

## Pedagogical narratives of Physical Education in times of precarity

### Abstract

There has been an increasing prevalence of mental health and wellbeing issues among children and young people for over two decades in the UK, exacerbated by the Pandemic, but sure to endure beyond it due to an exponential increase in the gig economy. The uncertainties and instability gig work introduces to people's lives makes them unwell, and creates precarity. The question is how should physical education respond to growing precarity? The dominant narratives of physical education during the past 50 years have been preparation for the coming leisure society (that never arrived) and the fight against obesity. While a risk prevention approach to physical education-as- health promotion may remain important, lessons based on Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity may not be what children and young people who are suffering with mental illness need. I advocate for pedagogies of affect informed by salutogenesis as an appropriate response to precarity. I finish with a brief review of the ways in which precarity has been used within the physical education and sport pedagogy literature and argue that the concept, despite its great importance, has yet to cut through to scholars in our field.

**Keywords:** Physical education; Critical pedagogy. Precarity; Salutogenesis

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## **Narrativas pedagógicas da Educação Física em tempos de precariedade**

### **Resumo**

Há uma prevalência crescente de problemas de saúde mental e bem-estar entre crianças e jovens há mais de duas décadas no Reino Unido, situação exacerbada pela pandemia e que certamente perdurará além dela devido a um aumento exponencial da economia gig. As incertezas e a instabilidade que o trabalho gig introduzem na vida das pessoas as deixam doentes e produzem precariedade. Neste contexto, a questão é como a Educação Física deve responder à crescente precariedade? As narrativas dominantes da Educação Física, nos últimos 50 anos, têm sido a preparação para a vindoura sociedade do lazer (que nunca chegou) e a luta contra a obesidade. Embora uma abordagem de prevenção de riscos para a Educação Física como promoção da saúde possa permanecer importante, aulas baseadas em Atividade Física Moderada a Vigorosa (AFMV) podem não ser o que crianças e jovens que sofrem de problemas emocionais precisam. O artigo defende pedagogias afetivas informadas pela salutogênese como uma resposta apropriada à precariedade. Termina com uma breve revisão das formas pelas quais a precariedade têm sido utilizada na literatura da Educação Física e da Pedagogia do Esporte, oportunidade para argumentar que o conceito, apesar de sua grande importância, ainda não atingiu massivamente os estudiosos de nosso campo.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação física; Pedagogia crítica; Precariedade; Salutogêneses

## **Narrativas pedagógicas de la Educación Física in tiempos de precariedad**

### **Resumen**

Hay una prevalencia creciente de problemas de salud mental y bien-estar entre niños y jóvenes hace más de dos décadas en Reino Unido, situación exacerbada por la pandemia pero que continuará por más tiempo debido a un aumento exponencial de la economía gig. Las incertidumbres y la inestabilidad que el trabajo gig que se introducen en la vida de las personas las deja enfermas y producen precariedad. La cuestión es, ¿cómo la Educación Física debe responder a la precariedad? Las narrativas dominantes de la Educación Física, en los últimos 50 años, han sido la preparación para la futura sociedad del ocio (que jamás llegó) y la lucha contra la obesidad. Aunque un abordaje de prevención de riesgos para la Educación Física como promoción de la salud pueda continuar siendo importante, clases basadas en Actividad Física Moderada a Rigorosa (AFMV) pueden no ser lo que niños y jóvenes que sufren de enfermedades emocionales necesitan. El artículo defiende pedagogías afectivas informadas por la salutogénesis como una respuesta apropiada a la precariedad. Termina con una breve revisión de las formas por las cuales la precariedad ha sido producida en la literatura de la Educación Física y Pedagogía del Deporte y argumenta que el concepto, a pesar de su enorme importancia, aun no atendió masivamente los estudiosos del campo.

**Palabras-clave:** Educación física; Pedagogía crítica; Precariedad; Salutogénesis

## INTRODUCTION

### **Precarity, the Pandemic, and the rising prevalence of mental illness among children and young people**

The Global Covid-19 Pandemic arrived just at the time the concept of precarity was gaining a small foothold in the physical education and sport pedagogy literature. The lockdowns that accompanied the Pandemic created insecurity, uncertainty and instability in people's lives which, in turn, had detrimental effects on their health and wellbeing. Insecurity, uncertainty and instability and their deleterious effects on wellbeing are also features of precarity generated by the gig economy. So it is possible to see how, faced with reports of the rising prevalence of mental health issues among children and young people, that the Pandemic is viewed as primarily responsible for this rise. This would be a misinterpretation of the situation.

