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# Caring teaching and the complexity of building good relationships as pedagogies for social justice in health and physical education

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## ABSTRACT

The Health and Physical Education (HPE) profession has increasingly advocated for caring teacher-student relationships. In this paper, we draw on data from an international research project called 'EDUHEALTH' [Education for Equitable Health Outcomes – The Promise of School Health and Physical Education] to explore caring teaching and the complexity of building good relationships as pedagogies for social justice in HPE. The data reported on in this paper were generated through 20 HPE lesson observations and interviews with 13 HPE teachers across schools in Sweden, Norway and New Zealand. In our analysis of the data, we employed Nel Noddings' 'Care Theory' [(1984. *Caring, a feminine approach to ethics & moral education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; 1997). *Pedagogisk filosofi* [Philosophy of education]. Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal] to study the constitution of relationships and caring teaching in HPE practice. The findings demonstrate that caring teaching is inevitably built on developing good relationships, and that developing such good relationships is a complex process influenced by three key elements. First, teachers have to develop knowledge about their students on a societal, group and personal level; second, teachers have to reflect on the individual, environmental and relational aspects required for building good relationships; and third, teachers have to implement caring teaching strategies, such as planning, caring actions and doing 'the little things'. Drawing on Noddings' care theory, we conclude that pedagogies for social justice are enacted when teachers use their own knowledge and knowledge about the students, together with reflection and caring teaching strategies, to arrange a learning environment that promotes inclusion and equitable outcomes for all students.

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## Introduction

In this paper, we draw on data from an international research project called 'EDUHEALTH' [Education for Equitable Health Outcomes – The Promise of School Health and Physical Education] to highlight

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caring teaching and building good relationships as pedagogies for social justice in school Health and Physical Education (HPE). EDUHEALTH is a collaboration between HPE and physical education teacher education (PETE) researchers from universities in Sweden, Norway and New Zealand. The project is focused on how teachers address and enact social justice issues in HPE. More specifically, the aim of EDUHEALTH is to contribute to our understanding of how teachers of HPE teach for social justice by examining their teaching practices. Our cross-nation exchanges have enabled us to identify some of the broader societal values and structures that support or constrain social justice practices in HPE, as well as recognise both different and similar meanings of social justice across these contexts.

In an earlier publication stemming from this project (Schenker et al., 2019), the meaning of the concept(s) 'social justice' and our conceptualisation of what constitutes pedagogies for social justice across different HPE contexts have been explored extensively. In short, our understanding of pedagogies for social justice in relation to HPE teaching draws on Tinning (2016) who points out that social justice pedagogies in school HPE embrace the ethics of the social justice agenda. This perspective encompasses a range of teaching practices inspired by the big tent of critical theory (Lather, 1998) that 'seek to recognise and act on social inequities rather than further marginalise groups of students due to e.g. gender, sexuality, and ethnicity or socio-economic standing, with the goal of more equitable health outcomes' (Schenker et al., 2019, p. 127).

In our project, we have observed and interviewed HPE teachers in Sweden, Norway and New Zealand, selected through purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016) as 'good' examples of teachers who teach for social justice. The selection criteria for 'good examples' of HPE teachers to take part in the project was based on our existing knowledge of teachers known for addressing and enacting socially critical perspectives and social justice issues in their HPE teaching practice. Our understanding of 'good examples' was further grounded in our previous research and theoretical knowledge about issues related to inclusion, democracy and social justice in HPE. Having analysed the data, the cross-nation research group identified several themes relating to pedagogies for social justice. In this paper, we deal with one of these themes; 'relationships' as our data clearly show that teaching practices aimed at building 'good' relationships are fundamental to pedagogies for social justice in HPE. By 'good relationships' we mean those relationships where all students feel included, a sense of belonging, equal opportunity to learn and succeed and that they are cared for in a safe and secure environment. Our data also reveal that building such relationships is a complex process. An important part of building good relationships involves caring teaching, whether that be to build good teacher-student or student-student relationships. It is in this way that we seek to explore how caring teaching and building relationships can be seen as an attempt by teachers to both embrace and enact the social justice agenda in and beyond the HPE classroom.

## **Building relationships and care in HPE**

Previous research in both general education and HPE has highlighted the importance of relationships and caring teaching. This body of research has highlighted overall descriptions of both how teachers conduct caring teaching and students' experiences of caring teaching. A given premise for caring teaching is that it is relational (Andersson, Öhman, & Garrison, 2018), with Larson and Silverman (2005) pointing out the need to investigate the relationship between the concept of caring and teaching. McCuaig (2011) suggested that the field of HPE has increasingly advocated for caring teacher-student relationships (also see e.g. Larson & Silverman, 2005; Owens & Ennis, 2005; Rovegno & Kirk, 1995). Larson and Silverman (2005) reported that caring HPE teachers shared similar beliefs about why it is important to be caring. Their study showed that caring HPE teachers shared a common interest in broadening relationships with their students, and they argued that physical activity/physical education makes a positive difference in the lives of youth. Larson and Silverman suggested that personal biographies strongly influence teachers' attitudes towards caring. In

a subsequent study on how students perceive caring teaching in HPE, Larson (2006) identified eleven clusters of perceived caring teaching practices, which were further grouped into three sub-themes; 'recognize me', 'help me learn' and 'trust/respect me'. The study, importantly, points out that HPE teachers have numerous opportunities to demonstrate caring teaching and that students notice when they do (Larson, 2006).

