

**Norwegian youngsters' perceptions of physical education:
Exploring the implications for mental health**

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Abstract

Improving young people's mental health has become a priority for policy-makers in Norway as elsewhere. Although the evidence is limited, physical activity has been identified as having a role in mental health promotion with school physical education (PE) typically being presented as a suitable setting. Few studies, however, have explored young people's perceptions and experiences of PE and the possible consequences for their mental health – the departure point for this paper. We approach this issue sociologically by focusing on the processes through which PE is enacted. Qualitative data were generated by 31 focus groups involving 148 youngsters from the 10th grade (15–16-year-olds) in eight secondary schools in Norway. The overarching theme to emerge was that PE was valued by the students for what it was *not* as much as what it was. The appeal of PE often lay in being different and a break *from* 'normal' school lessons and, at the same time, an opportunity for informal social interaction and strengthening social bonds. Enjoyment of PE – even among those with limited sporting competence – was understood as giving rise to cathartic benefits and an antidote to their increasingly academic, routinized and performance-oriented school lives. However, processes relating to the organization, delivery and assessment of lessons meant that these benefits were sometimes compromised for some young people. We conclude that as far as the mental health of young people is concerned, the best justificatory defence for PE becomes physical *recreation* as a solution to (academic) schooling rather than PE as *education*.

Key words: Physical education, mental health, students, Norway

Introduction

In the past decade or more, improving young people's mental health has been identified as a priority for policy-makers in many countries, including Norway. A number of surveys in high income countries suggest that the mental health of youngsters is deteriorating (Collishaw, 2015; Potrebny et al., 2019; UK Office for National Statistics, 2017). In the most recent national youth survey in Norway, for example, 9% of boys and 27% of girls in the 10th grade reported depressive symptoms (Bakken, 2018), reflecting a slight increase in recent years (see, e.g., Bakken, 2014). In addition, increasing proportions of Norwegian youngsters (and females, in particular) report stress related to their school lives (Eriksen, Sletten, Bakken, & Soest, 2017; Lillejord, Børte, Rudd, & Morgan, 2017). This is broadly consistent with research elsewhere (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Pyhältö, Soini, & Pietarinen, 2010; Sotardi, 2017; Sweeting, West, Young, & Der, 2010).

Physical activity (PA) has been identified as having a role in mental health promotion, particularly within schools. In Norway, for example, the government has been debating whether or not to make one hour of daily PA in school compulsory, with a decision pending at the time of writing. As Coalter (2010) points out, policy-makers frequently show evangelical enthusiasm for using sport to achieve a variety of outcomes. However, evidence that sport, PA and, by extension PE, can be a vehicle for improving mental health is somewhat scant and ambiguous. A recent review of research focusing on children and young people (Biddle, Ciaccioni, Thomas & Vergeer, 2019) concluded that the strongest evidence for a causal relation with mental health related to cognitive functioning. The evidence was weaker for depression and unsupported for self-esteem and anxiety. Nonetheless, PE (as a setting for PA) is increasingly viewed as having a potentially significant role to play in addressing mental health among the young. However, in order to understand the putative relationship between PA (via PE) and various dimensions of

mental health, greater attention needs to be paid to how PE activities are mediated in terms of experience, form and social context. This necessitates a qualitative focus on processes of PE, which is the point of departure in this paper.

While it is well-documented that school-related stress is associated with a number of poor mental health outcomes (Eriksen et al., 2017), relatively few studies have explored how social processes might be linked to such outcomes, and this is especially the case with regard to PE. As a curriculum subject, PE differs from many others in terms of the social dynamics of lessons and the circumstances they create, the kinds of competence required on the part of pupils and the visibility of performance (often in competitive arenas), among many other things. It seems likely, therefore, that PE might function as an enclave wherein young people's mental health might be enhanced and/or undermined. Research to date supports this observation by identifying a number of stressors, barriers and challenges (Lyngstad, Hagen & Aune, 2016; Paechter, 2003; Ridgers, Fazey & Fairclough, 2007; Säfvenbom, Haugen & Bulie, 2015; Tudor, Sarkar & Spray, 2018; Wiltshire, Lee & Evans, 2017), as well as recognizing that PE can also be intrinsically and extrinsically enjoyable (Beni, Fletcher & Ni Chróiní, 2017; Smith & Parr, 2007). Research also suggests that PE is a site for identity formation and views about one's 'self' in relation to others, particularly in terms of sporting competence and its associated symbolic capital (that is to say, competence which is recognized and valued) (Metcalf, 2018), with experiences often being patterned along gender (Nielsen & Thing, 2019) and ethnicity (Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2018) lines.

