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High School Students' Experiences of Being "Seen" by Their Physical Education Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the association between students' level of physical fitness and experiences of being "seen" by their physical education (PE) teachers, by interviewing 26 high school students (13 with low physical fitness, and 13 with high physical fitness). The analyses indicated that being "seen" in PE seems to be related to experienced opportunities for students to display their skills, teachers' caring behaviors, feedback from teachers, and the quality and tone of dialogue with teachers. The results showed that, whereas all 13 students with a high level of physical fitness experienced being "seen" by their PE teachers, only six students with a low level of physical fitness had the same experience. These findings suggest that PE teachers possess a limited narrative of their students with a low level of physical fitness. The results may also indicate the prevalence of a pedagogical approach, according to which teachers focus more on physically-fit students. Overall, teachers seem to play a key role in determining whether students experience being "seen". The results have important implications for both teacher education and PE education in schools.

Keywords: To be "seen"; physical fitness; high school; physical education teacher.

Introduction

One of the aims in physical education (PE) is to educate humans to become healthy and productive citizens, and the establishment of relationships and socialization processes is important in this aim. One concept that is closely related to this is that of being “seen”. Social confirmation and recognition are important for young people in school (Lyngstad, Bjerke & Lagestad, 2017). Confirmation from significant others satisfies fundamental social needs, and is important for general human development (Rosenberg, 1979). Despite its importance, there is a lack of extant research in this area in PE. However, concepts related to being “seen” have constituted research topics in the literature. In this paper, we will introduce the concept and discuss the similarities and distinctions with similar concepts.

The concept of being “seen” is often linked to the establishment of relationships and socialization processes. Being “seen” in PE can be described as experiences based on feelings that moves along a scale between being “seen” completely at the one end (social needs are covered entirely) and being ignored on the other end (where needs are not satisfied at all). The feeling moves between satisfaction of needs and a condition where needs are not satisfied depending on what is happening in the PE class (Lyngstad et al., 2017). Since school constitutes a critical social arena for youth (Cox & Williams, 2008), it is necessary to understand processes in school in depth, which may result in an experience of being “seen” for some students or not being “seen” for other students. This kind of knowledge is requisite, for example, to develop useful pedagogies in PE. In this study, the context is PE, and our goal is to elucidate factors related to students’ experiences of being “seen” by their teacher in PE.

Although there is a lack of research on students’ experience of being “seen”, a study by Lyngstad et al. (2017) showed that students might have a wide range of emotions in connection with being “seen” by their teachers in PE. In the study, feelings were classified into two categories. The first category comprised the positive experiences of being “seen”, and such aspects of learning promoted by positive feedback, respect, and trust. The second reflected the opposite experiences of not being “seen” at all or “seen” too much. In both cases, PE classes were experienced as demanding and in part challenging, albeit in different ways. Lyngstad et al. (2017) contributed to instantiating principles, which may be useful for providing students with a sense of being “seen”, good experiences, positive self-efficacy, and learning outcomes in PE. They suggest that it will be greatly beneficial to discuss the sense of being “seen” in the case of students who do not experience PE in a positive way.

An important facet of being “seen” concerns expectations from others. According to Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) and Hattie (2013), teachers possess different expectations of students in class. The nature of the expectations of a particular student’s success often leads to self-fulfilling prophecies, they claim. Students who favour physical education are often boys, who are also typically members of one or more sports clubs outside of school (Larson & Redelius, 2008). Activities in PE in Norwegian schools often comprise ball games and basic training (Moen, Westlie, Brattli, Bjørke, & Vaktkjold, 2015). Such activities require physical fitness, and will also most probably increase the cardiorespiratory fitness of the student. It can be argued that PE teachers hold higher expectations for students with high levels of physical fitness than for students with low levels of physical fitness. Since higher cardiorespiratory fitness is usually positively related to both student motivation (Gao et al., 2008) and student self-efficacy (Gao et al., 2013), the behavior of higher-fitness students may differ from students with low levels of physical fitness in PE. Consequently, if students with different levels of cardiorespiratory fitness are treated differently, they may also have varied experiences of being “seen” by their PE teachers.