Brown and Evans (2004) claimed that the potential for building relationships and caring teaching in HPE lies in moving beyond the 'impersonal, vertical, highly regulated relationship of teacher and student toward a more personal, horizontal relationship in which there is an exchange of equals' (p. 55). This, according to Armour and Jones (1998), can lead to more meaningful and caring relationships between students and teachers in HPE. McCuaig (2011) argued that building relationships and care in HPE provides its teachers with the foundations for undertaking the social and moral shaping of future citizens. In a later study, McCuaig, Öhman, and Wright (2013) used a pastoral power analytical lens to make visible the consequences of caring HPE teaching practices, which appear to unassailably produce a general 'good' for all students. The authors concluded, using a Foucauldian perspective, that caring HPE teachers employ a wide range of normalising tools to instil in young people a specific model of 'normalised' healthy living, while simultaneously determining those who present problematic deviations from the norm. Several researchers point to the fact that HPE teachers tend to 'care for' the student-athletes or students who are willing to learn (Armour & Jones, 1998; Mendus, 1993; Owens & Ennis, 2005). McCuaig et al. (2013) therefore claimed that instead of discarding or ignoring those students who are positioned as problematic deviants, HPE teachers should care more 'fervently' and 'employ more intense strategies of individualisation such as togetherness, encouragement and familiarity' (p. 789). Clark (2019) recently further argued that justice is often articulated as 'distributive policies' aimed at compensating for inequities that leads to ongoing marginalisation, whereas care takes justice further by considering the wants and needs of those deserving justice and includes 'them in the process of determining and enacting justice' (p. 147). In this sense, we believe that caring teaching can serve as an important pedagogy for social justice in HPE.

In this paper, we are interested in how building relationships and caring teaching can lead to more inclusion, social justice and more equitable outcomes for all students in HPE. Drawing on our EDU-HEALTH project we are particularly interested in exploring and drawing attention to the good examples of how relationship building and caring teaching practices in HPE can address and act on social inequities as opposed to the potentially damaging normalisation processes described by McCuaig et al. (2013). Hence, the aim of this specific paper is to answer the following research questions: (i) What constitutes good relationships in caring HPE teaching? and (ii) How can such HPE practices be understood to foreground and act on social justice issues? In order to do so, we draw on Nel Noddings' (1984, 1997) 'Care Theory'.

### Nel Noddings' care theory

Building on more than 30 years of research emphasising that an ethic of care is a critical element to the ethics of social justice pedagogies in HPE (Oliver & Kirk, 2015; Rovegno & Kirk, 1995; Tinning, 2016), we find it necessary to adopt an ethic of care perspective in this paper informed by the philosophies of educational ethicist Nel Noddings (1984, 1997). Her theory, which explores caring in relation to schooling and learning, provides a useful heuristic to examine the constitution of relationships in caring teaching in HPE. Noddings argues that all meetings [between student and teacher] are relational, that is, they are situational and unique. Caring can thus be defined as a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realisation, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility (Gordon, Benner, & Noddings, 1996). This definition emphasises that caring occurs within relationships and that 'when teaching for social justice, teachers position themselves as needing to learn from their students, just as students must learn from their teachers' (Clark, 2019, p. 147). Because both caring and social justice are constituted

by context, to act 'as one-caring, then, is to act with special regard for the particular person in a concrete situation' (Noddings, 1984, p. 24).

Noddings (1997) further states that an educational philosophy based on traditional moral-philosophic rationale is inadequate because it deals with moral tasks in an abstract manner. In our understanding, Noddings' educational philosophy, based on the 'caring meeting' (Noddings, 2002) highlights the need to seek knowledge about and understanding of the 'cared-for' situation, which leads the nature of the interaction between the caretaker and the cared-for. In relation to HPE, the caretaker is the teacher, and the cared-for are the students. According to Noddings (1997) a caring meeting has three elements: (1) A cares for B; (2) A's consciousness is characterised by attention and motivational displacement, which leads A to perform some act in accordance with (1); and (3) B recognises that A cares for B.

