

**“EVEN IF YOU DON’T CARE ... YOU DO CARE AFTER ALL”:
‘OTHERING’ AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN NORWAY**

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Abstract

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. Physical education (PE), as a setting for physical activity, is increasingly viewed as having a potentially significant role to play in addressing mental health among the young. This paper reports the findings from a study of 148 Norwegian youngsters (68 girls and 80 boys) from the 10th grade (15-16 year olds) in eight secondary schools in Norway in 2017. It explores Norwegian youngsters’ experiences of PE in relation to aspects of their mental health – specifically, being judged and, by extension, ‘othered’. The findings suggest that PE may undoubtedly serve to generate positive feelings associated with physical activity and games and, in doing so, bolster some youngsters’ self-esteem and self-identities. On the other hand, however, for those less competent in sporting terms, and whose bodily self-image is not particularly positive, the public nature of PE and the nature of the activities that constitute the subject can give rise to unplanned and unintended harm to some youngsters’ mental health – especially in countries, such as Norway, where sport is a significant aspect of the group habitus and collective ‘we-group’ identity.

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 (O’Reilly et al., 2018). A number of surveys suggest that the mental health of youngsters in Global North¹ countries is deteriorating (Collishaw, 2015; Van Soerst and Wichstrøm, 2014). In Norway, 9% of boys and 27% of girls (15–16 years old) report a high level of depressive symptoms (Bakken, 2018) with increasing proportions (of females, in particular) reporting school-related stress (Eriksen et al., 2017; Lillejord et al., 2017). Alongside increasing levels of stress connected to school (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018; Sweeting et al., 2010), similar trends have been reported in many other countries (see, e.g., World Health Organization [WHO], 2018; UK Office for National Statistics, 2017).

Education in general and schools in particular have been identified as appropriate arenas within which young people’s mental health can be supported and improved (WHO, 2014; Department for Education, 2014; Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2016, 2017). Physical activity (PA) has been proposed as something of a ‘silver bullet’ response to mental health issues, particularly within the school setting. Notwithstanding the very well-documented benefits that PA has for physical health, the evidence for beneficial effects on mental health, especially among children and young people, remains ambiguous (Biddle et al., 2018). Although some studies have shown statistical associations between PA and various mental health outcomes, many have considerable methodological weaknesses. In addition, these studies are limited in the extent to which they can explain any associations in terms of causal mechanisms, which require a much more careful and detailed process of inference. In this regard, the mechanisms by which PA might effect positive academic and mental health outcomes remain unclear (Lubans et al.,

¹ The term ‘Global North’ refers to those countries (e.g. Europe, the USA, Australasia, and developed countries in Asia) which, in slightly simplistic terms, are richer and more developed.

2016). Nonetheless, in Norway, Parliament has asked the government to set a target of increasing the proportion of youngsters who meet the current recommendations for PA (60 minutes a day) within the school setting, as a means of improving both physical and mental health and learning (Committee on Health and Care Services, 2017).

This paper focuses on Norwegian youngsters' experience of physical education (PE), the curriculum subject typically viewed as a key location for PA and sport. The point of departure is a focus on the qualitative dimensions of PE as a dynamic social process. Recent research suggests that social processes could be significant in explaining how PE might influence mental health (Eime et al., 2013). We start by considering key conceptual issues relating to mental health before proceeding to briefly review the extant literature linking social relations in school and young people's mental health. We then focus in more depth on research relating to the social process of PE both empirically and theoretically.

There is some consensus that mental health is most usefully conceptualized as a complex, dynamic, multidimensional construct which incorporates mental health *difficulties* (such as psychological distress), mental *illness* (such as anxiety) and social, emotional and psychological *well-being* ('positive' mental health) (see, for example, Westerhof and Keyes, 2010). This conceptualization also incorporates constructs such as identity and self-esteem, which become significant, in developmental terms, during young people's transition from childhood through youth to adulthood. In this regard, we view mental health as constantly in formation and mediated by social processes such as education. We focus, in particular, upon the potential significance of social relationships in schools and it is to these that we now turn.

Social relations, school, PE and mental health

Almost three decades ago Rutter (1991) drew attention to the role of schools in providing social experiences – alongside their ostensible academic role – as “arenas of sustained interactions” (Green et al., 2000, p. 15). Subsequently, social relationships and affiliation, often referred to as ‘school connectedness’, have been recognized as important for young people’s mental health (McLaughlin and Clarke, 2010). A number of correlation studies in several countries over many years have revealed associations between mental health and school climate (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018; Kidger et al., 2012). The terms classroom and school climate tend to be used to refer to the “norms, expectations and beliefs that contribute to creating a psychosocial environment that determines the extent to which people feel physically, emotionally and socially safe” (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018: 122). In this regard, pupils’ perceptions of teacher support, safety, and a sense of belonging have been reported as particularly significant. Few studies, however, have focused on the social dynamics of the classroom in the context of everyday educational processes in relation to young people’s mental health, hence the focus of this paper. In particular, we explore the social processes through which PE can be experienced negatively, and the explanatory potential of the concept of ‘othering’.