Researching young people's perceptions can be of value because they shed light on the subjective reality of their school experiences (McLaughlin & Collins, 2010). Very few studies, however, have explored PE processes in detail through the eyes of young people and with a

focus on mental health; particularly in terms of the emotions generated in and through PE, how PE might make them feel about themselves, and how lessons might be differentially experienced by young people. One notable exception to this is a figurational study of Danish students' experiences of PE (Nielsen & Thing, 2019) which, although not specifically exploring mental health, concluded that some students struggle to feel included and can, by degrees, feel ashamed. We approach the study of PE and young people's mental health in a similar way by drawing on the process sociology of Elias (1978). In this regard, we conceptualize mental health in broadly sociological, developmental terms, that is to say, as inherently relational (Malcolm & Gibson, 2018). Consequently, we view PE (and sport more broadly) as a site for socialization experiences (Coakley, 2004) in which the nature of relationships, the teachers' actions and the experience of doing activities can have significant consequences. In this regard, PE, like sport, is, therefore, conceptualized not as essentially either 'good' or 'bad' but rather as having the potential to have both positive and negative consequences (Coalter, 2012), including for young people's mental health and sense of self.

While the terminology relating to mental health has tended to be dominated by definitions relating to mental illness (that is to say, an absence of mental health), there is an emerging consensus in some fields that this over simplifies the construct and gives little space for viewing mental health as a more complex, dynamic and multifaceted construct. In this study, we draw upon Westerhof and Keyes' (2010) two continua model, which conceptualizes positive mental health (or wellbeing), as related to, and distinct from mental illness. The model can thus be viewed as embracing a broad spectrum of constructs in which mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. This conceptualization draws on hedonic (happiness, interest and satisfaction with life) as well as eudaimonic (fulfilment and functioning optimally socially) ideas (Keyes, 2002). In this study we used this construct of mental health to explore with young

people their perceptions of PE in relation to the socialization processes of which they are a part. We also draw on a number of related constructs, such as self-esteem and identity, which relate to Elias' concept of habitus. Thus, the research question was, how do young people perceive and experience PE and what are the consequences for their mental health?

Methods

In order to explore young people's perceptions of PE, the study adopted a qualitative approach using focus groups with youngsters from the 10th grade (15–16 year olds). Eight secondary schools in Norway (four on the west coast of Norway and four in the eastern inland region) were purposively recruited to the study. The aim was to recruit diverse schools in relation to sociodemographic variables such as family background and ethnicity, as well schools that varied in relation to size and urban-rural location. Schools also varied in how PE was delivered. Young people were directly recruited through the PE teachers, with the aim of inviting all young people in 10th grade regardless of sporting ability. Those for whom full consent was obtained were organized into focus groups on the basis of friendship groups and gender (usually organized in single-sex groups). The size of the focus groups varied from three to eight. A schedule of open-ended questions was developed, which focused, in broad terms, upon the youngsters' perceptions of PE in their school lives and their experiences of PE. Data were generated by 31 focus groups conducted between February and June 2017, involving 148 young people (68 girls and 80 boys). All focus groups were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Analysis was informed by grounded theory, as outlined by Charmaz (2014), adapting the process to reflect the complexity of focus group data with regard to conversations involving multiple voices. Analytic codes were constructed from data and built into categories in a

primarily inductive manner. This process also involved the interweaving of theoretical ideas relating to our figurational perspective and guided by our overarching research question.

The study received ethical approval from Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD Project number 49218). Participation was on the basis of written informed consent from parents and the young people themselves.

Findings

The findings¹ are presented as five key analytical themes that emerged from the data: students' perceptions of the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of PE (including what were perceived as the likely 'official' benefits); the significance of the various dimensions of the subject (including the content of PE and the classroom climate); and experiences of being 'judged'.

Students' perceptions of the intrinsic benefits of PE

PE was spontaneously described by very many of the youngsters, particularly boys, as 'enjoyable'. Indeed, for many (and, once again, predominantly boys) it was viewed as 'the highlight of the day' (Atle, F²), 'making the school day somehow brighter' (Bjørn, F) and 'the most enjoyable subject during the week' (Amund, C); put another way, 'That one time during the week' (Knut, F) which offered 'something you look forward to' (Kjetil, C).

What made PE enjoyable was what amounted to the intrinsic pleasure experienced in the activities involved, reminiscent of the so-called 'joy of movement' associated with childhood: 'And that is fun. Because when you were little, then you played and moved around. Fun, right?'

¹ All quotations presented in this paper have been translated from Norwegian into English and anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.

² Capital letters following pseudonyms represent school identifiers.