To care for or care about are therefore the basis for good ethical practice, in contrast to the Kantian ethic, which argues that logic is superior to feelings, and Plato who positions thinking as superior to emotions. Noddings rejects this dualism between logic and emotions. She proposes that emotions and caring are underestimated in relation to teaching. Instead, she argues for motivational displacement [turning points] where the person who gives care can switch between a caring, emotional approach and a more rational-objective approach, based on the nature of each unique situation (Øsknes & Steinsholt, 2017).

The key, central to care theory, is this: caring-about (or, perhaps a sense of justice) must be seen as instrumental in establishing the conditions under which caring-for can flourish. Although the preferred form of caring is cared-for, caring-about can help in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing it. Those who care about others in the justice sense must keep in mind that the objective is to ensure that caring actually occurs. Caring-about is empty if it does not culminate in caring relations. (Noddings, 2002, p. 23)

The consequence of the latter is that caring-about is both a significant force in society and an important feature of our sense of justice. Caring-about also contributes to the cultivation of social capital based on informal education that moves our understanding of education beyond curriculum and educational strategies (Noddings, 1997). It is in this way that we seek to explore how caring teaching and building relationships can be seen as an attempt by teachers to both embrace and enact the social justice agenda in and beyond the HPE classroom.

## Methodology

EDUHEALTH is a cross-national research project conducted by eight HPE and PETE teachers and researchers from three different countries: Sweden, Norway and New Zealand. Culpan and Bruce (2007) suggest that Sweden, Norway and New Zealand (along with Australia) are somewhat unique in that socially critical perspectives and social justice issues foreground each country's contemporary HPE curricula. As discussed elsewhere (Schenker et al., 2019), there are both similar and different understandings of the concept of 'social justice' across these three contexts. That said, our analysis of the data also reveal that some findings stand out as common regardless of country. One such cross-nation finding was that teachers in all contexts enacted strategies to develop good relationships with and between students as a premise for socially just, caring teaching. In this paper, we will not elaborate on the three contexts in detail (e.g. curriculum, culture, school system) or provide a full description of the methodology of the project. For a discussion of this, we instead refer to earlier published articles from the project (Gerdin et al., 2019; Schenker et al., 2019).

## Sample and data collection

In this paper, we draw on data generated through 20 HPE lesson observations and interviews with 13 HPE teachers (7 male and 6 female; age 32–49 years), ranging from 3 to 25 years teaching experience from New Zealand, Norway and Sweden. The teacher-participants were selected through purposive

sampling (Bryman, 2016) via existing knowledge of HPE teachers in each country and local region. Selection was based on the teachers being good examples of teachers who enact socially critical perspectives and address social justice issues in their HPE teaching practice. The study was piloted in all three countries in 2017 and was granted ethical approval in Norway by the Norwegian Centre for Data Research, in New Zealand by the University of Auckland, Human Participants Ethics Committee and in Sweden by the Regional Ethical Approval Committee in Linköping. The observations and interviews reported on in this paper were conducted over a period of nine months from March to December 2018.

The data collection was based on the principles of critical incident technique (CIT) methodology (Tripp, 2012) and stimulated-recall interviews (Patton, 2002). 'Critical incidents' in the context of this study focused on teaching behaviours, strategies and decisions that foregrounded issues of equity and social justice (Philpot et al., *in review*). In our observations we narrowed the scope of the observations from broad concepts of quality teaching to a focus on 'critical incidents' by drawing on an observational template that included a list of 'prompts' that was generated from literature focussed on teaching for social justice. These prompts included focusing on critical issues of social justice such as addressing issues of gender, social class, ethnicity, ability/disability as well as critical approaches to social justice such as responsiveness to student needs, intentional use of non-dominant forms of PE, problematising traditional knowledge of the body and democratic classrooms. The observations were completed by teams of observers including at least one researcher from each country. Each researcher completed the observations independently. The research team met after the observations and selected the incidents to discuss in the interviews. The teacher was then interviewed by a team of researchers.

In this study, we recorded observations initially as 'captured incidents' (CAP) before defining them as 'critical incidents'. 'Captured incidents' were everything from a momentary interaction or event during the lesson to the whole lesson (content, teaching method etc.). In order to change status from a 'captured incident' to a 'critical incident' there was a need for a deeper explanation of the CAP (Tripp, 2012) to determine its link with social justice. In other words, during the interview, when the teacher explained the rationale behind a CAP and we as researchers could identify a social justice agenda, the CAP moved to become a 'critical incident'. Our identification of a social justice agenda was guided by the list of prompts used during the observations as exemplified above. In the findings section below, the CAPs are represented in the form of our observation notes.

The interview guide involved a combination of open questions designed to enable the teacher to elaborate on social justice pedagogies, and specific questions designed to afford the teacher an opportunity to explicate the thinking behind their practice and the identified CAPs. In Sweden, one interview was conducted in Swedish and the other three interviews in English with the teachers' consent. In Norway, all the interviews were conducted in Norwegian and in New Zealand in English. The interviews lasted from 40 to 70 min and were recorded via digital audio and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts from the interviews conducted in Swedish and Norwegian were translated into English to make it available for analysis by all researchers.