Judging, evaluating and othering

What, in this study, we are referring to – in line with the term frequently used by students’ themselves – as being ‘judged’, sociologists might prefer to conceptualize as ‘othering’. The concept of the ‘other’ is typically defined as people and groups being marginalized and treated as “other than the norm” (Kumashiro, 2000: 23; cited in Robinson, 2018). Othering is a term imported into sociology from the writings of the French existential philosopher and author, Simone de Beauvoir. She argued that women had been subjected to othering by men and were the second sex because their characteristics had been defined by another group from that group’s standpoint (Roberts, 2009). Subsequently, sociologists have applied the concept of the

other to understanding how various groups, and females in particular, tend to be identified, categorized, labelled and, ultimately, marginalized (see, e.g., Robinson, 2018). Othering, it is said, distances those who label from those labelled and portrays the other differently from the ways groups may otherwise have identified themselves (Roberts, 2009). In effect, othering is a process whereby established or insider groups seek to other ‘outsiders’ (typically minorities of one kind or another) on the grounds that their way of life (culture) and beliefs are fundamentally different from the established or insider groups. Othering is a function of social interaction and is mediated via discourses (ideologically value-laden ways of communicating) that lead to judgments regarding the alleged inferiority and/or superiority of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ (us and them) (Dervin, 2015).

Drawing upon figurational sociology, othering is conceptualized here in terms of the dynamic power relations between established and outsider groups. Othering entails some groups portraying others as outsiders, different from those more established. According to Elias and Scotson (1965, 2008), status distinctions between established and outsider groups are rooted in an uneven balance of power. In PE and sport, sources of status and power tend to revolve around sporting ability – what sociologists, such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) might call physical capital – and physical condition (symbolic capital). Group power differentials generate what Elias and Scotson (1965, 2008) referred to as the particular socio-dynamics of stigmatization, whereby members of established groups project a public image based upon their best members or best behaviours and, correspondingly, construct the identity of the outsiders in terms of their worst members and worst behaviours (Van Krieken, 1998). On this view, it becomes difficult for members of an outsider group, such as non-sporty or unfit youngsters in the present study, to resist internalizing the negative characteristics attributed to them by the established group. Members of the outsider group are said to experience their power inferiority emotionally and

interpret it as a sign of human inferiority – subsequently incorporating the stigmatizing judgements of the established group into their own personality structures – developing, for instance, a minority identity. Elias and Scotson (1965, 2008) highlighted the role of social gossip as a means of collective social control, referring to ‘praise gossip’ – which serves to reinforce social cohesion – and ‘blame gossip’ – intended to sanction deviant members and encourage stigmatizing views of outsiders.

Studies of othering in PE and sport have characteristically focused upon particular othered identities such as sexuality/gender (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001; Sykes et al., 2011; Scraton, 1992, 2018), ethnicity (Fitzpatrick, 2013), ‘fatness’ (O’Brien et al., 2007; Wright, 2009) – as well as the intersections between these (see, e.g., Azzarito and Solomon, 2005; Flintoff et al., 2008; Thorjussen and Sisjord, 2018) – and the role of PE in sustaining and perpetuating othering processes in relation to inclusion (Nielsen and Thing, 2017). More recently, research has highlighted the place of ‘emotional affiliation’ in the learning process in PE. In this regard, we refer to processes within PE that help young people maintain feelings of social connectedness, such as the importance pupils attach to being seen/not seen (Lyngstad et al., 2017). None of these studies, however, have explored processes of othering in PE, explicitly, in relation to the consequences for young people’s mental health. In Norway, where PE is taught in mixed-sex groups, gender relations might be an important dynamic around which power, status and ability converge.

Against this backdrop the paper focuses upon youngsters’ perceptions of the consequences of being ‘judged’ within PE. In the process, we explore whether youngsters’ experiences in PE can adequately be described as othering – as this concept is conventionally applied in PE and

beyond (see, e.g., Thorjussen and Sisjord, 2018) – and reflect upon the consequences of judging/othering for youngsters’ mental health.

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative approach, data being generated by 31 focus groups conducted between February and June 2017. In total, 148 youngsters (68 girls and 80 boys) from the 10th grade (15-16 year olds) in eight secondary schools in Norway (four on the west coast and four in the eastern inland region) were included. This age group was chosen for several reasons: first, they were judged to be sufficiently mature to take part in a focus group and share their views with their peers; second, they were in their third year of experiencing secondary school PE and had sufficient experiences upon which to draw; third, insofar as they were in the midst of the life-stage of youth, they were experiencing a period of transition during which patterns of physical activity and sport participation tend to shift and mental health difficulties emerge. Taken together, this meant that they constituted a valid group of key informants who could contribute rich data that would give insight into how they experienced PE.

Schools were purposively sampled in relation to size, urban-rural location and ethnic mix. PE teachers recruited young people to the study on the basis of their levels of engagement in sport in conjunction with membership of friendship groups and gender. The size of the focus groups varied from four to eight and were usually organized in single-sex groups. PE teachers were asked to construct groups according to perceived ‘sportiness’ paying attention to including youngsters from across the sporting ability spectrum. The most important criterion was, however, that groups were constructed to ensure a ‘friendly and good atmosphere’. Thus, references to sporty and non-sporty are based upon the youngster’s perception of their ‘sportiness’.