(Endre, B). In this respect, students across the schools viewed PE as a substitute for the play experience that they associated with childhood and felt that they were missing out on as young people in the contemporary Norwegian school system, with its perceived preoccupation with scholarly work and academic success:

[Doing] something physical ... [not] constantly think[ing] about school. Outdoors, with friends for example, having fun. Experiencing what a child is supposed to. But, in reality, it is like school is with you everywhere. (Stig, B)

The girls' groups, however, were typically less likely than boys to speak spontaneously of enjoyment in PE, being more likely to describe it in more neutral (and sometimes negative) terms: 'It's OK, I guess' (Sofie, G). Indeed, it was mainly girls who described themselves as 'not being particularly enthusiastic about PE' (Oda, B), being more likely to talk of 'hating PE' (Lone, C), describing it as the 'worst lesson' (Astrid, F), most enjoyable 'when it is over' (Sanna, A). The upshot was that some girls spoke of marginalizing themselves either through a perceived lack of competence or concerns relating to their body image: 'In ball sports or similar things, you often observe that girls create like a small circle ... Because they do not quite want to expose themselves' (Synne, C).

Whether they found PE intrinsically pleasurable or not, individually and collectively the students (and boys in particular) were inclined to point to a range of benefits of PE above and beyond the sheer pleasures intrinsic to movement, play, physical recreation and sport.

Students' perceptions of the extrinsic benefits of PE

Beyond fun and enjoyment, very many of the 10th graders spoke in especially positive terms about the opportunities PE provided to simply get 'free from the school desk' (Bente, D), to

‘jump and bounce a little’ (Herman, G) or ‘move around ... [and] be active’ (Mikkel, B). In effect, PE was viewed as a contrast to classroom subjects; in other words, ‘something different’ (Aina, D), a ‘time-out’ (Ida, E) from the ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’ school day with its emphasis upon ‘us[ing] the body instead of sitting still by a desk’ (Arne, E), listening to teachers talk and doing tiresome academic and theoretical tasks: ‘I think PE is a ‘twist’ in the everyday setting, in a way. It even makes the day a little easier too, because you are free from theory lessons’ (Elin, D) and ‘It kind of feels like an extended break’ (Tor, E). In this manner, the perceived benefits of PE were often framed in terms of what it was *not* (i.e. not being ‘stuck’ in a classroom doing academic work) as much, indeed more, than what it actually was in practice (e.g. playing games). In short, the physically active, recreational aspect of the subject meant that PE was often viewed as worthwhile *despite* rather than because of itself: ‘Even if it [PE] involves running round in circles, it is better than sitting behind a desk being bored half to death’ (Fredrik, B).

For some students the contrast between PE and other subjects – and, by extension, the contribution of PE to the way they experienced school in particular, as well as their mental health more generally – was more especially a contrast between *doing* and *thinking*:

I think it is good ... most of the other subjects we have are purely theoretical, so I think it is very nice to get a little break throughout the school day ... For me it is like a free period – have fun. (Vetle, C)

This contrast between (school) work and PE as physical *recreation* (rather than physical *education per se*) was viewed as beneficial even when PE itself was not considered especially enjoyable (if enjoyable at all) by the 10th graders. The contrast related to using the body rather

than the mind, being outdoors rather than indoors, and being spontaneous and creative rather than thinking:

It is good with something practical to get a break from pure theory and just sit staring at a blackboard, in a way. It is good to get out and be physically active – even though PE is not always especially fun. But it is a big variation from just sitting indoors. That’s what makes it really good. (Jonas, F)

Many of the perceived ‘extrinsic’ benefits of PE amounted to a variety of mental health benefits. PE was viewed, for example, as beneficial precisely because it was more ‘worry-free’ (than academic lessons), due to fewer cognitive demands and pressures: ‘It is not a subject with tests that you worry about because you haven’t done your homework, in a way’ (Tone, A). In this vein, PE was described as ‘relaxing, as opposed to ordinary school’ (Tor, E), the one aspect of the school day where ‘[you] get to relax, mentally at least’ (Rune, D) precisely because it is experienced as an alternative to ‘work, work, work’ (Linn, G). Thus, whether enjoyable in its own right or not, PE was viewed (by boys, in particular) as in some way cathartic³ – an opportunity to ‘let off steam’ and be energetic. The perceived tedium of much of the school day alongside the necessity of remaining relatively still in classroom lessons, meant that students typically described feeling in need of mental refreshment, renewal or recreation through PE: ‘By lunchtime, and if we aren’t to have PE that day, we simply snap ... Because we sit still all the time’ (Jens, G). The pressure of academic subjects and the emphasis on concentration also meant that students perceived a need to ‘unwind’ by having the opportunity to act spontaneously and without these normal classroom constraints: ‘While here [in PE], we get to just play and yell and shout and ...’ (Oskar, B). Furthermore, students tended to view being unable to engage

³ A purging – akin to what Elias and Dunning (2008) described as “a controlled de-controlling of the emotions” – providing psychological relief in a socially acceptable ‘civilized’ form through the open expression of strong emotions.

in relatively unrestrained physical activity as having negative consequences: ‘I *have* to move, if not I get fidgety’ (Bente, D; emphasis in the original).