It can be argued that the student’s experience of being “seen” in PE relates to the ethics of recognition (Ricoeur, 2005). The ethics of recognition is based on Hegel (1977), who theorized that the human spirit constitutes the product of mutual recognition. It was, however, the French philosopher Ricoeur (2005) who clarified the concept and the theory of recognition. The core notion is that recognition from others forms the basis for the development of human relations, identity, and self-esteem. Accordingly, recognition in the form of constructive and positive feedback from the teacher in PE may have an impact on students’ self-esteem, performance, or motivation to participate, study, and learn in PE (e.g., Foster, 2012; Hattie, 2012,13; Scott, Murray, Mertens, & Dustin, 1996). Moreover, from a different perspective, recognition may be related to empathy. Lyngstad et al. (2017) asserted that the teacher’s empathy shapes the construction of understanding students through the role that it plays in influencing the emergence of a perceived “consensual domain”. For example, understanding the difficulties that the students encounter from their point of view allows the teacher and the student to construct a “consensual domain” through the interaction process. This means changing the perspective from an external, objective view to an internal view of a student. In teaching, this is critical because it relates to the capacity to foresee students’ behaviour.

The Norwegian context

PE is taught at all levels in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school in Norway. The national curriculum for PE in Norway aims to inspire the joy of movement in and through many activities in PE classes. PE aims at the acquisition of skills in physical-motor activities in a broad sense, and not only in traditional sports. At the same time, PE should also provide positive self-understanding and bodily identity. Moreover, through participation in various activities in PE classes, pupils should be inspired to continue to sustain a physically active lifestyle throughout their lives. The development and practice of collaboration, socialization, and collective skills are also essential in PE classes (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2015).

The national curriculum in Norway contains built-in principles that provide guidance for teaching, assessment and communication with students, although it is not a prescription for specific methods of teaching. The curriculum is based on the principle that it is not reasonable to expect that all pupils, due to different pre-existing skills and skill levels, will achieve equally high skill levels and knowledge in PE. For example, physical fitness, as such, is not an important criterion for grading, according to this perspective. It is, therefore, a goal in the national curriculum that the student should be able to engage in activity and use training principles on the basis of her or his own bodily development and health. To facilitate achieving the goal of engaging in activity and training, it is essential to establish good communication with the students, as well as to solve any basic problems that could lead to withdrawing from or dropping out of PE. Good communication - including seeing the pupil - will provide guidance to develop methods of teaching that inspire participation rather than dropping out (Lyngstad et al., 2017).

According to Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), teachers may view students differently due to their own expectations of the students' physical fitness. Based on the above discussion the study comprises two research questions:

1. What constitutes students' experiences of being "seen" in PE, and how do they describe the experiences?
2. Do students with a low level of physical fitness experience being "seen" differently by their PE teachers than students with a high level of physical fitness, and if they do, what characterizes these differences?

Methods

Subjects

The study applies qualitative methodology, particularly phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches, in acquiring data analyses (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). VO_2 peak ($\text{ml}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}\cdot\text{kg}^{-1}$) was considered to be the best indicator of physical fitness (Åstrand, Rodahl, & Strømme, 2003). The subjects are 26 high school students at the end of their second year in the middle of Norway (age= 18 ± 0.5). The subjects were selected from 69 students who had completed measurements and a questionnaire as part of a larger research project, and had PE as a compulsory subject in the school. The 13 students with the lowest (six girls and seven boys) and highest (seven girls and six boys) oxygen uptake values were selected with a cut-off based on the Young–HUNT division (Nes, Østhus, Welde, Aspenes, & Wisløf, 2013). Students with low levels of physical fitness had significantly lower oxygen uptake values than adolescents with high levels of physical fitness among both girls and boys ($p < .001$). Students with high and low levels of physical fitness also differed greatly in their self-reported physical activity at a questionnaire. While students with a high level of physical fitness reported engaging in strenuous physical activity at school/leisure on most days of the week, students with a low level of physical fitness reported engaging in such strenuous physical activity less than once a week.