A topic guide was developed comprising open-ended questions relating to their experiences of PE which provided a departure point for young people to raise issues they found pertinent (Kreuger, 1998). Examples of key sections in the topic guide were: being 15/16, perceptions of health and mental health, and experiencing PE. Within these sections, open-ended questions were used, such as: ‘How would you describe PE in your school?’ and ‘How does doing PE make you feel?’. A number of probes were judiciously used to help young people clarify and elaborate on their comments, including: ‘What do you mean by...?’; ‘Could you explain ...?’; and ‘Could you give me an example of ...?’.

All focus groups were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The analysis was informed by grounded theory, as outlined by Charmaz (2006), in order to construct analytic categories from coded data in a primarily inductive way, which were then built into overarching themes. The study received ethical approval from Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). Participation was by written informed consent from parents and young people.

Findings

The findings are presented under three main headings that represent the key analytical themes to emerge from the data in relation to processes of being judged and evaluated by peers and teachers – according to sporting competence, physical fitness, physical attractiveness and their intersections. In addition, the findings explore the processes that facilitate and augment processes of judging and evaluating. These included the delivery and organization of PE and, in particular, the role of PE teachers. Quotations from focus groups are used to illustrate key themes and are anonymized using pseudonyms.

Being judged in PE: perceptions of sporting competence

In the first instance, students' perceptions of being judged tended to be connected to physical competency and sportiness. Moreover, it was evident that young people's perceptions of themselves as 'other' were formed through the interweaving of processes in PE that made their (lack of) competence visible and commented on, as described by two girls from Ås school:

Kari: Yes, those who perceive themselves as being better than the rest of us.

Tone: And then [laughing] we are placed lower.

Self-defined less competent or less 'sporty' students often spoke of the ways in which those who appeared to enjoy the subject, not least because they were 'good at sport', tended to constantly judge and evaluate and, frequently, treat as outsiders those considered less able – and, as a corollary less willing – in PE lessons. This became particularly apparent during games where they were deemed not good enough:

You feel quite bad about yourself – that you don't manage to do what they can do. You feel that you are categorized in a way – that “They are good and you are bad. Hence we pass to those who are good and you just get to stand there”, in a way. (Mari, North school)

During such interactions, differences in sporting ability were keenly felt among those less able. Irrespective of gender, the more-able youngsters were sometimes described as tending towards 'showing off' their superior abilities and, in doing so, consciously or sub-consciously drawing attention to the inferiority and marginal position of their less able counterparts. This was perceived as a matter of difference in (sporting) status in one group at Dal school:

Trine: They get like “We are best” ...

Mona: They really like to show themselves off. Like showing “We can do this, and everyone shall know that we can ... It's a little like they are looking down on us. That

they kind of perceive themselves to be much better, that we never can come up on their level.

Those ‘doing’ what amounted to labelling – the more-able and ‘sporty’ youngsters – were as likely to talk in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ as the less able, ‘non-sporty’ ones. Thus, sporty girls were as inclined as sporty boys to be critical of, and somewhat condescending towards, the less-able girls and boys – particularly because they were perceived as not making an effort to be better. Associated with their examples of condescension, however, was some appreciation that expressing these views was not deemed acceptable, particularly in Norwegian society: “I can get irritated. At least if they don’t even try, and just observe the ball coming towards them ... Then a few words may come out, that I’m not particularly proud of” (Else, Nord school).

Students observed how the nature of many typical PE activities – games such as handball and football – had an in-built tendency to exacerbate differences according to sporting ability and performance; as illustrated by boys at Nord school:

Stian: There is always those who are a little better in everything, who just take the ball and run off.

Lars: Especially in football.

The importance invested by the more-sporty youngsters in competitive activities in particular, such as the aforementioned games, was perceived as having inevitable (and potentially damaging) consequences, whether intended or otherwise:

And it’s like those who are good in ball sports and such tend to take things too seriously [when] we play matches and such. If you should do something wrong, they may be nasty and yell at you at times (Mia, Nord school).

While judgement and evaluation regarding sporting competence was seen as commonplace and pervasive throughout PE, its most obvious form was forged along gender lines. This tended to manifest itself in terms of processes of exclusion/inclusion within the playing of games, processes which, within PE were ever-visible. The consequences of being excluded within games was, according to one of the girls' groups at Nord school, often felt to be discouraging:

Ida: If you are the worst in that particular sport, and the others are good, like Oda just said, there is someone and especially boys, I think, who don't want to include you in that sport, because you are bad.

Hanne: Then you never get the ball.

Ida: Exactly. It's not especially motivating.