While lockdowns and all of the attendant factors, such as children's and young people's isolation and separation from friends, arguments with parents, and the increased importance of social media as a form of communication, appear to have contributed to increased anxiety, depression and behavioural problems (KAUHANEN et al., 2022), the prevalence of mental health issues had been rising in the UK during the previous two decades at a rate Pitchforth et al. (2019) describe as 'striking'. Further qualifying the impact of the Pandemic, Ford et al. (2021, p. 1-2) emphasise that apart from exacerbating already existing mental illness among children and young people, effects of the Pandemic on children and young people's mental health were "[...] unevenly experienced across different age groups and socio-economic circumstances". To emphasise this point, they also write that those families living in poverty fared worse through the Pandemic than more affluent groups.

The Pandemic has been without question a period of considerable turbulence with tragic consequences for many. As societies begin to return to their pre-Pandemic ways of life, and with the benefit of temporal distance from the lockdowns, it is possible to see the Pandemic as a time-limited event. In contrast, precarity is an enduring force that will continue to feed the increasing prevalence of mental health problems among young people far beyond the lockdown years. This is because the gig economy is predicted to continue to grow in size and influence on the economies of countries of the Global North. According to the web site StandOut CV ([Gig Economy Statistics UK | 2023 Industry Report \(standout-cv.com\)](https://standout-cv.com)), the number of UK workers in the gig economy has been doubling every three years since 2016 (2.3m) to 2026 (an estimated 14.86m). In 2022, numbers stood at around 7.25m, accounting for 22% of the entire UK workforce. They report that, according to some estimates, gig work could be worth over £60 billion to the UK economy by 2026.

While these figures illustrate the situation in the UK, Standing (2016) shows that the rise of the gig economy is a global phenomenon. The details may differ, particularly between countries of the Global North and Global South, but the gig economy marks a fundamental reconfiguration of people's relationships to work around the world. Aligned to forces associated with neoliberalism, such as employers' needs for more flexible and cheaper workers compared to more traditional forms of work, the gig economy features zero hours and short-term contracts. A fundamental difference

between traditional forms of work and gig work is that, in the case of the former, workers are paid for their time while, for the latter, they are paid for completing a set task, regardless of how long the task might take.

Not all gig workers disapprove of these features. For people who have retired from a traditional form of work, for example, the flexible nature of gig work can be attractive. But for those whose sole or main source of income is from gig work, the uncertainty and instability impact wellbeing. Because of the inherent flexibility of gig work, it is difficult to plan activities ahead of time. Some tasks, such as parcel delivery, may take varying lengths of time depending on traffic and weather conditions, which the gig worker can't control. And for most forms of gig work, there is little or no opportunity for career advancement.

### **Changing contexts and dominant narratives of physical education: the leisure society and the obesity epidemic**

I suggest that the rise of precarity gives a new impetus to thinking about critical pedagogy in physical education. This is not to say that there has not been sufficient social and economic inequality and injustice in the world prior to the emergence of precarity to justify a critical pedagogical approach within physical education. But perhaps the apparent imperturbability of the aspiration of achieving what Berlant (2011) calls 'the good life' obfuscated the urgency and necessity of critical pedagogy, particularly in countries of the Global North. In a world where there appears to be constant expansion of the economic benefits of capitalism to more and more people, the appearance of 'progress' indeed, the need to teach about social and economic injustice may be viewed as merely a left-leaning pre-occupation? Perhaps this is the source of Tinning's (2002) qualms about critical pedagogy in the early 2000s and his advocacy of a 'modest pedagogy' (or what he has redubbed recently a 'modest critical pedagogy') in its place (TINNING, 2020)?

The global financial crisis of 2008 is popularly understood to have provided the precedent for a new era of austerity in UK society, led by a succession of increasingly right-wing Westminster governments since 2010. It has been during this time that the gig economy has come to a noticeable level of prominence as the relationship of individual workers to work has changed. Austerity involved shrinking the State and with it the gradual underfunding of important public services such as health, education, social care and law and order. As such, it is not only gig workers who have been affected by the rise of the gig economy within an era of austerity. Even those employed in more traditional forms of work have seen changes that mirror features of gig work, such as an intensification of work, requirements for greater flexibility among workers, and, of course, an ongoing reduction since 2010 in the real value of wages.