In addition to opportunities for relaxation and catharsis – perceived as especially important due to their absence elsewhere in the curriculum – PE was seen as providing considerably better possibilities than academic lessons for important social interaction and socializing (especially with friends), due to its more informal nature: ‘That we can be together. When we sit in a maths lesson, if we talk to each other, we instantly get a clear message: “keep quiet!”’ (Oskar, B). In short, in terms of its perceived (latent) function of sociability, PE was seen as an opportunity to ‘talk some and be a little active’ (Peder, G) because it did not have the routinized constraint towards quietness that characterized other academic subjects. Boys, in particular, suggested that in this way PE could strengthen and reinforce social bonds, albeit mainly within already existing (friendship) groups. Both boys and girls suggested that in this way PE could strengthen and reinforce social bonds within their class as highlighted by the two boys quoted:

Nils: ...you laugh a little more. Have more fun together, in way

Herman: Right, everyone comes closer. (G)

Rather than ‘sitting in a lesson, raising your hand to answer questions’ (Linn, G), socializing in PE was seen to provide youngsters with the opportunity to know their class peers in a different way: ‘You see a little more of people’s personalities when we have PE, because there isn’t any blue print, in a way. You are what you are.’ (Linn, B)

Alongside the cathartic and socializing dimensions, PE was often described as leading to other, more positive, cognitive benefits, including feeling ‘more awake’ (Kristin, A) and invigorated: ‘You get a little energized and happy and maybe put down a little more effort’ (Øyvind, F). In

this way, being active during the school day (in PE, for example) was seen as having positive consequences for cognitive functioning ('it is good for the brain' (Elin, D)) and a corresponding ability to concentrate: 'It makes things a little easier, because you feel more awake and I feel like I have more energy and more concentration after a PE lesson than I have if I had been sitting reading' (Berit, D).

Students' perceptions of the 'official' purposes of PE

Beyond their initial intuitive responses regarding the intrinsic (fun and enjoyment) and extrinsic (a break from academic work, along with the cathartic function of exercise) benefits of PE, when they considered the ostensible 'official' purpose(s) or intended benefits of PE, one particular justification surfaced time and time again; namely, PE as a vehicle for (public) health promotion: 'Motivating people to get out and exercise a little ... and improve public health. That has to be the purpose' (Iver, C). The formal purpose of PE was, therefore, perceived to be the (physical) health-related benefits of being physically active: 'I think it's because it has always been that we need to do it [PE] to have good health or something like that' (Mona, B). At the same time, the potential harms of being sedentary were highlighted: 'it is not healthy sitting on your butt all day' (Fredrik, B). Among other things, this purpose was believed to be achieved by compelling youngsters to be physically active during the school day:

To provide pupils with at least some activity. Because not everyone is exercising after school or something like that, then it is a good thing that we have PE at school to ensure that those who don't exercise get some exercise after all. (Sander, B)

In this manner, the 10th graders' belief that *physical* health (via PA) must be the formal goal of PE stood in marked contrast to their perceptions of PE primarily as a vehicle through which

their *mental* health and wellbeing could be enhanced – by serving as an antidote to the physical constraints and demands of the rest of (academic) schooling.

Physical education processes and mental health

When exploring the processes by which PE was perceived as beneficial or otherwise in relation to mental health, several sub-themes emerged. The first was the significance of competence and mastery of sporting skills for not only enjoyment of, and engagement with, PE but also for self-esteem and self-identity and, as a corollary, levels of confidence and anxiety and, ultimately, wellbeing – that is to say, feeling good or flourishing – while at school.

The significance of competence and mastery

Sporting competence was often referred to as being a necessary prerequisite or condition for enjoying the actual activities on offer in PE lessons. This related to some activities more than others, however: ‘You have to be skilled for that [gymnastics] to be fun’ (Simen, C). ‘Sporty’ boys, in particular, appeared to enjoy competitive sports because of the excitement generated through particular games or even individual activities: ‘I always think PE is fun when we compete to win. It doesn’t necessarily have to be something we know but it has to involve competition’ (Oskar, B). In this way, competition was perceived to provide a setting for the use of skills and demonstration of competence which, in turn, gave rise to feelings of fun and enjoyment.

Whatever the informal or formal justifications for the subject, whether PE was experienced positively in its own right (that is, in terms of the substance of PE lessons) or not often appeared at least partially related to perceptions of mastery: ‘If you have that feeling of mastery. If you have mastered something in PE, then of course, you have that good feeling inside’ (Martin, A).