The likelihood of competitive activities giving rise to physically aggressive behaviours was also seen as leading, almost inevitably, to the marginalization of girls more than boys. In this vein, some girls referred to 'standing in the way' of, and being overrun by, enthusiastic boys whose strength was apparent in how they played the game. These kinds of situations could give rise to feelings of anxiety relating to the physicality that could accompany participation in these types of activities. Feeling unsafe meant that the process of marginalization tended to become self-fulfilling, something that was expressed by girls from Dal school. In the first instance, Stine observed that "What makes playing with boys so scary is that they, for the first, they are very aggressive, and then they use so much power, I feel ... I get scared ... That's the issue. I want to lie low." In a subsequent focus group, Nora added,

For example, there are many playing basketball, and they want to show off and be good ... And they don't really show much consideration. Just plunging over the pitch and suddenly they've scored ... I think that's some of the reason that I'm not that happy with

ball sports. That you don't quite manage to participate because the boys, or at least some of them, are so violent.

What was perceived as the likely 'aggressive', even violent, behaviour towards girls from boys was seen as one of the negative effects of mixed-sex PE lessons involving games. In particular, fear of doing something wrong in these situations was felt strongly:

... and when you are on a team with one who really wants to win, you are afraid of making any mistakes. Because they tend to get 'high' and really angry ... It does affect you when you are being yelled at (Elin, Vest school)

A particular feature of PE, which tended to augment and exacerbate youngsters' perceptions, was its public nature. All of the students, whether they liked it or not, recognized that they were visible to everyone else, with all the consequences for their sense of self-identity, self-esteem, confidence and other dimensions of mental health that tended to imply:

I strongly feel that you have to be very cautious. You cannot do exactly what you would like to do because you will be looked down on ... It's like if you are very 'out there' then you are really visible, right – and if you should do anything wrong, it becomes very public (Anne, Sør school)

The dynamics of games in particular – and the feelings they tended to generate – meant that, whether male or female, not 'fitting in' affected their dispositions towards PE lessons. Feelings of being excluded tended, as discussed in a group from Nord school, to be de-motivating:

Stian: Well, we don't feel like playing when they never pass the ball.

Dag: No, consider it to be unnecessary. 'Don't need you', can do everything themselves.

Such feelings were reported as having almost inevitable consequences for their engagement with PE. Hearing negative comments about sporting competence together with experiencing being excluded during activities combined to generate a degree of apathy among those on the receiving end, borne at least in part out of a sense of feeling redundant and unwanted. This was addressed in a group at Dal school:

Ola: You don't feel like engaging.

Trine: Right. You really feel like wanting to stop.

Ola: Agreed. If people complain about you, and you suck at football, you don't feel like playing any more.

The group dynamics during games gave rise to an assortment of mental health consequences for those who felt excluded. In addition, being marginalized could generate feelings of frustration, partly due to a perceived 'knock-on' effect relating to their PE teachers' attitudes towards them. For these young people, their teacher sometimes showed a lack of understanding of their situations and why they might not engage with activities:

Especially, like if we are playing football and all the others just run off with the ball and we try to win it back we eventually give up trying, because it's impossible. And then the teacher gets angry with us because we don't do anything. (Lars, Nord school)

Some of the more marginalized youngsters acknowledged that the consequences for their own feelings of exclusion in PE activities was not straightforwardly a reflection of deliberate attempts by their more capable peers to ignore or marginalize them or make them feel alienated. However, even though they recognized this they still made them feel invisible. Some of the groups consisting of sporty youngsters spoke of the lengths they went to in order to include those they judged to be less-able (whether male or female) in order to avoid embarrassing them

or further undermine their self-esteem and enjoyment. Jon (Sør school) emphasized the importance of complimenting rather than criticizing, if being teamed up with someone performing worse than others:

Then for God`s sake do not yell at them. That just destroys their self-esteem, and it doesn`t make that person any better, just frustrated. Rather, it`s important to give good advice. It`s OK to set requirements – but not to yell ... and if they do something good, it doesn`t have to be very ... but a little good, then you compliment them. Then they get happy and start thinking: “I can do this”. That way they get a feeling of mastery and they can build themselves up. And then they thrive.

Being judged in PE lessons: perceptions of bodily attractiveness and condition

While girls seemed to be more willing than boys to discuss concerns relating to body image and self-esteem, both boys and girls tended to view their experiences in PE lessons as simply a reflection of a wider societal focus upon body-image and health more generally. This focus was experienced as a pressure to meet idealized norms of what young girls should be like, which itself was also felt to be about performing: “In the period we find ourselves in now, there are so many struggling with body pressure and pressure upon grades and in a way performing in absolutely everything.” (Lone, Sør school)

Within PE, however, these wider gender norms were more transparent and evident because the subject focused, in one form or another, on physicality and physical appearance. This was exacerbated, with potentially harmful consequences for engagement and self-esteem, especially when PE focused on fitness, physical health and body-shape:

Having this additional pressure on being as fit as possible when you are already unhappy with, for example, how you look and your body looks. I think it`s stupid that they [the

teachers] will have like: “OK, you should, in a way, perform on a certain level – you should meet that standard. If you manage, you are good enough, but if you don’t you should exercise *more*”. (Lone, Sør school)

The potential for PE to bolster or undermine strong body-images and self-esteem appeared pronounced among the girls, who seemed especially sensitive to the significance of a positive self-image for their sense of well-being:

But in a way, it is a bit different because your body has a lot to say about your psyche ... If you are feeling good about yourself ... then you manage to perform well. And if you feel that, OK, I look sufficiently good and I have a sufficiently nice body – then you don’t necessarily worry as much for these things. (Lone, Sør school)

The public nature of PE, alluded to above, resurfaced in discussions around body-image. In one girls group at Ås school, the changing rooms were considered an especially difficult arena for girls to negotiate while keeping their dignity and self-esteem intact:

Solveig: Like ... me and her [referring to another girl in group] have our own changing room, because we don’t feel comfortable changing clothes when others are watching.