There were 13 PE teachers at the school, and since the selection of the students was related to absolute VO_2 peak level, the teachers randomly taught the 26 students in PE. The students had one PE teacher during each of the two school years in high school. In general, the students' reflections regarding being “seen” by their PE teacher were from their second year of high school, but some students also discussed their PE teacher in their first year of high school.

Procedures

The concept of being “seen” was considered as a student experience and was analysed from data collected through interviews with open, general questions in which the main focus was the students' experiences of PE and communication with their PE teachers. The questions were organized in a semi-structured interview protocol, which included the questions: “To what extent does the PE teacher ‘see you’?” and “How does the PE teacher ‘see you’?” The

questionnaire also included several questions about the students' experience of their mastery of PE skills (e.g. "Does your PE teacher acknowledge your skills in PE?"), feedback from the teacher (e.g. "Can you tell me about the feedback your PE teacher are giving you?"), relationships with the teacher (e.g. "How will you describe the perfect PE teacher?") i.e., questions that could indirectly shed light on whether the students were "seen"), and factors that could be important in being "seen". The interview was pretested on two students before the rest of the interviews were carried out. Each participant was interviewed once in an individual interview at a location chosen by the student. The duration of the interviews was between 45 and 60 min. Follow-up questions were asked in relation to the students' responses. These open-ended questions were reactions to their answers, in order to get more details and a more nuanced understanding of their experiences of being "seen". Examples of such questions was "you say your teacher see you a lot – can you please tell me in which way he does?" "Has it an impact on you?", or "you say that the teacher see you by caring about you, can you please tell me more about how s/he show you s/he cares"? The subjects were fully informed about the protocol prior to participating in the study, and written consent was obtained from all subjects. Approval to use the data and perform the study were granted by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed with QSR NVivo 10. The analyses were based on a case study approach that included all of the participants' answers on the questions collected during the interviews, in which students' experiences of being recognized or "seen" were taken as subjectively true (Armour & Griffiths, 2012). With such an approach, we did not ask the teachers about their experiences or perceptions. The data are based on subjective constructions, which students constructed as part of their own interpretations and reflections on what has occurred in PE at school. The analyses are based on transcribed answers focusing on meanings, as described by Johannessen, Tufte and Kristoffersen (2006). Opinions and statements are identified according to the theme of being "seen", then concentrated, condensed, coded and categorized in units of analysis, and then reconstructed within a theoretical framework (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this process, the students' statements are assigned codes that are classified into categories (Hastie & Glotova, 2012). The data are sorted based on these categories in order to elucidate patterns, similarities, relationships, or differences between the statements.

The analysis and the interpretation also followed hermeneutical principles, in that the interpretation process led to an increasingly deeper understanding of the statements in the interviews according to our comprehension of the whole and the parts, and to understandings that were free of contradictions or logical flaws (Kvale, 1983). The transcribed text was read several times. Reading the text led to the creation of categories from students' statements. First, all responses that referred to being "seen" by their PE teachers were marked and coded as belonging to the category to be "seen". Subsequently, all text that was coded "to be seen" was read through, and two subcategories, i.e., "seen" and "not seen", were created. Furthermore, all of the text labelled "seen" was read through in order to extract the categories that seemed to be related to the phenomenon of being "seen" by condensing the meaning of the statements. Several subcategories that dealt with how students were "seen" (e.g., through the experience of feedback from the teachers) were created. The same procedure was performed for the text coded "not seen". Various alternatives for interpretation and perspectives were discussed. This eventually contributed to intersubjective consensus in the analysis and strengthened the credibility of the findings. In the presentation of the results, students with a low level of physical fitness were given codes L1-L13, and those with a high level of physical fitness were given codes H1-H13. This naming strategy allows the reader to easily distinguish students with a low level of physical fitness from those with a high level of physical fitness.