In this vein, as well as being a relatively stress-free ‘time-out’ from theoretical subjects, PE was also viewed by some as an important arena for those with sporting ability to demonstrate their ‘worth’. This was especially the case when juxtaposed with their perhaps lesser competence in academic subjects:

If you are really bad in such things [mathematics] and are really good physically then you get to show it there [in PE]. Because people are good at different things. Then you have some subjects for everyone, in a way. (Trine, B)

Thus, for those who were good at sport the public nature of PE was viewed as an opportunity to demonstrate prowess and bolster self-esteem in a way that might not be possible within academic arenas: ‘If you are good in PE, it is something all notice, since everyone is present ... everyone is present and watching’ (Harald, A). In this regard, it was apparent that the youngsters viewed sport as a significant source of social status in Norwegian society, in particular – status that brought with it something akin to symbolic capital. Furthermore, youngsters perceived status as not only a good thing in its own right, but also something that generated and sustained social connections that went beyond PE. In other words, it gave rise to social capital: ‘It’s about status. Like, if you have high status in something, it kind of follows you in everything else’ (Mona, B). Thus, being good at sport had multiple personal and social pay-offs, not least because in the eyes of many you are ‘a model’ (Tor, E) and your peers ‘want to team up with you’ (Hans, E): ‘it’s always the sporty boys [that] tend to be presented as tough, cool and big in media’ (Tor, E).

The degree of social status and its transferability into the rest of youngsters’ lives appeared closely related to the *form* of sport youngsters were ‘good’ at:

Ingrid: If you play handball or football, then you have ...

Ellen: Then you have status.

Ingrid: Then you *immediately* have status as popular [emphasis in the original]. (F)

The major national Norwegian team games were perceived as possessing the greatest status and, by extension, transferable symbolic capital that generated feelings of being accepted and well-liked: ‘We *can* be characterized as popular, because we are handball girls, at least were!’ (Toril, G; emphasis in the original). Unsurprisingly, therefore, students who saw themselves as lacking the necessary sporting competence were far more likely to perceive PE in negative terms and as potentially damaging for their self-esteem and social status, as well as stressful: ‘If you feel someone is better than you, and you do your best and it still isn’t good enough ... that feels bad’ (Trygve, E). Thus, not being and feeling competent in sporting terms tended to erode self-esteem.

The significance of the content of PE

As indicated above, perceptions of enjoyment, competence, self-esteem and status were bound up with the content of the PE curriculum. Interestingly, some students observed that the activities that typically populated the conventional PE curricula in their schools (e.g. the team games of football and handball) could make some who were ‘sporty’ beyond school, in their leisure, appear ‘non-sporty’ in PE lessons. This gave rise to feelings of frustration:

Lone: We are not active within the right categories!

Anne: Right. We play football and cannonball [in school PE] and that is something I am not good at. What I am good at is never a theme in PE. So I don’t get to show what I am good at. (C)

The significance of the activities that formed the content of PE as well as the context in which they took place (in PE or in leisure time) could also be significant for some young people with regard to their perceptions of enjoyment – and, as a corollary, wellbeing. Thus, sometimes doing particular activities in PE reduced their enjoyment compared to when doing the same activity in another context, such as leisure-time:

Trude: When we play basketball, then I don't bother ... I can't stand basketball when it is together with the class.

Ulrik: That's like me and football. I hate football in PE. I can play a little bit like at school with friends, that's a little fun. (B)

This was explained, in part, in terms of the varying degrees of constraint that characterized each setting. PE was more rule-bound and formal at times and leisure enclaves provided more opportunities for unrestrained physical activity and spontaneity: 'With friends, you can create your own rules' (Anders, B). Notwithstanding these differences, they also linked their dislike of activities within PE to the rude and disrespectful behaviours of some (dominant) classmates. Games played during PE could also be too competitive and serious at times for some of the youngsters. This not only diminished their enjoyment it also led to their marginalization:

Playing on teams and stuff like that, that's not much fun, because some in the class take it far too seriously. And then if they make mistakes or you're doing something for them to make mistakes they snap – it's somehow like: "No, you will not get the ball again". So you don't get to do your part and end up just standing there waiting for the PE lesson to be over. (Trude, B)

The significance of classroom climate

It was not, however, simply the content of PE nor, for that matter, sporting competence that impacted youngsters' perceptions of PE. What is typically referred to as 'classroom climate' (see Discussion) also made a difference. For students in this study, PE teachers were a crucial dimension of classroom climate insofar as their attitudes and behaviours during PE were viewed as significantly influencing students' own attitudes and behaviours: 'If the teacher is really engaged and happy ... then you easily get more engaged as well' (Malin, A).