Grete: The body pressure is quite big.

Solveig: It is very big.

Grete: What you look like, and what is ...

Solveig: You feel vulnerable.

Grete: It may not be that everyone is looking at you, but you feel you are being looked at, in a way.

It was noticeable that the boys' groups tended to express the view that the significance of PE and sport for body-image was an issue primarily for the girls: "I do think girls are being more sensitive about that than boys are" (Hans, Nord school). In a number of cases, however, some of the boys – such as those at Ås School – acknowledged that body-image was an issue for them as well:

Tore: And boys care less than girls about that. All the girls in class want that perfect body, you know. It's like a competition.

Erik: They see it on social media.

Tore: They see it everywhere, really. It's this body pressure they talk about.

Martin: It does occur amongst boys as well, but.

Erik: Not to the same extent.

Martin: Not in our class, at least.

With its focus on sporting and physical performance and, by extension, the body, PE was viewed by less-able and sporty boys as a setting in which those less competent were especially vulnerable. If verbal comments were made, they were experienced as particularly hurtful:

Body pressure. If you feel a little fatter than others for example, you may instantly be pulled down. Surely if you get a comment, and you are already aware, and then get "fatso" or something thrown in your face. Then you may feel you[rself] sink. (Tor, Nord school).

Translating sporting and physical capital into social status, esteem and popularity

Students, whether sporty or not, viewed sporting capital (being good at sport and being seen to be good) and physical capital (in terms of approximating to an ideal-type body image) as

translatable into both individual and social status and esteem. This was reflected upon by girls from Dal school:

Mona: It's about status. Like, if you have high status in something, it kind of follows you in everything else.

Trine: Then you get a little 'high headed' compared to those who never have been engaged with such things.

Moreover, both insider (sporty) and outsider (non-sporty) groups considered being good at sport an automatic passport to popularity. In this regard, it was noteworthy that some sports (and especially team games with strong cultural traction in Norway, such as football and handball) had symbolic capital and were viewed as especially significant in relation to status and esteem in the popularity stakes, as the following discussion from a girls group at Haugen school illustrates:

Ellen: And whether you play handball or football.

Ingrid: Absolutely, handball or football if you play handball or football, then you have ...

Ellen: Then you have status.

Ingrid: Then you automatically have status as popular, in a way.

The marginalization of those less-able during PE lessons diminished their sense of belonging, perhaps inevitably so given what was perceived as the sustained manner in which their sporting inferiority was made visible through interactions. It also gave rise to a variety of emotions experienced when trying to 'fit in' during PE lessons, as these youngsters from Dal school indicated:

Trine: You kind of feel ...

Ola: You don't fit in.

Trine: Right. You kind of, like you get sad ... Even if you kind of don't bother to care, it becomes ... They just: 'We own you, you can never be as good as we are. Just stop trying'. It can be perceived like that. Even if you don't care in a way, you do care after all.

All groups indicated that, whether implicit or explicit, messages regarding sporting competence and physical appearance tended, predominantly, to be generated within and mediated by their peers. Nevertheless, some – and the less-able in particular – spoke of the role of their PE teachers in augmenting and sustaining, and occasionally generating norms about the pattern of competence in class

PE teachers as mediators of PE experiences

PE teachers were perceived as being crucial mediators of how PE was experienced, especially by those on the margins. What were perceived as PE teachers' prejudicial predispositions – typically based upon presumptions regarding individual youngsters' sporting abilities and physical condition – was a leitmotif in the comments from those students who saw themselves as less able and, as a corollary, less successful in PE terms. Even when they tried hard, like these girls from two different groups at Dal school, they often felt invisible to the teacher:

Stine: I feel that they maybe don't see us, because there are so many pupils... I don't think they look especially at me.

Trine: Because I know that, yes, they won't notice whether I try my best, because it isn't any different.

