and parents become the gatekeepers of children’s participation (Veitch *et al.*, 2015). This raises questions about the decision-making process that is involved here, what the consequences of these decisions are and who experiences the impacts?

One solution that has been proposed to help overcome this, is the integration of extra-curricular activities into formal education provision, scheduling activities at lunchtime or afterschool. There are multiple possible benefits of this, first, it means that schooling and additional activities are hosted in the same location, which reduces the need for children to be transported to activities. Second, since it has been shown that parents from all SES backgrounds recognise the benefits of enrichment activities, aligning them with school-based education provision may facilitate some state-subsidies to be made available to make activities more accessible (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014). As well as addressing class-based barriers, this may also enable participation by those from other social backgrounds as, for example, it has been shown that migrant children are less active outdoors and are less likely to be members of sports clubs (Karsten, 2005).

Third, it can be argued that the social and cultural capital acquired through enrichment activities improves educational attainment (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), thus current arrangements for participation in enrichment activities risk becoming a factor in the reproduction of social inequalities (Poveda *et al.*, 2007) so it is important that opportunities to address this are considered for implementation.

Physical Education in school settings

Schools are an important space in the lives of young people and therefore the learning and encounters that children have there are significant, particularly in terms of their experiences with physical education. One of the most widely cited studies on children's sports geographies investigates emotional geographies of sport, exercise and active play in UK primary schools (Hemming, 2007). In this work Hemming reiterates the importance of including and valuing children's voices both in research and when overseeing the activities that they participate in. In a sport and exercise context, it is noted that adult, specifically political, discourses are centred on the benefits for physical health (Radkowska-Walkowicz, 2021), as well as increasingly the mental health and wellbeing benefits (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2018). Whilst young people were shown to recognise these benefits it was not their focus, with participation being more about fun and enjoyment (Hemming, 2007). It is important to acknowledge this in the design and implementation of the physical education curriculum in schools, as teaching typically conveys adult interpretations of ideal childhoods, as opposed to those desired by young people from diverse social backgrounds (Holloway *et al.*, 2010).

Geographical research has considered the delivery and consumption of physical education in schools and has exposed several important areas for consideration. In education settings there has been a shift towards more structured play to encourage physical activity. However, it is important to consider how this is moderated to ensure that it has a positive impact. For example, during research with 9-10 year old children at a primary school in the English midlands Hemming (2007) observed how teachers moderated games, through a flexible interpretation of the rules, to encourage participation and inclusion. Conversely, the games played may require children to wait in line for a go or result in children being eliminated from the game which could result in the child being more sedentary than they would have been if they were simply given the option of participating in active free play (Snow *et al.*, 2019). But, it is possible for active free play and structured physical activity to co-exist. Further observations from Hemming (2007) noted the alternative use and repurposing of PE equipment, for example, using tennis balls for soccer, to initiate and enable enjoyment of physical activity when children are given free choice. Whilst this may already occur during recreational time in schools, this research would indicate that there are benefits to incorporating the chance of unstructured play into formal physical education teaching time.

This suggests that it is important to consider how physical education is framed in a formal school context, although the learning from this can be applied in other coaching

contexts. Young people are more likely to be active when there is an intrinsic enjoyment of the activity, so it is necessary to understand what sports are considered boring or which activities are disliked, e.g. outdoor games when it is muddy (Hemming, 2007). Children also value the opportunity to play with, or make new, friends during physical activity (Lee and Abbott, 2009) so this should be incorporated into the pedagogical design of physical education programmes. Finally, the wider positioning of physical activity within formal education should be explored. Hemming (2007) reflects on his observation of physical activity being used as a disciplinary tool, with access to outdoor activities being enabled or withheld depending on behaviour during other classroom-based learning. This has the potential to be problematic when considered alongside the narrative of encouraging children to be more physically active overall.

Children's bodies, gender and (dis)ability in sport

As discussed previously one of the key concerns of geographers is how actions play out in particular spaces. Going beyond this, geographical research, notably from a feminist geography perspective, has considered how identities and aspects of social difference influence behaviour across space. Feminist thought recognises children as different and a marginal social group who benefit from dedicated study (Valentine, 2000). Consequently, much of the research conducted in children's geographies has feminist roots (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011) and there is a small body of this work that relates to children and their participation in sport. Although there is scope for considerable additional work from a feminist sports geography perspective (Pavlidis, 2018).