The way PE was organized and delivered was perceived as having an especially significant effect on classroom climate. The students viewed as crucial their teachers' inclination and ability to adapt the PE lessons to the needs of the pupils, and the less-able ones in particular, in a manner similar to the norm for tailoring lessons to the needs of students in academic subjects. In this regard, how PE teachers transmitted their expectations and values through social interactions during lessons gave rise to perceptions of whether or not the classroom climate was inclusive or, by degrees, exclusive: 'But in PE it is just like everyone has to manage: "OK, you're not capable of doing one push-up like everyone else, and you have to be as good as all the others"' (Anne, C).

Alongside their PE teachers' tendencies towards 'labelling' – and (subsequent) grading – of youngsters on the basis of preconceptions regarding sporting ability and performance, those who tended to view the subject in negative terms also spoke at some length about the logistical aspects of the 'classroom climate' in PE and, in particular, how PE lessons tended to be organized. Whether 'pro' or 'anti' PE, the students spoke of the importance of organizing PE in order to facilitate participation for everyone and/or make it a worthwhile experience (e.g. in terms of what amounted to 'ability grouping', occasionally grouping by sex or smaller groups)

and, in the process, preventing students from feeling over-run, excluded or inferior, as well as ensuring that everyone felt safe and comfortable.

Students' perceptions of being judged

The process of grading⁴ in PE was perceived as yet one more unpleasant form of comparison likely to exacerbate students' emotional responses to the subject, not least because of its consequences for self-esteem and motivation:

Vetle: If you are far behind and realize that you will not get a good grade and that everyone else manages then it is easy to give up.

Karsten: Then you are not motivated ... maybe you quit exercising and have no joy of it. Because you feel you are much worse than all the others. (C)

In addition to concern with the grade itself, it was apparent that the process of grading was perceived by many students as a public vehicle for comparison by youngsters of each other –in the form of sporting ability, physical appearance, character and so forth:

In all the theoretical subjects you get a grade. But you can choose to keep that [the grade] for yourself. Whilst in PE lessons you can easily see, like the distances get very big. You can easily see who doesn't keep up as well and doesn't think it's any fun and doesn't run as fast. Because everyone registers these times [results] and then it is easy to start comparing ... (Vetle, C)

⁴ In Norway, the grading of students' performances in school subjects begins officially when students enter lower secondary school, at ages 12 or 13. The grades youngsters are awarded during the latter years of lower secondary school determine whether they are able to obtain a place at the high school, or upper secondary school, of their choice. Economic developments and the widespread availability of opportunities to do so have made 'staying on' in upper secondary school normative in Norway.

Grading appeared, therefore, as one dimension of a wider issue in relation to youngsters' self-esteem, self-identities and general mental health, namely being 'judged' or, put another way, continually being monitored and evaluated by peers. The data revealed two main dimensions to the theme of 'being judged' in PE lessons. In the first instance, the feeling of being judged was frequently connected to physical competency and sportiness, particularly among girls:

In cannonball, there are some who choose not to run for the ball nor throw it because they may not be as good throwers as the handball players. And, if you end up picking up the ball and throw it, some might laugh because you are not as good a thrower as the handball players. (Tuva, C)

Beyond sportiness, the more significant aspect of 'being judged' had to do with body-image and self-esteem. Some students were acutely aware of the pressures they felt regarding body-image and physical condition more generally:

That is, most people who like sports like practically everything, I think. Because they tend to be in good physical condition ... But what I think creates pressure is for those who tend not to like health and who, maybe, are in poorer physical condition. So, when they get to a PE lesson it is like they're thinking that it is absolutely awful, because there is so much body pressure. (Amund, C)

In this regard, some boys noted how the girls were every bit as likely to have stereotypical images of an 'ideal type' boy as the boys were of the girls, with all the attendant pressures that created: 'The girls. Everyone posts these pictures of boys that are fit, and says like: "Wow!" And that creates body pressure on us boys' (Simen, C). All-in-all, its public nature was perceived as a particularly significant feature of PE: that everyone, whether they liked it or not,

was visible to everyone else, with all the consequences for their mental health, including their sense of self-identity, self-esteem and confidence.

Having outlined the main themes in the study, we now discuss these in relation to the existing literature and explanatory theory.