Results

The analyses showed that, out of 26 students, 19 reported being "seen" by their teachers in PE, and seven students reported being "seen" to a limited degree or not being "seen" at all. All 13 students with a high level of physical fitness reported being "seen". This was also the case for six of the students with a low level of physical fitness. However, all seven students, who expressed being "seen" too little or not at all, had a low level of physical fitness.

The analyses revealed that four categories were related to the experiences of being "seen" by their teacher in PE. These categories were: (1) the opportunity for students to display their skills to teachers; (2) teachers' caring; (3) feedback from the teacher; and (4) the

quality and tone of dialogue with teachers. These findings are presented in more detail in the following subsections.

Opportunity to display one's skills

The analyses indicate that all students who experienced being “seen” had an experience of showing the teacher their skills in PE. A student (H4) stated that PE was fun because she was good at performing ball sports, and that she received feedback from the teacher that she was good at ball sports. For this reason, she was also asked by the teacher to help other students in the class in ball sports. A student (H5) also noted that, “*There are a lot of ball games and different things I have not tried before, in which I perform well.*” When H6 was asked about what it meant for him to be “seen” by the teacher, he replied, “*It really means quite a lot in a physical education context, at least.*” H3 expressed that he was “*seen from a positive view*” by his PE teacher because he possessed great physical skills. H2 also felt that he was “seen” by his PE teacher. When asked why he believed this to be so, he provided the following explanation:

Early in the school year, she already remembered my name. So, she obviously noticed me. She did not find it difficult to ask me if there is anything I can help with here. That is a sign that she obviously has seen me already from the first lessons. I think this is positive because I feel that we have something in common. You feel you are being seen and being appreciated – that you can help. I feel that she appreciates that I do my best and that I perform well because she has apparently noticed that, and it's important that she manages to see those who participate in physical education.

It is reasonable to assume that H2's high level of physical fitness was related to his teacher's behavior. Many of the students with a high level of physical fitness attributed their good marks in the subject to their physical fitness and effort. In addition, being awarded good marks in PE constituted one way of experiencing being “seen” by their PE teachers. However, having a high level of physical fitness does not seem to be a prerequisite for being “seen”. For example, a student with a low level of physical fitness (L3) stated that she was being bullied at school, but that the PE teacher “*saw her*” and had been “*very, very helpful*” to her. During the interview, L3 emphasized the importance of students being given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills in a variety of activities – not only ball sports and

running – in PE class for their teachers to see. L3 explained her thought process on the topic as follows:

Some students may perform very well in [the activity] and think it is great, whereas others may think it's horrible that they do not perform well in every activity. I think it is very good that he [the PE teacher] selects many activities so that everyone can feel mastery in PE. . . . I'm not particularly good in one specific sport, so I think it is better that I can get the opportunity to show my skills in different activities.

Whereas the display of good skills in ball sports and activities based on running by students with a high level of physical fitness predicts being “seen”, the display of poor skills in ball sports and a low level of physical conditioning among the group with a low level of physical fitness leads to an experience of not being given the opportunity to display their skills in PE. L7, a student who very clearly pointed out that she was not being “seen” by her teacher in PE, is a good example of a student in this situation. She observed, “*I end up on the sideline, because I am not good at this* [ball games in PE].” L7 then elaborated further, stating the following:

Even though I generally enjoy my classmates, it does not always work out well for me in physical education classes because I do not have the physical fitness they have. We are three [or] four students who don't play ball games in our leisure time, and we often seek each other out. We step aside, and you don't show your skills because you are afraid of making a fool of yourself and are afraid that someone in the class will use your foolishness against you. This strategy has had a negative impact on my physical education. There have been lessons when I know that today we will play soccer, and then I said that my knee was hurt and that I didn't want to participate because it [the experience of performing poorly in PE class] has simply been terrible.