The work of Judith Butler (1990) has inspired a significant volume of geographical research on the ways in which gender is performed, including the ways in which this plays out in a sport context (Spark *et al.*, 2019). Consideration has been given to the ways in which gender is performed in sports spaces, for example in school playgrounds (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Spark *et al.* (2019) have shown how the perceived inclusivity of sports spaces varies by gender; speaking to young people, aged 11-12, in Australia exposed how girls generally felt excluded from the spaces because "we're not very good at soccer" (p.198) and they are spaces "that boys used that I don't" (p.196). Whereas boys felt they were inclusive spaces as they were places that local boys, as well as newly arrived migrant boys, could play soccer together. Similar findings regarding gender-based migrant integration through sport have been demonstrated elsewhere including Germany (Burrmann *et al.*, 2017), Ireland (Ní Laoire, 2011) and Spain (Lleixà and Nieva, 2020). Adults have also been shown to perceive sports spaces as gendered, with locations such as baseball fields seen as ideal sites to instil good citizenship values for boys (Gagen, 2000).

Gender differences have been exposed in geographical studies in relation to the activities in which young people participate. Ardvisen *et al.* (2020) have discussed how equipment can encourage physical activity as spaces, such as playgrounds or soccer fields that are considered traditional sports spaces are more likely to be places where

children stand still. Conversely, the inclusion of a trampoline, which attracts children across genders and age, encourages mobility and activity participation. Asking young people to draw maps of particular areas is a commonly used research method in children's geographies and one such study, with secondary school students in Queensland, Australia, highlighted differential desires to participate in physical activities. Male participants included both formal sports and recreational physical activity spaces on their maps, whereas female references were less common and tended to be to recreational rather than organised sport spaces (Lee and Abbott, 2009). This raises questions about why these differences exist and what strategies can be used to address them.

Further geographical research has contributed some ideas about the causes of lower levels of sports participation among young girls. First, Evans (2006) has exposed a reluctance of girls to participate due to concerns about their bodies. Significantly, this was shown to occur in a range of settings: in co-educational settings girls fear the masculine gaze, but they are equally concerned about judgement from other females and the authoritative gaze that comes from staff about the quality of their participation. Second, Spark *et al.* (2019) highlight that girls feel that they lack the necessary experience to participate and that due to societal expectations throughout childhood they have become socialised into exclusion. There are gendered expectations of sports participation from an early age, for example primary school aged boys feel that dance is 'girly' (Hemming, 2007), but girls felt that if they had been more widely exposed to playing and coaching in soccer and other sports from an early age then it would alleviate exclusionary issues when they are older (Spark *et al.*, 2019). It is therefore important that adults encourage inclusive participation from a young age to help enable a more level playing field for continued participation in sports and physical activity.

Children's geography research has investigated the experiences of disabled young people in relation to sport, leisure and exercise. Although, despite a large volume of work about children's play spaces, and similarly about spaces used by those with disabilities, there is only limited work on disabled play spaces (Yantzi *et al.*, 2010). One potential explanation for this is because leisure and sports-based activities for disabled young people are often conflated with rehabilitation work rather than play (Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2013). Participation in leisure activities is impacted by discourses that disabled children are perceived as dependent, vulnerable and in need of protection (Holt, 2010). As such opportunities to participate may be limited to segregated leisure activities which is then further amplified by the requirement for accessible and affordable transport and/or equipment to enable participation (Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2013). This research demonstrates some of the barriers that exist to participation by all those with physical disabilities, although it is likely to be children that are most adversely affected. Additional research is required to propose solutions as to how these barriers can be overcome to help enable equal opportunities to participation.