### ***Data analysis and interpretations***

The interview transcripts together with the observation notes were made available to the whole research team by being uploaded to a common password protected online document storage platform. The data, both observation notes and interviews, were analysed following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More specifically, the data were analysed through a six-phase thematic analysis approach that consisted of familiarisation with data, initial and advanced coding, identifying and naming themes and reporting findings. The analysis involved both individual coding by all research team members as well as meta-analysis of the codes and themes generated as a group. For in-depth explanations of the entire analysis process, refer to Philpot et al. (*in review*). One of the themes that developed from our analysis was 'relationships', which is the

focus in this paper. To reaffirm and further refine and develop this theme, the first and second author went back to all the codes recorded for the theme, read, and re-read those several times individually, as well as returning at times to the interviews and observations. Then followed a discussion including several rounds of reading and refining the related codes to this theme, which clearly led us to the understanding that the theme relationships' consisted of three sub-themes; (a) 'knowing the student(s)', (b) 'reflecting on individual, environmental and relational aspects', and (c) 'caring teaching strategies'.

All researchers associated with the EDUHEALTH project took part in the process of analysing data. This is one way to strengthen the credibility of a study and to secure the trustworthiness (Bryman, 2016). Another way to ensure credibility, which we applied in all stages of the analysis process, was to look for disconfirming evidence (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005), where we tried to find contradictions or nuances in the analytical categories we worked with. More specifically this was done when the sub-themes were discussed in the wider research group in subsequent online video conference meetings, as well as in e-mail correspondence. At this stage of the analysis, we called on the theoretical concepts of Nel Noddings care theory to take our analysis of these themes from a 'semantic' to a 'latent' level (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the next sections, we present our findings related to the theme 'relationships' in the form of three sub-themes and our analysis of these as informed by Noddings care theory.

## **Findings – the complexity of building good relationships**

Noddings (2002) state that 'caring about' is the bedrock when teachers aim to build good relationships with their students. However, our analysis shows that building good relationships is not straightforward. A further analysis of the identified sub-themes, knowing the student(s), reflection on individual, environmental and relational aspects, and, caring teaching strategies also reveals certain nuances, which are reflected in the representation of the findings presented in the section below. We start by reporting on three levels of knowledge that the teachers consciously applied as a premise for building good relationships, we then show how the teachers put emphasis on the need for reflection on individual, environmental and relational aspects for building good relationships. Lastly, we present the caring teaching strategies (actions) the teachers applied to accomplish these good relationships. The reason we choose to present the findings in this order relates to our understanding and assumptions of how professional teachers work to enhance social justice; first they seek knowledge, then they reflect, and based on the two, they act.

### ***Knowledge about the student(s) on a societal, group and personal level***

The data from our project show that many of the HPE teachers talk about the importance of knowing their students. All teacher-participants state something similar to Louise (Sweden [SWE]) who said that, 'I think if I know them and talk to them, we show respect to each other'. Further analysis of 'knowing the students' revealed that the teachers in this study developed student knowledge on three levels; societal, group and personal albeit not all the teachers mentioned all levels with individual teachers also putting a different emphasis on each level.

Teachers from all three countries talked about the importance of having knowledge about the societal level the students lived in. Despite the different cultural and societal contexts of each country, the teachers emphasised the need to know the everyday context the students live in. For example, Dillon (New Zealand [NZ]) talked about the value of both living within the school community and understanding the implications of socioeconomic differences:

... being in the PE [section] for the last four years, and listening and talking to parents and understanding and living here, I know for some of them [the families] financially it is not possible [to buy a PE uniform], and so I am not going to punish them because they can't afford to buy ... a uniform. (Dillon, NZ)

This quote illustrates how Dillon's knowledge about the students' local community guides his practice as a HPE teacher. As researchers in this project, we also know this school has rules about PE uniforms. Our interpretation is therefore that Dillon's understanding of the socioeconomic conditions that many of the students at this school live under has a greater influence on his practice than the school-uniform regulations.

During the observation in Norway, one researcher in the team identified that 'the [PE] class appears to be homogenous' (CAP, Kari, Norway [NO]). In the interview, however, it was revealed that this group of students was 'merged from four different primary schools' (Kari, NO). One of the Norwegian researchers in the team knew (based on previous teaching experience in this municipality) that these four schools reflect different socioeconomic areas. Therefore, although one of the foreign observers in the research team positioned the class as homogeneous, due to (an observed) lack of ethnic diversity, the reality was that the class was not homogenous as the students came from significantly differing socioeconomic backgrounds. Hence, the teacher used her knowledge about the students on a societal level to deliberately choose activities to 'build a safe environment in the class' (Kari, NO).