Caring and attention

Of those students who experienced being “seen”, many reported that their PE teachers cared about them. In contrast, all seven students who had the opposite experience (not being “seen”)

reported that their PE teachers ignored them and did not give them any attention. The following statement by L2 exemplifies the importance of teachers' caring:

The physical education teacher asked me why I had been absent for a long time. He asked me if there was something that was bothering me, and since then, my relationship with the physical education teacher has been very good – after he contacted me, and we talked together.

According to L2, the PE teacher cared much about her, as shown by her following comment: *“You get the feeling that the teacher will be there. The teacher is there not only because he gets paid, but also because he wants to be with the students.”* L3 remarked that her PE teacher *“asks what he can do to help me to get better in physical education and achieve more. I come up with some suggestions, and then he tells me his suggestions. I feel this works very well.”* A major difference exists between teachers who care and those who do not – or in L3’s own words: *“Teachers who show you they will give you something, be there to help you, in contrast to teachers who just come to class, take attendance, and tell the students to organize activities themselves.”* According to L3, teachers who care make all the difference. L3 further explained this sentiment when recounting a conversation that she had with her PE teacher:

He said that I was good at some things, but he saw that I, maybe, gave up when I did not get it right the first time. He told me not to give up so easily in future PE lessons. I had to try until I got it right. . . . And to hear all the time that you’re good at something, but that you can get [even] better if you exercise more.

Simply recalling her PE teacher’s words of encouragement brought a huge smile to L3’s face. Another student, L6, echoed L3’s sentiment, stating, *“[Providing] information about what you need to do to improve yourself in physical education . . . it shows that the teacher is interested . . . that they actually care about how you do it.”* A PE teacher who cares can have a large positive influence on not only the single student, but also the entire learning environment, as evidenced by the following comment by L6:

The physical education teacher . . . is very good indeed. He is very clever to include everyone regardless of how you perform in physical education. Somehow, he motivates you to participate. Although you might not be good at soccer, you want to participate anyway.

As L6 astutely observed, a PE teacher who tries to include everyone can create an environment in which students feel that they are “seen”. When L6 was asked whether the PE teacher sees her, she answered “yes”, and then she elaborated her answer as follows:

He actually listens to and hears what we are saying. He hears and takes the time every time we

ask if we can talk with him alone. We can choose to talk about it all together, but if we don't want to, he takes the time to talk with you after the lesson if there are any further questions or something you did not think was okay. . . . He is very good at seeing everybody. He is kind of watching over us.

By contrast, seven of the students with a low level of physical fitness described a much different situation than the students who experienced being “seen” in relation to the teacher’s caring. They received very little attention from their PE teachers, which made them feel that they were not being “seen” by their PE teachers and that their PE teachers did not care much about them. This experience is exemplified in the following response by L8:

I enjoy physical education, but unfortunately it has not been very satisfactory for me during my high school years. Mostly because of the PE teacher, because the teacher has not followed-up with me, and she does not care about me. . . . She does not see me. No. She doesn't see what I do during the lessons when I do participate. She has just focused on the lessons when I am absent. My two years of PE in high school have been boring because I haven't got anything out of it.

L7 also felt neglected by her PE teacher. With a sad, resigned expression on her face, she told if it affected her:

Yes, clearly. . . . Primarily because we are being evaluated in relation to what we do, and when the teacher has no idea who you are. . . . The last semester, I had to ask the PE teacher why I got this mark because I had not been given any kind of feedback [before that]. Then, I felt that the teacher's answer was something he had just made up on the spot because he had no idea who I actually was.

The other five students with a low level of physical fitness – L11, L12, L10, L13, and L9 – also expressed that they were somewhat overlooked, and that their PE teachers did not care about them. L9 stated that he had experienced much better contact and dialogue with his PE teacher in secondary school, when he had the same teacher in several subjects. L10, L11, and L8 pointed out that their effort in PE lessons had been disregarded by their PE teachers, primarily because they had a lower level of physical fitness than other students.