Discussion

Perhaps the most striking theme to emerge from the study was the fact that PE was valued by the students for what it was *not* as much as what it was. Among the ‘sporty’ as much as the ‘non-sporty’ students, the appeal of PE often lay in being different and a break *from* ‘normal’ (academic, passive, boring) school lessons. The youngsters’ preoccupation with enjoyment alongside their perceptions of PE as primarily a ‘break’ from more scholarly activity and, at the same time, an opportunity for informal social interaction and strengthening social bonds, reaffirms existing knowledge (see, e.g., Coulter & Ní Chróinín, 2013; Dyson, 2006). In short, the students’ justifications for PE revolved around the more immediate – and, as they saw it, more pressing – benefits of the subject as an antidote (whether inherently enjoyable or not) to what were viewed as the rest of their (increasingly) academic, routinized and performance-oriented school lives. The benefits of PE were thus seen as *recreational* rather than *educational*. Put another way, what the youngsters viewed as most beneficial in terms of their mental health and wellbeing were opportunities to play (for fun) the activities that they enjoyed, and had degrees of competence in, in a more-or-less recreational or competitive format (depending upon their orientations), with their friends, in climates reminiscent of their experiences of leisure-time physical recreation than school PE. Ironically, however, the students were also keen to highlight the beneficial consequences for the rest of schooling of energetic physical recreation in PE lessons.

The cathartic benefits of PE took the form of a purging akin to what Elias and Dunning (2008) described as “a controlled de-controlling of the emotions” – providing psychological relief in a socially acceptable ‘civilized’ form through the open expression of strong emotions. In this regard, it was interesting to note the students’ belief that *physical* health was very likely to be the ‘formal’ or ‘official’ purpose of PE stood in marked contrast to *their* perceptions of PE as a vehicle through which mental health and wellbeing could be enhanced by serving as the aforementioned antidote to the restricted opportunities to move and academic demands of the rest of schooling.

The dimensions of PE viewed as having especially significant consequences for any mental health benefits included the content and delivery of PE; in other words, the specific ‘sporting’ activities (e.g. football) and the degrees of competition these may or may not entail, alongside the teachers’ predispositions and the ways in which the subject was taught. Together, these processes constituted something similar to ‘classroom climate’. Classroom climate here refers to students’ perceptions of the prevailing ‘atmosphere’ or ‘mood’ during PE lessons (from the changing room through to the lesson itself), including the attitudes of teachers and fellow students to all aspects of the PE lesson (from grouping of pupils through to norms regarding competitiveness). Classroom climate can be perceived by students as unsupportive, even hostile, and detrimental to enjoyment and learning. This is typically referred to as a negative classroom climate. A positive classroom climate, on the other hand, describes a supportive, unthreatening milieu seen as conducive to enjoyment, participation and achievement (e.g. in terms of group pressures towards taking the activities seriously).

The 10th graders had a good deal to say about the content of PE in their schools. Those activities that were, by their very nature, sporting – that is, physically vigorous and competitive game-contests – provoked relatively strong responses (both good and bad) from the students. The responses of many girls, as well as those boys who perceived themselves as less able in sporting terms, merely confirmed what has long been known about school PE (see, e.g., Kirk, 2010) – as they transition through the life-stage of youth, youngsters who are not good at sport tend to shy away from engaging with settings that revolve around sporting competition. In this regard, the content and delivery of PE and the extent to which this generated feelings of enjoyment and fun, appeared central to the perceived classroom climate.

The content and delivery of PE mattered to students, not least because of the differences in and significance of sporting competence. This was not only a prerequisite for enjoyment of many of the activities (and especially team games), it was also presented as a necessary prerequisite for experiencing such activities as cathartic. This did not apply to the same extent to those activities that were less or non-competitive where, because they were less demanding of high levels of competence and a positive disposition towards competition, they were experienced (by those whose skills and interests lay elsewhere) as more enjoyable, as well as enabling them to demonstrate a modicum of competence. In activities of this kind, engaging on more equal terms with one another was deemed important. This was particularly so among the girls. In this regard, the present study adds to the literature on the significance of classroom climate in PE (see, e.g., Morgan & Carpenter, 2002), not least in confirming the importance of teachers' attitudes (e.g. towards inclusion of non-sporty youngsters and even those sporty youngsters who do not see themselves as traditional team games players and the recognitions of effort) as well as those of their peers.

Perhaps the most detrimental aspect of classroom climate in PE for the youngsters' self-esteem and self-identities was what is typically referred to as the process of 'othering' (see, for example, Kumashiro, 2000). This refers to the ways in which some youngsters (e.g. those lacking sporting competence, who were overweight or out of condition, and girls, in particular) are labelled or portrayed as somehow different from those who are in a position to do the labelling – be they fellow students (e.g. sporty boys) or teachers. Whether with regard to sporting competence, ideal-type sex-stereotypical body shapes or physical condition, PE was seen as a site of constant comparison from which there was no escape (not unlike social media⁵), with all the negative mental health consequences that attend being evaluated by peers and teachers. All-in-all, a particularly noteworthy feature of PE in the eyes of the students was its public nature: that everyone, whether they liked it or not, was visible to everyone else – with all the consequences for their sense of self-identity, self-esteem, confidence and other dimensions of their mental health.

