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'Level the playing field’ – pupils’ experiences of inclusion and social justice in physical education and health

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ABSTRACT
School physical education and health (PEH) has an important role to play in the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of young people [Opstoel, K., Chapelle, L., Prins, F. J., De Meester, A., Haerens, L., van Tartwijk, J., & De Martelaer, K. (2020). Personal and social development in physical education and sports: A review study. European Physical Education Review, 26(4), 797–813] which, in turn, can enhance interpersonal relations and help build more socially cohesive and just societies [Benn, T., Dagkas, S., & Jawad, H. (2011). Embodied faith: Islam, religious freedom and educational practices in physical education. Sport, Education and Society, 16(1), 17–34; Smith, W., Philpot, R., Gerdin, G., Schenker, K., Linnér, S., Larsson, L., Mordal Moen, K., & Westlie, K. (2021). School HPE: Its mandate, responsibility and role in educating for social cohesion. Sport, Education and Society, 26(5), 500–513]. Unfortunately, research continues to highlight the inability of PEH to realize these important outcomes and the pervasiveness of practices that instead contribute to exclusion and inequality. The aim of this study was to add our understanding of school PEH practices by exploring pupils’ experiences of inclusion and social justice. Data were generated through a survey, observations, interviews and critical reflective texts. Participants in the study were pupils from three different upper-secondary schools (age 16–19) located in southern Sweden. The analysis of data involved a six-phase thematic analysis approach [Braun, B., & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners. Sage] informed by theories of critical and dialogical pedagogy [Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. Seabury]. The results are presented in relation to four central themes: (1) care and relationships, (2) pupil involvement, (3) use of modified and non-traditional activities and spaces; and (4) learning about and acting on social inequities. In order to promote more inclusive and socially just PEH practice, a [Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. Seabury] analysis of the pupils’ experiences draws attention to the importance of: establishing horizontal teacher–pupil relationships built on trust and love: engaging pupils in an ongoing dialogue where the pupils practice choice and decision-making with their peers; inviting the pupils into critically reflecting on issues of positionality and power and; pupils learning to act on social inequities. To conclude, the paper calls for future studies where teachers and pupils collaborate to develop PEH practices underpinned by inclusion and social justice.
Introduction

School physical education and health (PEH) has an important role to play in the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of young people (Opstoel et al., 2020) which, in turn, can enhance interpersonal relations and help build more socially cohesive and just societies (Benn et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2021). In Sweden, schooling along with sport are seen as important arenas that contribute not only to the physical well-being and health of the people, but also to the very fabric of Swedish society which is underpinned by the values of inclusion, equity and social justice (Gerdin & Schenker, 2021). However, after reviewing research on the educational and societal benefits of PEH and sport, Bailey et al. (2009) contest the claim that participation in PEH and sport automatically contribute to a more equitable and cohesive society. Dagkas (2018) similarly cautioned against the causal links that exist between PEH and sport and positive social outcomes. Instead, Smith et al. (2021) argue that it is the nature of these PEH and sporting experiences and whether teachers/coaches in their practice foreground social development, inclusion and equity that determine if there are positive individual and societal developmental outcomes. Unfortunately, research continues to highlight the inability of PEH to realize these important outcomes and the pervasiveness of practices that instead contribute to exclusion and inequality by putting pupils into either privileged or marginalized positions depending on their socio-cultural background (see e.g. Jansson et al., 2022; Svennberg & Högberg, 2018).

With this body of research as a backdrop, the overall aim of this study is to add our understanding of how school PEH practice can become more inclusive and socially just. The departure point of the study is the findings of a larger research project called ‘EDUHEALTH’ that demonstrated how teachers (can) teach for inclusion and social justice through building good relationships, teaching for social cohesion and by explicitly teaching about and acting on social inequities (Gerdin et al., 2021). As this project did not include the pupils’ perspectives and experiences of such pedagogical practices, the present study thus builds on this research gap by exploring the pupils’ experiences of inclusion and social justice in Swedish PEH. The study aims to address the following research questions: (i) What are pupils’ experiences of inclusion and social justice in PEH? and (ii) How may PEH practices contribute to greater inclusion and social justice for all pupils?

Swedish PEH curriculum and practices

According to the Swedish PEH curriculum, the school subject should contribute to a healthy lifestyle. Through positive experiences of movement and outdoor education (‘friluftsliv’), pupils should encounter a range of different activities in PEH (e.g. games, dance, swimming and orienteering). They should develop all-round movement competence as well as a belief in their own physical abilities. Pupils should also develop knowledge about how they can maintain good health throughout the lifespan. In the Swedish PEH curriculum, for years 1–9 (age 7–15), the aim of the subject and its role in education is described as:

Physical activities and a healthy lifestyle are fundamental to people’s well-being / … / Having skills and knowledge about sports and health is an asset for both the individual and society. (SNAE, 2011, p. 48)

Teaching in PEH for years 10–12 should, for instance, give pupils opportunities to develop the ‘ability to take an ethical stand on issues of gender patterns, gender equality and identity in relation to the performance of exercise and sport’ (SNAE, 2012, p. 2).