Feedback

The quality of the feedback from PE teachers also seemed to influence whether students experienced being “seen”. Of those who were “seen”, most received a great deal

of feedback from their PE teachers, whereas those who were not “seen” felt that they received very little or no feedback. When H7 and H8 were asked whether they were “seen” by their PE teachers, both replied in the affirmative and noted that they received feedback from their PE teachers. When H7 was asked what this feedback meant to her, she answered, *“Well, I feel that something is good about the things I do. He gives me feedback and talks with me during the lessons. He doesn’t just say ‘hello’, and then tell us what to do.”* H2 remarked that his PE teacher gives him positive feedback, and that he is often asked to help the teacher in class. This makes him feel appreciated and that the teacher believes in him.

The students’ experiences of receiving much feedback from their PE teachers are in contrast to the narratives from the students who experience not being “seen”. The two students who reported most directly not being “seen”, L7 and L8, had similar responses when asked whether they received feedback from their PE teachers: *“Not really at all.”*, claimed L8, and L7 answered: *“I cannot remember that I have had feedback at all.”* Later in the interview, L7 elaborated more:

We get feedback at the end of each semester. You feel that the teacher’s feedback has nothing to do with you, that this feedback was just previously written down for someone else, something that the teacher has kept in his desk and applied to you because the teacher has to fulfil a feedback requirement.

In a follow-up question, L7 was asked whether feedback is something that she misses, to which she replied, *“Yes. It is important to know how you can improve yourself and to be given knowledge of what you do well or badly. . . . To know when you are doing something positive, that helps.”* L8 also responded very negatively about the lack of feedback from his teacher, stating, *“I think this is very bad, actually.”* When asked to what extent she received feedback, L13 answered, *“Actually, I have not gotten much feedback this year. No, when I think about it, I have not. That’s bad. No, I cannot remember that I’ve got much feedback on what I’ve done.”* Similarly, L11 and L9 reported that they received very little feedback.

Quality and tone in the dialogue

The quality of the tone from PE teachers also seemed to influence whether students experienced being “seen”. Those who described being “seen” by their PE teachers noted that the quality and tone of the dialogue between them and their PE teachers were good. However, descriptions of engaging in dialogue with a good tone with their PE teachers seemed to be absent from the interview responses of students who felt that they were not being “seen” by their PE teachers. H9 described her good tone with the PE teacher as follows:

We do have a pretty good relationship, me and my teacher. We like to joke around, right. I really feel I am being seen, yes. I do not know to what extent the other students feel they are seen, but I am being seen.

A good tone was also exemplified by a student (L6), who stated the following about the role of her PE teacher:

It's very important. It's a teacher I have only two hours a week, but I feel like I know the teacher. He judges you by what you do and not in relation to what others do. The fact that he pays attention to small things, like he noticed that the social environment in the class has changed, that there are groups who may not cooperate in teamwork. He notices things that you would not expect a teacher to notice. He gives you credit for effort and does not see only the negative, but helps you to see the positive about your activity.

The students' experiences of engaging in dialogue with “a nice tone” with their PE teachers are in contrast to the narratives from the students who experience not being “seen”. L8 stated that he would have been more motivated to participate in PE if his PE teacher had told him that he had done something well. Instead, L8 said, “*The only thing the teacher cares about is my absence from some lessons.*” L7 also lamented the lack of dialogue with a good tone between her and her PE teacher. Reflecting on the difference between PE in high school and middle school, L9 described the relationship with his PE teacher to be worse in high school due to the “inferior dialogue” between them. Similarly, L10 and L13 remarked that the tone of the dialogue between them and their PE teachers had not been particularly good.