One particular way in which PE teachers played a significant role in the process of othering manifested itself in terms of which students received most attention. Students highlighted as detrimental to 'classroom climate' their PE teachers' tendencies to distinguish and discriminate between those deemed 'good' and 'bad' at sport and their predispositions towards "... looking more on those who are good, because it is more exciting and interesting to watch those who are capable of playing real football" (Monika, Øst school). Teachers' feedback, including giving or withholding praise, was one of the primary processes through which these messages were conveyed during PE activities, alongside giving attention in non-verbal ways such as watching particular students and spending time developing their skills:

But I genuinely feel, in our class at least, that it is those who play handball and those who love exercising ... they get a lot of positive feedback and they participate in PE every week. Whilst those who struggle with PE and actually think that it's awful, when they finally do their best it is like: OK, you never participate in PE anyway ... Like if you actually make an effort, you are not noticed and it is a kind of: Yes, you should be able to do better. (Lone, Sør school)

The role of the teachers appeared especially pronounced during the process of grading², which was often when students felt unjustly compared with others:

I perceive PE teachers, or teachers, to compare a '6' pupil, let`s say if one person gets 4 or 5, then the teacher compares to a better pupil and thinks like "You cannot get as good grade because you aren't as good as that person". Rather, they should think individually. (Gry, Nord School)

² In Norway, grading of PE 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.

Formal processes of grading tended to be accompanied by informal processes, including praising and approving those students perceived as good at demonstrating skills:. - As some boys at Nord school expressed it:

Arne: You easily see it when they [favourite pupils] are to show something to them [PE teachers]. That they want a little more from those pupils. Like they brag a little extra of that specific pupil if he does something.

Frank: Our teacher loves giving examples, and there are a couple of persons he mentions every time, that he seems to endorse.

How PE teachers organized lessons was seen as significant in relation to students' perceptions of success and failure, engagement and disengagement, and positive and negative outcomes. In this regard, organizing students into appropriate teams prior to playing ball sports was considered to be discriminatory, whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, and was thus a key process through which being judged played out on a regular basis. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the organization of PE lessons was a process that the students believed PE teachers should take more seriously than many were perceived as doing:

They should think more about effort and pay attention to how or what you are trying to do, and remember that not all are alike, that everyone is different. And they have to remember that we are not professionals. (Mia, Nord school)

Participating in smaller groups was perceived to be a judicious response to the problem of marginalization, othering and alienation, not least because, "You feel you can contribute more, because you have to. There aren't many others present to contribute. Then you get to shine a little you[rself] as well" (Trine, Dal school). The significance of grouping within PE lessons extended to the perceived problems associated with mixed-sex lessons:

Teams are mixed [sex], but that leads to the good ones taking control, that they kind of pass the ball to each other and then you just stand there watching and try to make them pass the ball – but they don't bother to because they know that you will lose it any way (Else, Nord school)

The argument for dividing PE activities into smaller groups was made predominantly by the girls, and was related to the discomfort felt when observed by peers (especially boys) while performing: “They look at you, and you kind of feel that you must not mess things up” (Trine, Dal school). Thus, one form of grouping implicitly suggested by girls amounted to a ‘back to the future’ solution: namely, single- rather than mixed-sex grouping within PE lessons themselves (and team games, in particular) – rather than across PE as a whole – as an organizing principle:

It has happened a few times that, for example, he has divided into boys and girls, and then it has a tendency to get better. For, sorry guys [she looks at the boys in the mixed focus group], it's often they who are the worst ... So in many sports, it's much more fun to play [with] just the girls, I feel. (Trine, Dal school)

The issue of the organization of PE lessons and games in particular was also, by degrees, intertwined with the developing pattern of friendship and peer groups during secondary school years. In a manner similar to the ways in which students tended to view sport as inevitably discriminatory and alienating, some, like the girls from Øst school cited below, also spoke of the inevitability of friendship groups forming around sport and leisure-time sports clubs in particular, with all the ramifications of that for youngsters feeling that they were ‘in’ or ‘out’:

Vera: There are some who stick with the same friends during all three years, but I think most change who they hang with. And then you change a little yourself as well.

Toril: Change according to the persons you hang with too.

Kine: Those you are together with in your leisure. If you play handball, then you hang with those who play handball at school. It's as simple as that really.

Indeed, some group members spoke of a tendency for sporty groups (especially sporty boys) to bring their sports-based friendships with them from an earlier life-stage (elementary school):

With the boys at least. They were friends, through football, prior to school ... secondary school. Then they gathered. And the girls, since they were already friends with them [the boys], they joined them and then more and more just joined. (Solveig, Ås school)

DISCUSSION

This study focused upon youngsters' perceptions of being judged within PE. Two main features of students' perceptions emerged: being judged in relation to sporting competence and being judged with regard to physical appearance. In this discussion, we endeavour to establish the extent to which youngsters' experiences in PE can reasonably be described as 'othering'. We also explore how students' experiences of PE influenced various dimensions of their mental health, particularly in terms of self-esteem and self- and group-identities.

Being judged on the basis of sporting competence

Whether or not the sporty youngsters sought, as 'established' groups, to 'other' those less able than themselves – the sporting outsiders – this often appeared to occur almost by default, due to the nature of the activities that constituted the bulk of PE lessons: competitive games of one kind or another. Sport, by its very nature is a zero-sum activity. Competition involves winning and losing and for one to win another must lose. Thus, the less sporty or outsider groups were inevitably identifiable, to themselves as well as others, due to the nature of the activities. It was

clear that by the time the youngsters had reached the secondary school years they had come to recognize whether or not they possessed the requisite skills to be successful in sporting activities and whether, therefore, sport during PE was likely to give rise to potentially beneficial or damaging psychological experiences for them, particularly in relation to their emergent self-identities, self-esteem and social status.