This section illustrates how a HPE teacher's knowledge about a community is a fundamental requirement in order to build good relationships with the aim of inclusion, democracy and social justice. The next section deals with knowledge about the group level, which draws attention to questions about how the students interact and function together with their peers, including hierarchical rank and status. Although this was not overly prominent in our data, the examples that follow reinforce the importance of such knowledge. The following situation was identified by the researchers as a CAP during one of the HPE lessons in Norway: 'It seems like he [the teacher] gives the students some "space" in being immature and a bit restless. When four boys pretend to be military men the whole lesson' (CAP, Per, NO). When talking to the teacher about this situation, he unpacked our observation with the following reflection (hence turned the CAP into a critical incident):

Some of the boys in this class take different roles, pretending to be someone else, as in a play. Suddenly they are military men, and then they could be ladybugs ... This can be quite challenging especially because this is secondary school students. It can be demanding to facilitate learning, at least the preferred type of learning [laughing] ... (Per, NO)

It was obvious that the teacher handled the boys with respect and tolerance because he knew his students. Hence, he let the 'kids be kids'. He ignored what the researchers could construe as annoying behaviour, because as he later described, he knew the students and was confident that their behaviour did not disturb/affect the rest of the group.

Another aspect of knowledge about the group level is how the teachers use their knowledge of the abilities and sporting interests of the students in their class to design inclusive learning activities. The following quote from Per (NO) shows how he uses team building activities to build group understanding and tolerance:

... we have worked on, call it team building activities. It is the second year I have them [this class] ... we have worked a lot with activities to avoid such unintended conflicts between groups in the class. (Per, NO)

In other words, to avoid conflicts between groups of students with different abilities and interests the teacher needs to know the group members and consider the relationships between students when planning. Charlie (SWE) similarly illustrates how she consciously uses her knowledge about the student group dynamics when she divides the class into groups stating that:

I always mix students when I divide them ... I have noticed that they behave in different ways when they are with their best mates and when they are with someone else. (Charlie, SWE)

As this section shows, knowing the group and acting on this knowledge is essential to building good relationships between student and teacher, as well as good student-student relations. In addition to the group level, knowing the students on a personal level was important for most of the teachers.



Phrases such as ‘focusing on the individual’, ‘seeing each student’, ‘I have to know them’ and ‘closeness to the students’, featured prominently in our data.

The teachers reported using different strategies in order to acquire knowledge about the students. Several of the teachers talked about the importance of knowing the students by name. The following sequence of reflections by Candice (NZ) is indicative of the importance of knowledge at the personal level. Candice recalled how ‘We played a really boring name game at the start of the year ... it was actually perfect because now I know all of their names ... it makes a big difference’ (Candice, NZ). The relevance of knowing the student’s family was also mentioned by Candice who claimed that, ‘I know a lot of their older brothers and sisters, which has actually helped as well because they can relate to me’. Lastly, Candice and other teacher participants highlighted the benefits of using what we have identified as a ‘golden moment’, a moment of mutual recognition in the caring relationship:

One of the boys can be a bit of a handful but he is fine with me but if you didn’t know him you would think he is like always angry and stuff and is kind of negative and things, but he is actually not. You have to know him, that is just the way that he talks and so I just take the time to talk to him like when you are walking up and walking down. (Candice, NZ)

One finding that stands out in the data among the Norwegian teachers is how they talk about their collaboration with other teachers and the contact teacher (the teacher responsible for the class and the school-home relationship) as well as teaching other subjects themselves. This dialogue about individual students enables them to develop a deeper understanding of the students before they meet them in PE classes: ‘I have also some teaching [with the PE students] in another subject, then I get to know them better in PE ... And it is also based on cooperation with the contact teacher’ (Ola, NO).

Our overall finding is that the teachers in this study stress that, ‘it is [their] job as a teacher to build good relationships with the students. This is not a student job’ (Per, NO). Further, many of the teachers highlighted that good relationships are only established over time and through personal investment in the relationship. As Dillon (NZ) summarises, ‘it takes time to build a relationship’. Our analysis reveals that good examples of caring teaching as a pedagogy for social justice in HPE occurs when teachers know their students, hence have knowledge about the student at the societal, group and personal level, and apply this knowledge in their teaching practice.

### ***Reflecting on individual, environmental and relational aspects***

The overall aim of the EDUHEALTH project was to identify good examples of social justice pedagogies in HPE. As the section above indicates, caring teaching is one example of social justice pedagogies, but this does not happen by chance. Teachers’ actions are closely connected to the teacher’s knowledge about their students.