Discussion

Categories that constitute the experience of being “seen” in PE

The analyses indicated that being “seen” in PE seems to be related to four categories related to students experiences, all of which concern recognition from others: (1) the opportunities for students to display their skills; (2) teachers’ caring behaviors; (3) feedback from teachers; and (4) the quality and tone of dialogue with the teachers. As highlighted in the introduction, recognition from others forms the basis for the development of human relations, identity, and self-esteem (Ricoeur, 2005), and such recognition from the teacher in PE has several benefits (e.g., Foster, 2012; Hattie, 2012,13; Scott, Murray, Mertens, & Dustin, 1996). By having been provided with care, feedback with a positive tone, and opportunities for displaying their skills, students seem to experience recognition from the teachers (e.g., Ricoeur 2005). These experiences are valuable in the processes of a growing young person to construct their identities in which the conceptions of one’s mind and body are in equilibrium. We assume that this kind of an identity is constructed in the myriad negotiations and interactions in the social networks of the school and other life contexts. Student experiences of recognition are interpreted from the categories of phenomena that we have suggested. What teachers say or do not say, how they comment or not comment, and what kind of feedback they give and in what tone is interpreted by a growing young person as recognition or lack of recognition. In the literature, feedback from teachers has also been proven to be important for learning (Hattie, 2013; Zeng, Leung, Liu, & Hipscher, 2009). Hattie (2013) found that feedback was the 10th most important factor for students’ achievement of the 138 variables in his meta-analysis. Nicaise, Bois, Fairclough, Amorose, and Cogérino (2007) found that when students feel that teachers give them feedback and spend time on them, the students’ feelings of competence, effort, joy, and skill increase.

Hattie (2013) pointed out that visible learning occurs when practice is directed deliberately toward increased competence, when feedback is provided and asked for, and when engaged, passionate, and active teachers and students participate in the learning process. Establishing good dialogue between teachers and students seems to be crucial in relation to visible learning, as described by Hattie (2013). The results of the present study indicate that students who experience being “seen” by their teachers seem to have dedicated, passionate, and active teachers who give students attention and facilitate a good dialogue. In

the statements of those students who experience not being “seen”, these characteristics seem to be absent.

The results of our study support the findings of Lyngstad et al. (2017), and also contribute to instantiating principles, which may be useful for providing students with a sense that they are being “seen”. We argue that it is critical to facilitate students to exhibit their skills in PE classes and to communicate with them with care and professional accuracy in order to help them experience recognition. We conclude by arguing that knowledge of these matters is essential for the development of professional competence among PE teachers in higher education. From a narrative perspective, it is critical that PE teacher education provides future teachers with an understanding and perspective of students as developing actors growing towards adulthood, in which there is a developing narrative of physical identity with a perspective for the rest of life.

Differences in being “seen” according to low and high physical fitness

Our results suggest that attention and feedback from teachers seem to be unequally distributed among students. The results indicate that having a high level of physical fitness almost guarantees being “seen” by PE teachers. Everyone with a high level of physical fitness interviewed for this study experienced being “seen” in PE, whereas only approximately half of those with a low level of physical fitness experienced being “seen”. It can be argued that the results support the assumption that PE teachers follow-up and treat students differently because they expect different skills and performances from them, as Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) and Hattie (2013) have highlighted. Hattie (2012) points out that the goal of teaching is to reduce the gap between students’ current performance and their desired or expected performance. Hattie (2012) further identifies an important link between the challenges that students face and the feedback that they receive. Essentially, the larger the students’ challenges are, the greater the likelihood is that the students need feedback. An important aspect of providing feedback is that it gives teachers opportunities to make sure that students are on track to face challenges and work successfully. In relation to students with different levels of physical fitness, we suggest that students with a low level of physical fitness should be prioritized in terms of receiving feedback. However, the results here indicate that the opposite occurs. Indeed, according to Hattie (2013), all teachers should hold expectations that all students can make progress and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to improve. Nevertheless, the results here indicate that this may not currently be the case.