Prior to this era of austerity, from the 1970s, it could be argued that the dominant narratives of physical education's contribution through school education to UK society shifted as contexts changed. From the 1970s and prior to the 1990s, there was much talk of preparing young people for 'the leisure society' (Roberts, 2020). This narrative drew on the idea that with the increasing automation of many forms of work including domestic work, and the more widespread affluence this would bring, people would have more 'free time' and more money to follow leisure pursuits. Physical

education's purpose in this context was to provide young people with the skills necessary to engage in active leisure pursuits such as sports and games. Through the 1980s this leisure society narrative gradually became infused with the notion that active leisure was not merely a fun and wholesome way to fill free time but could also offer health benefits in the face of emerging concerns about sedentariness-related diseases such as cardio-vascular disease (CVD).

From the 1990s, we can see in this infusion of health-related elements the beginning of a shift in the dominant narrative as physical education sought to respond to a social context in which not only CVD was a major concern, but rising childhood obesity was now identified as an urgent priority. The underlying assumptions fuelling this shift were that while increasing automation and associated affluence in society may not after all increase leisure time, they had encouraged sedentary behaviour and the consumption of fast foods. Within this context and from a New Public Health perspective, physical education's response was to contribute as a member of a collective of health-related professions to promote physical activity and physical fitness (SALLIS; MCKENZIE, 1991). By the end of the 1990s there was the beginning of widespread consensus that physical education's role in this context, of what was by now being billed as an *obesity epidemic*, was to offer opportunities for young people to engage in appropriate 'dosages' of Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA) on a regular basis, drawing on the notion that exercise-is-medicine. Arguably, this narrative had begun to drown out the preparation for leisure narrative by the beginning of the austerity era around 2010.

These dominant narratives about the contribution of physical education through school education to society over the past four decades may seem more clearly discernible with the benefit of hindsight. In the thick of the action, at the time, these shifts were harder to recognise in school practice. As I have discussed at length elsewhere (KIRK, 2010), we find physical educators struggling to prepare young people for the leisure society in any meaningful way due to constraints imposed by the institutional order of the school, where timetables and facilities determine the extent to which pupils could engage in the growing range of active leisure pursuits that were potentially available. Instead, within the multi-activity curriculum, the predominant experience was of the repetition of decontextualized sports techniques. Thus confined by these historical circumstances and with, moreover, the residual influence of forms of physical education responding to earlier social eras that were informed by militarism and eugenics, physical education was already by the early 1990s being viewed as a 'failed' subject in the school curriculum (LOCKE, 1992). Meanwhile, New Public Health advocacy for physical education as a form of health promotion became stronger.

Arguably, physical education-as sports-techniques (KIRK, 2010) was not fit for practice to take forward a health-promotion agenda. While the advocacy has slowly fed a widespread belief within the physical education community that physical education's primary contribution to society is to join in the 'fight against obesity', the pedagogy to enact this belief has not been in place, evidenced in McKenzie and Lounsbery's (2009) lament that physical education was 'the pill not taken'. Where such pedagogical tools have been in place to support this health promotion agenda, such as the case of *Fitnessgram*® (Pluim and Gard, 2018), there has been resistance to physical activity and physical fitness as primary goals of physical education from various quarters and for a number of reasons, such as a narrowing of the range of possible forms that physical education might take (KIRK, 2020).

While childhood obesity has not receded in the era of austerity, it does not appear to have become as prevalent as obesity scientists were predicting in the early 2000s (GARD, 2011). At the

current time, arguably, its influence on the dominant narrative of physical education may be viewed as a distraction from even more pressing issues concerned with mental health and overall wellbeing of children and young people. It would certainly appear that, in this contemporary context of austerity and precarity, the promotion of MVPA by school physical education is not all that is needed in the face of children's and young people's anger, anxiety, alienation and anomie (the 4 As of precarity) (STANDING, 2016). A new pedagogical narrative is required that accounts for obesity and CVD but that also provides a rationale for physical education's response to rising mental illness.