Another key factor to success in building good relationships identified in our data, is the teachers’ emphasis on the need for reflection on individual, environmental, and relational aspects. Reflection on individual aspects refers to reflections on how to empower the students. Reflection on environmental aspects refers to the teachers’ emphasis on facilitating good learning environments. While reflections on relational aspects are connected to the teacher’s awareness of relationships between students, for example how the students talk to each other, and an awareness of the power relationships between teacher and student.

The most prominent finding was the emphasis and awareness of environmental aspects. Many of the teachers talked about the importance of building an inclusive learning environment as a premise for socially just teaching. Emma (SWE) wanted her students to feel safe. She asked herself, ‘How can I create that environment that people want to come in and feel safe ... like I know them and I want them to grow’. Following an observation of a lesson on canoeing where the students were purposefully paired with a partner for a sequence of learning activities, Ola (NO) described how he worked at

developing an inclusive learning environment by using peer-learning both in PE classes, and as part of an overall school policy.

- Ola: ... we have a focus on peer-learning. That is the starting point ...  
 Interviewer: So you use peer-learning as an overall teaching method at this school?  
 Ola: Yes!

At the individual level, the teachers in our study talked about the importance of empowering students. Our analysis shows that what they meant by empowerment in relation to social justice was; a desire for all students to feel competent/able, with a focus on the 'silent' students, and a focus on the individual instead of groups (e.g. gendered, ethnic). The following discussion between Per (NO) and the interviewer reveals the latter:

- Per: ... I have more focus on the individual as they are ... we have girls here that connect with the boys and that are maybe more one of the boys than one of the girls ...  
 Interviewer: So, what you are actually saying is that it is the individual, independent of gender, religion, ethnicity and sports background, which you have on the top of your mind  
 Per: YES, absolutely!

Another key element was the teachers' reflections on relational aspects. Dillon (NZ) speaks for many when he states that he recognises the importance of being conscious about handling the power he possesses:

... teachers' kind of take their power to their head and then they kind of end up in the wrong way. And I want to be a teacher that doesn't do that. I just want to be calm, I just want them to understand where I am coming from and that is all I want to be. (Dillon, NZ)

Our findings highlight how the teachers' awareness of what kind of power they possess, is fundamental for socially just teaching in HPE, even across different contexts/countries. In the next section, we will show some examples of caring teaching strategies that the HPE teachers apply in order to build good relationships in their teaching.

### ***Caring teaching strategies: planning, caring actions and doing 'the little things'***

During our observations, we identified different caring teaching strategies employed by the teachers. Our interpretations show that these strategies had the intention of developing good relationships, as a basis for socially just teaching. It was apparent that teachers had their own caring teaching strategies to create good relationships. We have identified planning, caring actions, and doing 'the little things' as sub-themes to represent the theme of caring teaching strategies.

The teachers in our project planned their teaching both consciously and meticulously. There are many things to be said about careful planning and organising. However, we will highlight one important aspect in this regard, namely where the whole lesson was identified as a CAP and later constructed as a 'critical incident'. The lesson had a clear objective that was shared with the students at the start of the lesson followed by a clear sequence of relevant learning activities. The following CAP recorded by one of the researchers illustrates this:

Well planned progressive lesson with an obvious objective of developing collaboration and cooperation – Although we didn't see the planning it was obvious from the content that the teacher had thought about the nature of the activities and planned the progressions with the intention of requiring the students to integrate with different others and work collaboratively in different pairs and groups. (CAP, Kari – NO)

In other words, the lesson appeared to be framed within a bigger context, indicating that the teacher had knowledge about her students as a group, as well as individuals. This assumption was confirmed by the teacher (Kari) during the stimulated-recall interview in which she talked about the 'need to work in groups in order to build good relationships'. The following quote from Dillon (NZ)

demonstrates how he also used his knowledge about the students in his planning, in other words, planning the lessons within a bigger context:

there was quite a bit of a disjoint in the class ... the class [needed] to trust each other and then from that point start developing those interpersonal skills and giving others the opportunity to demonstrate those interpersonal skills. (Dillon, NZ)

Through our observations we identified several caring actions among the teachers. Caring actions in this regard were situations where we recognised that the teachers performed actions that were caring in their relationships with their students. For example, we made the following observation 'additional support services with the teacher showing a high level of care and concern to ensure positive integration as much as possible' (CAP, Emma, SWE). We also identified that some teachers combined the caring part and the teaching part of the job. For example, when we observed Kendall (NZ) we found that besides being organised and well prepared, 'she also stood out as a "mother figure"' (CAP, Kendall, NZ). In the interview, she elaborated on this:

I looked at these kids and went wow ... some of these students don't have structured parents ... I felt it was something that was almost like combining a little bit of parenting with a little bit of teaching. (Kendall, NZ)

A further caring action many of the teachers applied, concerned students coming late to class. Instead of making a point of their late coming in public, they included the students naturally into the class and activities.