Alongside research on disabilities that impact on mobility, geographers have investigated how chronic conditions can impact on physical activity participation. Cardwell and Elliott's (2019) work on 11-18 years old asthma sufferers in youth sports teams in Canada exposes several important issues that sports coaches should be mindful of in their practice. First, it is necessary to reflect upon the spaces that are being used for sport, is there dust on the playing surface or are they close to main roads where there is a risk of high levels of pollutants? Second, they highlight that in the case of asthma sufferers, as well as for those with other conditions or disabilities, coaches should ensure that every individual feels accepted in the leisure space even if the extent of their participation is limited. Children should not feel that they are to blame as this can create additional stigma from both peers and coaches which can contribute to other issues such as stress and bullying, within and beyond the sports context.

Implications for children's sport coaching

From the geographical research on children's sport and physical activity there are two areas of focus. First, what can be learnt from the findings of research and second, how geographical approaches to research can be adapted for use as evaluation techniques for sports coaching.

It has been shown that geographical research has centred on active play and informal physical activity as opposed to formal sports participation. Despite this, some important questions are raised about how an effective balance can be achieved when trying to ensure maximum participation. The research evaluation in this chapter has shown that simply participating in formal sports activities may not always result in an increased level of physical activity. It should also be acknowledged that the extent of participation in organised sport is limiting the time that children have available for free-play (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2018) so coaches could consider whether more playful activities can be incorporated into organised sport, both within, and external to, school settings.

Studies in children's geographies have highlighted the importance of reflecting upon the spaces used for physical activity. Formal sports spaces are viewed by young people as a place for fitness (Chaudry *et al.*, 2019), however since being active is now understood to be important for well-being and mental health, how can the narratives be adjusted, and the spaces be adapted, to encourage participation amongst those children who are less willing or able. It is often assumed that physical activity only equates to competitive sports, which is what traditional school grounds are designed to support (Dyment and Bell, 2007). Likewise, how can equipment be utilised effectively by young people under the guidance of coaches. The research has shown that both traditional and alternative equipment can influence participation in physical activity, and the manner in which participation occurs. Therefore, can spaces, and what is included in them, be redesigned, or alternative spaces used to maximise inclusive participation.

Finally, geographers have highlighted the importance of considering social difference in relation to the opportunity for children to access and participate in sport and physical activity. Ordinarily children want to participate and take pride in their sports successes (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014) so it is necessary to give greater consideration to the barriers that prevent them from participating. In some instances, for example in relation to chronic conditions such as asthma (Cardwell and Elliott, 2019), additional coach education may enhance awareness of strategies that can be incorporated to enable participation. But in other cases, it may be that more extensive changes are required, beyond the capability of individual coaches, to overcome barriers to participation caused by socio-economic status, gender and disability for example.

Alongside these findings from children's geographies research, the research methods applied may have value for evaluating coaching practice. First, consideration of the techniques that can be used with young people when discussing issues relevant to coaching. For example, when discussing body image and health discourses, children are aware of the associated stigma so are hesitant to discuss them or incorporate them into visual methods activities such as drawing or taking photographs (Gunson *et al.*, 2016). Instead, more unobtrusive methods such as participant observation may be appropriate (Hemming, 2007). But, perhaps the most important take-away from children's geographies, is the importance of listening to and incorporating children's voices (Holloway, 2014) as opposed to relying on adults to convey their views for young people. This is an approach that could be easily and effectively utilised to evaluate and enhance coaching practice.

Summary, Future Directions and Future Research

Children's geographies can offer valuable learning points for sports coaching, particularly when reflecting on the spaces of sports coaching and ability of children to access formal coaching. At present there is only a small volume of geographical research on children's coaching activity, but this chapter has shown that there is potential to undertake more research in this area. It is likely that there is much to be learned from an explicitly geographical focus, when moving beyond play and informal physical activity to organised sports activities, both within and external to education settings.

With this in mind, future research could usefully investigate the spaces used for formal sport and who is able to access these spaces. This could be done at a global scale given that virtually all the existing research has been done in the global north and therefore little is known about the sport and coaching experiences of children in the majority world. Children's geographers have also made important contributions to work on gender and disability, amongst other aspects of social difference, and it would be valuable to see further research investigating the impacts of these in relation to sport and coaching. This is research that could be undertaken by geographers or sports

coaches or researchers could come together and take an interdisciplinary approach. It is vital that any future research incorporates young people into the research process, this would empower the children as researchers and/or participants and provide them with the opportunity to use their voices to shape future practice.

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