The inherent tendency for sport to generate processes likely to lead to othering by default is likely, we suggest, to be exacerbated by the cultural significance of sport in Norway. Put another way, the likelihood of othering related to sporting competence not only occurring but having potentially significant ramifications for youngsters' sense of mental health, appears pronounced in countries where sport and physical activity (and sporting bodies) have strong cultural traction, such as Norway. In this regard, the findings underlined the observation that strong social norms have an "inherently double-edged character": in the very process of binding some people together, they turn those people against others (Van Krieken, 1998:113).

It was also apparent that some of those marginalized and, by degrees, alienated from sport through their PE experiences did, indeed, take the view that those good at sport – who possessed appropriately proportioned bodies – were viewed by their less sporty and attractive peers as displaying a tendency to persistently and repeatedly other them by treating them as outsiders, thereby stigmatizing them in word and deed. In this study, such examples of othering involved established groups (e.g. sporty students, those deemed physically attractive and fit students) co-constructing ideas about themselves and utilizing their established status to judge and include or exclude outsiders (see Elias and Scotson, 2008) or others.

Nevertheless, the findings in relation to sports performance and sporting identities do not straightforwardly, in our view, amount to othering – in the strong sense of one group deliberately and systematically marginalizing another group identifiable by particular and enduring characteristics. Rather, they seem to indicate the existence of what might be termed a weaker sense of othering – although the consequences may be similar in relation to youngsters’ mental health. Whether or not the established, sporty groups of students had intentionally sought to distance themselves from the others – portraying them as outsiders, different from those more established – in their own interests, as tends to be implied by the strong sense of the term othering, the findings suggested that it was far from straightforwardly the case that the outsiders – the less sporty ones – had internalized their supposed inferiority. Whether consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and unintentionally othered, the less sporty were evidently more-or-less inclined to internalize the negative characteristics attributed to them by the established sporty groups. We say, ‘more-or-less’ for two reasons. First, a number of the youngsters in the study appeared to have ‘a foot in each camp’: i.e. while not especially good at sport they were by no means unsporty and lacking in some sporting competence and physical fitness. Indeed, some youngsters appeared to experience both sides of the othering coin: othered outsiders during team games, for example, but on the inside as established players of lifestyle sports. Second, many of the less sporty, marginalized outsiders were clearly reflexive in making sense of their situations and somewhat resistant to the implications.

Futhermore, ‘blame gossip’ appeared to bind outsiders together. While members of the outsider, non-sporty groups experienced their treatment at the hands of some (but by no means all) of their peers and PE teachers as demeaning and, at times, damaging for aspects of their mental health (such as self-esteem and self-identities), they were often resistant to interpreting their sporting inferiority “as a sign of *human* inferiority” (Elias and Scotson, 1965: xxvi; emphasis

in the original). Indeed, some students' observations that their sporty peers might not 'mean it that way' serves to remind us that discussion of othering in sport has a tendency to overlook or, at least, under-play the intrinsically othering nature of sport and PE *per se* and, as a corollary, the unforeseen and unintended character of othering in the weak sense.

The composition of the focus groups – sporty and non-sporty, mostly single-sex – facilitated any predispositions within the groups to discursively consolidate their preferred views of themselves and others utilizing forms of 'praise' and 'blame gossip' (Elias and Scotson, 1965). It often appeared that girls – who were continually being reminded, through PE, of how unhappy they were with their physical appearance – particularly in relation to the ideal types being normalized among their peers and in the media – were, indeed, more likely to “incorporate the stigmatizing judgements of the established groups into their own personality structure” (Van Krieken, 1998:150).

Being judged on the basis of physical appearance

When it came to the gendered dimension of displays of sporting competence in PE and, in particular, bodily appearance, a strong sense of othering seemed more applicable. Although perceptions of physical appearance were clearly intertwined with generational and wider social norms regarding the stereotypical attributes of attractive and desirable bodies – especially (but not solely) in relation to females – sporty boys and girls were seen to represent the closest approximation to an ideal-type physical appearance. Thus, our findings lend support for Wiklund et al.'s (2017) claim that not only do “body and fitness ideals [remain] gendered” but that teenage girls continue to be confronted by “the paradox of shaping themselves as ‘strong and skinny’” (emphasis in the original). That said, othering is evidently multi-dimensional. In other words, it reflects what is often referred to as the “the intersectionality of various other and

othered identities” (Robinson, 2018). Thus, in our study, normative pressures relating to ideal-type feminine physical appearance was not felt so much, if at all, by sporty girls. Here, the findings appear to support Beltrán-Carrillo et al.’s (2018: 257) observation that “adolescents who are competent in sport are less influenced by ideal body discourses than by performative body discourses”.