Being a caring teacher also involved what we have identified as doing 'the little things'. These little things such as saying 'hi' to the students, using names, sitting down on their level when speaking, forming and being part of the circle, and being positive and encouraging represent an overall ethos of care.

At one of the Swedish schools, we also observed how the teacher (Charlie, SWE), used a lot of physical touching. When asked to explain this practice Charlie said:

At this school it is common with physical contact in the form of hugs and touching when you are talking to the students ... Many of the teachers at this school use touching as a pedagogical tool. It's very natural for me and my colleagues. We feel that the students need this form of contact. It is a form of comfort and confidence building but not everyone likes it so we only do it when we know it is ok ... It is a way of communicating and is a common approach in a school with many different ethnicities and they need this. It is another way of communicating when you don't know the language ... I think you can use it to calm some students by touching them. They get a little calm then. (Charlie, SWE)

These 'little things' may be easy for any teacher to do, however, the best examples of caring as part of socially just teaching in our data are the ones where we can see coherence by reverse tracking the teachers' 'path' to success, from *caring teaching strategies*, that are derived from deliberate *reflections*, which are based on *knowledge of the students*.

To summarise the findings, we have identified that in order to develop good relationships as part of socially just teaching in HPE, the teacher has to develop knowledge about his/her students, reflect on significant aspects of building good relationships, and convert this into good caring teaching strategies. As mentioned above, teachers do this differently. The degree to which the teachers were able to give a substantial description of their caring teaching strategies suggests that they have different levels of consciousness about these three sub-themes. Ultimately, our findings show that the teachers' most coherent practices aimed at addressing and acting on inclusion, democracy and social justice are those that can combine *all* three; knowledge, reflection and caring teaching strategies, into their caring HPE teaching practice. We have found that caring teaching consists of more than meets the eye. In other words, findings from this study reveal that caring teaching as a pedagogy for social justice in HPE is somewhat complex. Caring teaching can in this way be found somewhere along a continuum between personal/individual meetings and group/societal insight. Or to put it another way, caring teaching is intentional actions by teachers that emerge from their understanding of both the group/society and the needs of individual students.

## Discussion

The aim of the overall EDUHEALTH project is to contribute to an understanding of how teachers of HPE teach for social justice. As the findings presented in this paper have shown, 'building positive relationships' are critical in socially just HPE teaching. In order to understand what constitutes good relationships in this regard, we now further draw on Noddings care theory (1984, 1997) to discuss how the three sub-themes are mutually informative and supportive for caring teaching practice in HPE: 'knowing the student(s)', 'reflecting on individual, environmental and relational aspects', and 'caring teaching strategies'.

Noddings (2002) states that all classroom interactions are situational and unique and emphasises what she describes as 'caring meetings'. For a caring classroom interaction to occur, positive teacher-student and student-student relationships are required, which is based on the premise that the student recognises the teacher's caring actions. However, we have to acknowledge that students' attendance at school is not voluntary. Hence, intended caring teaching actions from the teachers may not be experienced as such by the students.

In agreement with Noddings, and in relation to socially just HPE teaching practices, we argue that relationships built on a mutual understanding of the situation (B recognises that A cares for B) and caring, are inexorably interrelated. In her care theory, Noddings explored caring in relation to schooling and learning. She argued that all meetings [between student-teacher, and student-student] are situational and unique. Such relationships (meetings) stand out from our findings in various ways, in the teachers' actions (how they teach) based on their unique meetings with students. For example, Per (NO) let the immature boys play their military game ('let the kids be kids'), alongside the rest of the class. In other words, instead of following a traditional moral-philosophic rationale (Noddings, 1997) these teachers recognised the uniqueness of the situational interactions between teacher and the student(s). This shows, in line with Larson (2006), that a teacher's willingness to respect individuals, and at the same time take care of the whole class, recognises that the class consists of many individuals that the teacher has to 'care for'. Put in another way, the teachers 'ensure that caring actually occurs' (Noddings, 2002, p. 23), which demonstrates to their students that they care about them as individuals (Noddings, 1992), regardless of the students' learning in the subject (Wentzler, 1997). However, such caring teaching does not happen by chance. Rather, it is an outcome of the teachers knowing their students and reflecting on various individual, environmental and relational aspects.