Despite these curriculum objectives in Sweden calling for teachers to address issues of inclusion, equity and social justice in their practice, research continues to draw attention to inequitable outcomes such as: achievement and higher grades in PEH often being linked to active participation in sport clubs (Modell & Gerdin, 2022), pupils who do not participate in organized sport in their leisure time experiencing feelings of anxiety and inability (Ekberg, 2021), and higher grades generally attained by boys with a Swedish background and who have well-educated parents (Svennberg &
Högberg, 2018). The most marginalized group currently in Swedish PEH is foreign-born girls (Jansson et al., 2022) although Högman et al. (2022) recently also drew attention to marginalization of rural pupils. Furthermore, the latest government report on PEH in Sweden (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2018) that includes voices from pupils in Year 7–9 (age 13–15) highlighted issues of exclusion and inequities when it comes to: not all pupils attending regularly; too much focus being on sports and ball games; competitive situations providing unequal conditions; situations of pupils feeling unsafe; girls and boys experiencing the subject differently; and reflective conversations about learning missing.

Based on these PEH curriculum objectives and recent studies in Sweden, the present study therefore sought to further explore pupils’ experiences of inclusion and social justice. In particular, the intent was to seek out positive experiences where pupils report on ‘good’ and enabling examples of inclusive and socially just teaching practices in PEH rather than providing yet more critique. The focus on pupil voice in this project is seen as particularly important since not only can it offer opportunities for young people to be actively involved in their learning but it can also help challenge the current status quo in PEH practice (MacPhail & O’Sullivan, 2010). In the next section, I therefore briefly outline previous work on advocacy and pedagogies of inclusion and social justice in PEH before presenting how the study has drawn on a Freirean theoretical framework to represent what the pupils perceived as teaching practices that foreground inclusion and social justice.

**Inclusion and social justice in PEH**

Whilst it is recognized that school PEH can for instance play a crucial role in enabling pupils to lay a foundation for healthy and active lifestyles (Morgan & Bourke, 2008), it is also acknowledged that the way PEH has been conceptualized and taught in schools is at times both exclusive and socially unjust as it does not always provide all pupils with equal opportunities to achieve these goals. Indeed, research continues to show that many current PEH practices privilege or marginalize certain pupils based on their gender, sexuality, bodies, ethnicity and religion (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Landi, 2018; Walseth, 2015) and that many PEH teachers are unable or unwilling to address such social justice issues within their classrooms (Sirna et al., 2010). For instance, my own previous research (see e.g. Gerdin & Larsson, 2018; Gerdin & Pringle, 2017) that deals with gendered social justice issues has shown that boys’ experiences of PEH are often based on narrow images of (hyper) masculinity, (hetero) sexuality, bodies, sports and health. The (re) production of these norms also often happens at the expense of other boys (and girls) leading to further exclusion and inequities. Stride et al. (2022) recently concluded that gendered power is alive and kicking and called for a democratic pedagogy that values girls’ voices and recognizes them as co-collaborators in curriculum design. Going beyond prevailing notions of heterosexuality and gender binaries, experiences of exclusion and marginalization are also particularly felt by queer, non-binary and transgender students in PEH (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Landi, 2018).

Much of this research (including my own) has focused on critiquing practice for (re)producing exclusion and marginalization of pupils with considerably fewer studies drawing attention to ‘good examples’ of PEH practices, particularly when it comes to issues of inclusion, equity and social justice.

One exception was Fitzpatrick’s (2013) seminal critical ethnography of Dan, a teacher at a high school in New Zealand who was ‘passionate about critical pedagogy’ (p. 80). Fitzpatrick (2013) argued that Dan’s ‘classes provided a rare example of critical pedagogy in practice’ (p. 99) and included pedagogies such as ‘building the environment, deconstructing power, playfulness, studying critical topics, and embodying criticality’ (pp. 193–206). However, it should be noted that the pupils’ responses to these practices were varied leading Dan the teacher to questioning what impact his approach was having (Fitzpatrick, 2013).

In another example, Oliver and Kirk (2015) suggested the development of a pedagogical model for working with girls in PEH as a way of breaking the reproduction cycle and improving the current
situation for girls in PEH. Based on their activists’ research approach involving girls as co-researchers they identified four critical elements that they believe need to be present in order to assist girls to identify, name and negotiate barriers to their engagements with PEH and participation in physically active lifestyles: student-centred pedagogy; critical study of embodiment; inquiry-based physical education centred-in-action, and listening and responding to girls over time (Oliver & Kirk, 2015). Enright and O’Sullivan (2010) similarly drew on a participatory action research to involve students as researchers and designers of PEH curriculum and found that participatory approaches to research and curriculum-making can serve to promote students’ meaningful engagement in the critique and the reimagining of their PE and physical activity experiences. They concluded that ‘The girls in this study were ... empowered by a learning environment that recognized their capacities as competent social agents’ (p. 219). Both Oliver and Kirk’s (2015) and Enright and O’Sullivan’s (2010) studies draw attention to the importance of involving the students in designing and negotiating PEH content and practices as a way of promoting greater inclusion, equity and social justice in the classroom.