Othering, PE and mental health

Students tended to refer to being judged by their peers in relation to two criteria: sporting competence and physical appearance. These two features were frequently viewed as determining whether someone ‘belonged’ in PE. For those youngsters on the ‘outside’ by virtue of their relative lack of sporting competence and/or physical condition, the threat to self-esteem and identity posed by their experiences of PE often seemed likely not only to undermine their mental health but also to countervail any mental health gains in the form of recreational, cathartic benefits.

CONCLUSION

The secondary school years have the potential to be a turbulent period of young people’s lives, not least in terms of becoming established within peer and friendship groups and developing stable self-images and self-identities. In cultures where sporting engagement and competence, and the emphasis upon physical condition and appearance, are front and central to group identities and social norms, processes such as school PE can take on heightened significance in the development of the aforementioned self-images and identities. In this study, 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, with all the consequences for mental health associated with being constantly judged and evaluated by peers

and teachers in a highly visible way. The process of othering (in both the weak and stronger senses) impacted upon youngsters' emerging individual and group identities – identities forged in social settings which tended to shape how they view themselves (e.g. in terms of being sporty and/or physically attractive) and, by extension, their self-esteem.

Whether through the effects of competitive games or other indirect, informal aspects of the process of doing PE, the extent to which the individual and group responses from the youngsters tended to be deeply-felt was striking. In short, they were expressions of not only the emotional nature of responses to PE but also the effects of PE on various dimensions of youngsters' mental health (via self-esteem, self- and group-identities, self-efficacy and so forth).

Highlighting processes of othering is important because these processes are not straightforwardly visible. In order to process negative experiences appropriately and preferably at an early stage, raising the awareness of teachers (and peers) of processes of othering within the dynamics of everyday lessons could be valuable. The nature of PE (as with the nature of sports) and the activities that take place in PE are neither good nor bad in themselves. Rather, it is the teaching and learning processes that have implications for young people's mental health. If the mental health of all youngsters is to be supported within PE then teaching and learning processes as well as the broader dynamics relating to classroom management require scrutiny. What emerges from our analysis is that it is *how* PE is organized and delivered that seems to matter and central to this is a focus on relations and power dynamics. Youngsters in this study offered a number of suggestions for how to change things, which would make processes of othering less likely: smaller groups which would keep everyone 'busy and happy', occasionally organized on the basis of gender, and opportunities to take part in activities that were more likely to neutralize existing differences in skills/competence. While, in principle at

least, friendship groups and PE teachers provided an important potential safety net for those among whom PE experiences threatened to undermine self-esteem, in reality the latter – the PE teachers – appeared more likely to augment, even exacerbate, the tendency for some youngsters to feel othered.

Thorjussen and Sisjord (2018: 694) have argued recently that “As western countries have become increasingly diverse education is often emphasized as one of the most important arenas for social integration.” Within education, PE is frequently proposed as a suitable setting and solution for dealing with health and, increasingly, mental health issues. Our findings suggest that PE may undoubtedly serve to generate positive feelings associated with physical activity and games and, in doing so, bolster some youngsters’ self-esteem and self-identities. On the other hand, however, for those less competent in sporting terms and whose bodily self-image is not particularly positive, the public nature of PE and the nature of the activities that constitute the subject can give rise to unplanned and unintended harm to some youngsters’ mental health – especially in countries, such as Norway, where sport is a significant aspect of the group habitus and collective ‘we-group’ (Elias and Scotson, 1965, 2008) identity. In short, *if* youngsters’ grow up in societies that place a great deal of store by sports participation, health-related exercise and physical appearance, *then*, PE has greater propensity to generate negative consequences for some youngsters’ mental health. The policy implications of this study are clear: games-dominated PE curricula are likely not only to lead to less sporty youngsters disengaging from PE, they run the risk of undermining these youngsters’ self-esteem and sense of mental health by othering them directly or indirectly.

Limitations to the study

Although our intention was to recruit a diverse sample of young people, we have no way of knowing if this was achieved in practice given our reliance on PE teachers to organize the focus groups with those who volunteered to participate (and gave their informed consent). In this regard the group is inevitable self-selecting. Nonetheless, young people were recruited from schools that were diverse in terms of location and the socio-demographics of the catchment area. Future work should endeavour to generate samples that include diversity, especially in relation to ethnicity, for example. While the focus groups generated rich data, the quality of discussion was – at least to some extent – a reflection of the dynamics between the young people and the extent to which they were willing and inclined to participate in the discussion. This varied across the focus groups: there were groups where some voices were more dominant than others, and in others young people noticeably challenged dominant voices. It is also the case that mental health is an issue that is sensitive and possibly difficult for young people to talk about, particularly in a public arena such as a focus group. Nonetheless, this appeared to the facilitator to be less of an issue, although individual interviews might have drawn out more detailed or specific accounts of personal experiences. These issues do, therefore, raise some questions about the authenticity of views expressed. However, the data generated was rich and detailed overall and the analysis illustrated continuity and difference in relation to key themes across the dataset giving some confidence to the emerging analysis. Finally, given the cultural context of Norway, the extent to which these findings can be theorized to other settings needs careful reflection. The mixed-sex environment and strong sporting culture are particularly pertinent in this regard.

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