Noddings (1997) points out that the caring meeting consists of three elements. First, and as our findings show, the teacher's focus on the individual's best interests. Our teachers are, for example, conscious about ensuring that the students feel safe, and experience personal growth. Second, our findings reveal, in line with Noddings, that the desire to build good relationships is predicated on a teacher's motivational displacement. This is reflected in the data by the teachers managing to switch their attention between the everyday student-teacher meeting (A cares for B), and social justice in a broader context. Remember Kari for example, who drew on her societal (contextual) knowledge about the student group not being homogenous and integrated this knowledge into her teaching (planning and practice). The third element Noddings pinpoints in order to talk about a caring meeting is that the students have to *feel* that the teacher cares for them. In our study, we have not talked to the students. Hence, we cannot know if they feel recognised and cared for. We have, however, identified caring teaching strategies, and lessons that were well prepared and went smoothly (planning). As we have not talked with the students, we can only claim that this combination increases the likelihood that the students recognise that the teacher cares for them. This is further substantiated by the positive communication constituted by doing 'the little things', identified as caring teaching strategies, like saying 'hi', sitting down on their level when speaking, forming and being part of the circle, and generally being positive and encouraging, which aligns with earlier research findings (e.g. McCuaig et al., 2013). In line with Noddings (1992), this emphasis on dialogue and interaction, which also involves the use of physical touch (as demonstrated by one of the

teachers in this study, Charlie (SWE)) can be seen as pedagogical tools to show the students empathy and care (Andersson et al., 2018; Caldeborg, Maivorsdotter, & Öhman, 2019; Larson, 2006).

Moreover, the focus teachers had on developing knowledge about the students at a personal level, for example knowing their names and their siblings, also strengthens the impression that the students may recognise that the teacher cares for them. This is similar to Larson and Silverman (2005) who found that caring HPE teachers work to deepen their relationship with the students, which includes showing an interest in the individual students' personal biographies.

In our findings, we see that the teachers in this study endeavoured to enhance students' personal growth. This is visible in 'the little things' the teachers do, and also the way they talk about empowering their students on a personal level, as well as in building good relationships with individuals and groups. This is consistent with what Noddings (1992) refers to as the caring teaching strategy of 'confirmation', which centres around the act of affirming and encouraging the best in others to develop a positive relationship with the students. Working on empowering students constitutes personal growth in the name of social justice and moves the understanding of education beyond curriculum and educational strategies (Noddings, 1997).

The teachers in our study talked about their awareness that they possess power in relation to their students. Noddings, on the other hand, does not apply the concept of 'power relations' in her care theory. Rather than reflecting on power, she highlights the necessity to be caring teachers. In this regard, there must be an interaction between the care-taker (teacher) and the cared-for (the students), where the care-taker really cares, and the cared-for recognise the caring. To make this happen, our study has identified that the teachers need knowledge and they need to reflect, in order to base their actions (teaching) on mutual respect. This illustrates Noddings (2002) point that 'caring about' is empty if it does not culminate in caring relationships. Kari's (NO) teaching practice of building a safe environment, for example, can be understood as one of the activities that caring teachers employ, according to Noddings (1992). This can be done through modelling. When modelling, the teacher does not tell the students to care, rather s/he shows them how to care by caring.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we are in agreement with Owens and Ennis (2005) who argue that Noddings' care theory and ethic of care can be used as a fundamental component of effective teaching in HPE. They state that teacher caring is a critical component of student success and that it is essential for teachers to establish a caring environment for learning. The need to create caring relationships with the students, to ensure they feel cared for and can then care for themselves and each other, has never been greater. As teacher educators, it should no longer be assumed that our students, future teachers themselves, realise the significance of care, understand the dynamics of caring relationships and environments, and approach their teaching and their students with care (Owens & Ennis, 2005).

Findings from this study demonstrate that caring teaching is inevitably built on developing good relationships, and that developing such good relationships is a complex process relying on three key elements. First, the teacher must develop knowledge about his/her students at a societal, group and personal level. The teacher then must reflect on individual, environmental and relational aspects for building good relationships, and finally, they must implement caring teaching strategies, such as planning, caring actions and doing 'the little things'. If HPE teachers follow these key elements of caring teaching, we believe, in line with Noddings (1992), that more inclusive and therefore socially just teaching occurs. However, based on our findings we also extend on Noddings' work by drawing attention to the importance of the teachers' awareness and addressing of (unequal) teacher-student power relations in their caring teaching practice. The caring teachers use their own knowledge and knowledge about the students, together with reflection and caring teaching strategies, to arrange the educational environment accordingly to provide more equal opportunity and inclusion for all students. Caring teaching is in this way a critical element in pedagogies for social justice in HPE.

Finally, we want to stress that caring teaching does not automatically result in pedagogies for social justice. Caring teaching is a foundational social justice pedagogy as it builds the trust needed to engage in other ‘pedagogies of discomfort’ (Shelley & McCuaig, 2018, p. 517) that may disrupt taken-for-granted practices and act on social inequities. Also, since our study does not include student’s experiences of caring teaching, the unintended consequences of caring teaching are difficult to predict. Hence, future research could fruitfully explore how the students’ themselves experience and make sense of what constitutes caring teaching and building good relationships in HPE. On the other hand, our study shows that the teachers have deliberate intentions of *why* and *how* to perform caring teaching. In other words, the intended consequences of caring HPE teaching are that the teachers both *address* and *enact* social justice in HPE.

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