It was also noteworthy that the likelihood that PE not only could, but would, have a positive impact on 'sporty' youngsters was not always the case. These were often the youngsters who engaged in what might be seen as the lesser status activities (or 'alternative' sports) in their leisure, such as gym, dance, parkour, drill, and martial arts. Those students whose abilities and sports were not particularly valued by their PE teachers expressed frustration regarding PE being overly-focused upon traditional activities and sports, thereby robbing them of an opportunity to 'shine' as well as enjoy themselves. This reaffirmed findings elsewhere in Norway (see, e.g., Säfvenbom et al., 2015).

⁵ The difference here is that youngsters are not compelled (although they may feel so) to engage with social media as they are with PE.

The findings also raise some interesting questions regarding the place of PE in Norwegian education and society. In relation to education, the study adds to our understanding of students' perceptions of the prevailing *school* climate and the apparent focus on achievement and grades in PE as well as the classroom. What makes the Norwegian situation especially interesting, however, is the fact that the process of 'grading' re-introduces the kind of pressures seen as characterizing demands for academic achievement associated with the rest of schooling. If we treat as axiomatic Weber's observation that people respond to circumstances according to their interpretations of the situation (Gerth & Wright Mills, 1946) then, as far as the youngsters' in this study were concerned, the demands of an academically-oriented Norwegian school curriculum – exacerbated by the process of grading in PE – have resulted in students perceiving a key mental health benefit of PE to be found in its (latent) function in relation to the rest of schooling: that is, as an alternative – a form of physical recreation in an otherwise academic milieu. Many youngsters in this study could accept and 'live with' both 'good' and 'bad' PE as long as it provided something markedly different from theoretical/academic subjects. That is the weak sense of the mental health benefits of PE. The strong sense suggests that for those good at sport and who like/prefer a diet of conventional sports (and team games, in particular) then PE has the potential to offer optimal experiences that are challenging, require commitment and skill and are thus akin to 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and may not be found elsewhere in school life. It may be this, in particular, that underpins the cathartic value of PE.

Conclusion

It is a domain assumption in the social sciences that "If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928) and, thus, the minds of actors need to be part of any explanation of social processes, such as school PE. This observation is germane to the study in several respects. First, regarding the potential limitations of language when

talking with youngsters about a complex subject such as mental health, our findings suggests that the youngsters' understanding of mental health involves the absence of psychologically 'bad' things (e.g. things they refer to as stress, apprehension, and pressure) and the presence of psychologically 'good' things (e.g. enjoyment and pleasure). Second, and by way of explaining youngsters' perceptions, PE needs to be understood relationally. In school in general, as well as PE more specifically, students are inevitably in relationships of interdependence with each other and with their teachers, among others. As a consequence of these interdependencies, complex dynamics emerge which shape many aspects of their experiences and have significance in shaping youngsters' perceptions of the 'reality' of PE vis-à-vis aspects of their mental health. Put another way, the findings of this study suggest that students' perceptions of PE need to be seen in relation to the rest of schooling (e.g. academic lessons) and, in particular, in relation to their peers and teachers. Third, growing up in a country where sport has such strong cultural traction, and sporting competence brings with it such beneficial consequences for identity and status, appears likely to exacerbate the potentially damaging effects on youngsters' mental health (for their self-esteem and self-identity in particular) of negative experiences in PE. Fourth, what amounts to a mental health role for PE in the eyes of the young people is likely to become even more important as educational demands and the attendant pressures on youngsters to perform academically grow. Thomas and Thomas' (1928) famous dictum is also germane to the study insofar as we can never know that if a person states that PA or PE is beneficial for their mental health that it actually is.

Four of the five themes identified in peer-reviewed articles published in English over the past 30 years (Beni et al., 2017) as central to young people's meaningful experiences of PE – social interaction, fun, challenge, motor competence – were, likewise, central to the experiences of youngsters in this study. The fifth theme – personally relevant learning – took the form of PE

as an antidote to the emphasis on learning and academic study elsewhere in the curriculum. In policy terms, therefore, the ‘take home’ message from this study is, we suggest, of immense significance for school PE. In the context of a hegemonic academic orthodoxy and the associated ‘crisis of legitimation’ (Stolz, 2014) pervading PE, the marginalization of the subject within the school curriculum has been a persistent threat throughout the history of state secondary schooling in the West. Hence, articulating the (alleged) social as well as educational value of PE has been something of a holy grail among physical educationalists for over half a century. Ironically, it may be that in the context of a moral panic regarding the mental health of young people, the best justificatory defence for PE becomes physical *recreation* as an antidote to (academic) schooling rather than PE as education and one more subject on the ‘academic treadmill’ (Dore, 1997).

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