### **Salutogenesis, physical education-as-health promotion, and pedagogies of affect**

Aaron Antonovsky's (1996) theory of salutogenesis was developed in the 1970s and first introduced to the physical education and sport pedagogy scholarly community by Swedes Sollerhead et al. (2005) and Quennerstedt (2008). While its relevance to health was obvious from its beginning, I believe its value as a theory of health promotion really comes to fore in the context of precarity. As I have argued elsewhere (KIRK, 2020), the core concept of the theory, Sense of Coherence (SoC), and its three sub concepts of life's meaningfulness, comprehensibility, manageability, represent the antithesis of precarity's 4 As. If, as Antonovsky postulates, having a SoC is a key factor in keeping individuals and communities well in the face of life's challenges, then the development of pedagogies in physical education that support SoC is vital in the face of rising precarity.

As Antonovsky was at pains to stress throughout his work, advocating for a salutogenic approach to health promotion by identifying the salutatory factors that are relevant to keeping people healthy does not diminish the importance of pathogenic approaches based on cure and prevention. But as Antonovsky argued at length, pathogenic approaches are insufficient in themselves to form a theory of health promotion. In the case of physical education, we need both in order to develop pedagogies appropriate to particular circumstances. Physical education pedagogies informed by risk management and prevention will take different forms to those based on contributing to SoC. In more explicit terms, lessons that promote MVPA to improve physical fitness and focused on the physiology of the body are unlikely to help children and young people experiencing any or all of the 4 As of precarity. My term for such salutogenic-informed approaches to physical education is pedagogies of affect.

Pedagogies of affect are concerned explicitly with learning in the affective domain, in relation to such things as (in terms used by the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland) motivation, confidence and self-esteem, determination and resilience, responsibility and leadership, respect and tolerance, and communication. This contrasts with other forms of physical education where affective learning is seen as a hoped-for by product of skill learning in games and sports. We already have well-developed and researched pedagogies of affect in physical education, such as Teaching for Personal and Social Responsibility, various forms of Sport Education, and activist approaches to working with girls and socially vulnerable youth, as well as more informal approaches by individual teachers (KIRK, 2020). Research centred on these approaches to physical education provide a body of evidence that pedagogies of affect can benefit children and young people.

A new narrative of physical education's contribution through school education to society in a time of precarity has the notion of pedagogies of affect at its heart. If children and young people are experiencing the 4 As of precarity, we need pedagogical approaches to physical education that address mental health and wellbeing directly and explicitly. Note that advocacy for such a narrative is not to suggest that there is one best method for physical education in schools. We need a pluralistic approach that employs other pedagogic forms when circumstances warrant their use (Casey and Kirk, 2021). What is key, however, is that we have fit-for-purpose forms of physical education that can support children and young people experiencing precarity and its detrimental effects, and that there are practitioners expert in their use and school environments that can support this practice.

## **The concept of precarity in the physical education and sport pedagogy literature**

I began this paper by claiming that the Covid-19 Pandemic arrived just as the concept of precarity was gaining a foothold in the scholarly literature. It is indeed a small foothold, and it is within that section of the literature concerned, unsurprisingly, with social justice pedagogy. In preparing to write this paper, I conducted a very brief survey of the literature and identified ten papers published since 2020 that mention the word precarity, excluding publications that I have authored or co-authored. I don't claim this to be an exhaustive search, only that these were published papers readily available in the data bases Education Database, Scopus, and Sport Discus searching for 'precarity and physical education'. The purpose of this final section is to determine the extent to which, given its crucial importance to understanding our recent and current social context, the concept of precarity is cutting through to scholars in our field. A secondary purpose was to look into how the concept was being understood and put to use.

In four of the ten papers, precarity is mentioned only once. In a paper on a facilitator's role in supporting teachers, Goncalves et al. (2022a, p. 282) refer to "a teacher's precarity", with no reference to the source of the term, relating to teacher's needs and ways of learning. Sanches Neto et al. (2021, p. 706), writing about a socially-critical curriculum for PETE in Brazil, see "consistent and enthusiastic advocacy for more critically oriented PETE programmes that enable graduates to better deal with the issues caused by growing levels of poverty, racism, sexism, war, and migration" as a response to precarity - with reference to Kirk (2020). In a paper on African and Indigenous games in Brazil, Pereira and Venancio (2021, p. 719) note "[...] the invisibility of ethnic-racial issues is aligned with the precarity of neoliberalism and its repercussions in physical education" (again citing Kirk, 2020). Philpot et al's (2021, p. 663) study of action for social justice in HPE classrooms contains the comment that "the relationships between neoliberalism, precarity and health and wellbeing are complex and nuanced" - citing Kirk (2020).