Hattie (2013) claims that the teacher is of major importance, and our findings in the present study support this conclusion. The analyses in the present study indicate that the type of PE teacher is more important for students with a low level of physical fitness than for students with a high level of physical fitness. Hattie (2013) reported that, in classrooms in which teachers succeed, teaching and learning are visible in the engagement of both teachers and students. The present results reveal that this engagement seems to be missing among students with a low level of physical fitness who do not feel that they are being “seen” by their PE teachers. In contrast, students who feel that they are being “seen” report such engagement from their teachers and themselves. Hattie (2013) also emphasized that the contribution of teachers to students’ learning constitutes the ability to stimulate students’ efforts and to engage all students. The results here indicate that some teachers manage to do so, regardless of their students’ fitness levels. Although some PE teachers have succeeded very well with this strategy, the results also indicate that other PE teachers have failed.

In the introduction, we highlighted the pedagogy of recognition, which is connected to the idea of enhancing the development of identity (Foster, 2012). We argued that this identity is a narrative, constructed identity, created from the experiences of physical activities, teachers’ comments, and feedback. The results reveal that students with a low level of physical fitness have indirectly constructed a narrative according to which they are not willing to even try, because their bodily identity consists of a narrative that they are not good enough or cannot perform the required tasks correctly.

Limitations of the study

One limitation of this study is that it tells stories from the narratives of students, and not those of teachers. Accordingly, the students’ descriptions of the actions of their PE teachers may not accurately reflect what PE teachers actually do. However, it may be argued that the teachers’ actions concerning seeing students are of minor importance if the students themselves do not feel that they are being “seen” by their teachers. Another limitation is that we do not know which teachers taught each of the 26 students interviewed in this study, and cannot determine whether the students of a particular teacher have similar or different accounts of being “seen” (or not being “seen”) by this teacher. However, obtaining such knowledge was not the aim of the study. Furthermore, since the selection of the students was related to absolute VO₂ peak level, the PE teachers randomly taught the 13 students with low and high levels of physical fitness. To investigate the phenomenon of being “seen”, we proposed that PE teachers may have higher expectations for students with high levels of

physical fitness, due to better performances and seeing these students more. From a critical perspective, physical fitness is not necessarily linked to performance in PE, because technical and tactical skills are also integral. On the other hand, our findings support the importance of physical fitness according to the experience of being “seen” by PE teachers. Finally, due to the low number of respondents, it is necessary to be cautious in the generalizability of our conclusion.

Conclusion

Knowledge of which factors are included in the concept of being “seen” is of major importance in the teaching of future PE teachers. However, what is included in the concept of being “seen” and whether students with different levels of physical fitness have different experiences of being “seen”, does not seem to have been defined in the PE literature or other literature. The analyses indicate that being “seen” or not being “seen” depends on whether four factors are satisfied: (1) the opportunity for students to display their skills to teachers; (2) teachers’ demonstration of caring behaviors toward students; (3) the quality of feedback from teachers; and (4) the quality and tone of dialogue with teachers. The results indicate that while all 13 students with a high level of physical fitness experience being “seen” by their PE teachers, only six of the 13 students with a low level of physical fitness experience this. These results may indicate that the PE teachers’ narrative of the students with a low level of physical fitness is focused on these students’ low performance level and limited perspectives in developing their fitness.

The findings clearly indicate that PE teachers must be aware to which students they pay attention and to make an effort to bestow attention and provide feedback to, and engage in dialogue with, students, independent of their level of physical fitness. Finally, the findings demonstrate that PE teachers hold the keys to students’ experience of being “seen”. The study identifies the critical importance of PE teachers’ approach to teaching students. Indeed, it could be posited that factors that determine whether or not students feel that they are being “seen” in school may be relatively universal, and that teachers of other subjects can benefit greatly from these results. To confirm this, future studies should utilize interventions in different subject areas that include the four categories that have been shown to constitute the basis for the experience of being “seen” in this research.

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