In the other six papers, precarity receives often numerous mentions. In the case of Calderón and MacPhail's (2023, p. 162) paper on redesigning physical education teacher education, precarity - citing (KIRK, 2020) is an extension to a conversation about "how wider environmental, political, economic and societal issues circumscribe and interfuse with our work in school physical education and PETE". Sutherland and Parker's (2020) work on responding to trauma in and through physical education posits that precarity (citing Kirk, 2019, though it is the 2020 book) is linked to trauma

through the uncertainty and instability it incorporates. In a paper on nurturing physical education teachers' practice in a precarious context, Goncalves et al. (2022b) make frequent reference to precarity - citing Kirk (2018, 2019), though the latter is the Kirk (2020). Importantly, they extend the meaning of precarity beyond its connection to insecure employment in countries of the Global North to include the point that “[...] in the global south, many people face multiple forms of insecurity that destabilise daily life such as health vulnerabilities, environmental hazards, debt, incarceration, crime, and violence” (GONCALVES et al., 2022b, p. 340).

Two further papers also use precarity in slightly different ways from its connection to the gig economy. Varea et al. (2022, p. 38), writing about changes to physical education in the age of Covid-19, make a connection between the conditions produced by lockdowns and precarity. They stated “our preservice teachers illustrated how fear, doubt, and precarity were produced in PE. Children’s bodies are emplaced in PE. Unlike before, when a child coughs or sneezes it is no longer natural. Rather it produces different affects. These affects range from fear, rejection, worry, and uncertainty. It is the connection between the child – cough – equipment – virus assemblage that produces a different feeling in PE. As a consequence, the above objects converge to produce precarity in PE.” Similarly taking a wider view of precarity, Landi et al. (2020, p.20), in a piece on the A-Z of social justice, cite Judith Butler’s distinction between precariousness and precarity. They write, “[...] precariousness is a universal human condition that is based on the interdependence that humans have on each other — and all humans are therefore vulnerable.... Precarity, on the other hand, produces the same effects of precariousness, but in this case it is due to an unequal (and unfair) distribution across the population”. Despite these variations from the account provided by Kirk (2020) of precarity, both Varea et al and Landi et al cite this source.

A final paper by Zeust (2022, p. 138-9) on the quest for relevance in the age of precarity, poses this question “How can we make physical education socially and culturally relevant for young people in the age of precarity?”. Precarity in this paper is consistent with Kirk’s (2020) account and is used to frame the author’s main purpose, which is to provide an answer to her question by exploring an intervention called the Weight Inclusive Thinking Project. This application of precarity is perhaps the fullest use of the concept to date in the physical education pedagogy literature, beyond my own work.

This brief review of the uses of precarity in the physical education pedagogy literature is interesting for several reasons. The first is that we see variations in the ways in which precarity is understood and applied, even across a small number of papers. This is consistent with Millar’s (2017) comment that precarity had already, at the time of her writing, become so ubiquitous in socio-cultural writing that it lacked precision and meaningfulness. Precarity has a more general meaning beyond academe and so this variation of use is understandable. It will be important, though, that scholars are aware of variation of use and clear in communicating how they are using the term and why. A second reason is that, although the topics of the papers cited vary, they are all in the general area of the pedagogy field concerned with social justice. Indeed, as I noted earlier in the paper, precarity provides an impetus and urgency to writing on social justice topics that previously, prior to the 2010s, was perhaps due to the persistence of the appearance of social progress towards ‘the good life’. Third, each of the papers contribute, some more fully than others, to a new pedagogical narrative about physical education’s contribution through school education to society, with Zeust’s paper the most developed of these ten papers. At the same time, a more explicit articulation of this new narrative of



physical education for ‘new times’ might be appropriate. Fourth and finally, it is interesting to note that so many of the authors of these ten papers are from South America or have connections to countries of the Global South, perhaps for the reasons suggested by Goncalves et al. (2022b), that instability and uncertainty in life have many more sources than gig work. Indeed, due to the Pandemic, the climate crisis, war in Europe and a cost-of-living crisis, perhaps the situation in some countries of the Global North is increasingly matching the situation of countries of the Global South?

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