Lynch and Curtner-Smith (2019) further reported on the practice of a teacher in an elementary school in the US and drew attention to five transformative pedagogies: (1) creating communities of learners through restorative practice principles; (2) building on what pupils bring to school with them for a democratic curriculum; (3) teaching skills, bridging gaps and the affective component; (4), working with communities in-between social justice illiteracy and (5) utilizing diverse forms of assessment. In an Australian context, a case study by Alfrey and O’Connor (2020) reported on how a large PEH department in Australia worked alongside a group of researchers to transform their secondary PEH to align with the critical intentions of the Australian PEH curriculum. These transformed practices cohered around: (1) questioning and critical dialogue as a focus in every lesson; (2) student choice related to assessment; and (3) opportunity for critical reflection and creative thought and movement. The authors acknowledged the challenge of transforming practice but they concluded that the transformation was facilitated by providing teachers with the time and space to engage in repeated action and reflection which ‘continues to be transformative of their identities and philosophies as HPE teachers’ (Alfrey & O’Connor, 2020, p. 299). The studies by Lynch and Curtner-Smith (2019) and Alfrey and O’Connor (2020) thus advocate for transformative practices as a way of achieving more inclusive, equitable and socially just outcomes in PEH but also highlight how these desirable outcomes are dependent on the teacher’s disposition and ability to engage in such practices.

Notwithstanding the importance of these research findings, there still exists a relative paucity of studies that focuses on the pupils’ perspectives of these issues. Indeed, much of the previous studies as indicated above have focused on teachers’ practices for inclusion and social justice but not included the pupils’ experiences and responses to such practices. For a long time, educational researchers positioned pupils as objects and conducted research on instead of with pupils which failed to recognize both pupils’ subjectivities and agency (MacPhail & O’Sullivan, 2010). In conducting this study, I agree with Quennerstedt’s claim (2019) that pupils should not be positioned as ‘not-yets’, or as ‘in-need’, and that their views, needs and perspectives should not be constrained or neglected, but instead are necessary to inform our thinking and understanding of inclusion and social justice in PEH. Taking this position on the importance of involving the pupils themselves in transforming PEH practices led me to utilizing the work of Paulo Freire. Indeed, one of Freire’s key arguments is that any critical or social justice pedagogy needs to be produced with, and not simply for, pupils (Freire, 1970).

Theoretical framework

At this juncture of the paper, I first find it important to discuss my understanding of inclusion, equity and social justice as related to PEH practice. Inclusion can be seen as ensuring that all pupils regardless of their ability and background have equal opportunities to participate in PEH whereas equity means focusing also on how all pupils have the same chance to succeed through, for instance,
the unequal distribution of help and resources (Evans & Davies, 2017). So while pedagogies for inclusion and equity might focus on building an inclusive class environment through promoting responsible behaviour, respect for others, cooperation and fair play and providing an extra level of support for some pupils, they do not necessarily address issues of power inequities and marginalization at the level of societal inequities. It can be argued that such pedagogies have long existed in school and PEH programmes of many Western societies, without having or intending to have any impact on structural equity and social justice (Evans & Davies, 2017). Social justice pedagogies, however, are transformative in their intent and nature, since they seek to address inequity and social justice issues that impact at a more structural level (Philpot et al., 2021). A focus on social justice in PEH practice is therefore not only about the inclusion of all pupils and providing more equitable outcomes by acting on the inequalities that students bring to the classroom, but also about challenging and ultimately transforming the practices that make these inequalities matter. However, I would also like to stress that striving for social justice in PEH needs to be scaffolded through PEH practice where a focus on, for instance, inclusion through pedagogies of care, empathy and understanding are important first steps towards social justice as also highlighted in Freire’s critical and dialogical pedagogy below.

Goals for increased inclusion, equity and social justice in and through schooling are thus about making visible, managing and transforming structural social inequalities (Giroux, 2001). Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire, one of the founders of critical and dialogical pedagogy (Giroux, 2001), believed that the teacher’s role is to stimulate and encourage pupils to question and challenge existing social injustices. Freire (1970) was opposed to the model of ‘banking’ education which he argued aimed to reproduce existing power relations. In his view, the banking education model represents nothing more than a depositing of information between ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ which then, acts as a platform to reproduce hierarchical structures of domination. In addition, this model constrains both curiosity and critical awareness, as learners conform to the apparently ‘natural’ discourses of society (Freire, 1970). Freire’s ontology instead aims to prepare pupils for freedom, not for submission (Giroux, 2001). An important part of educating for freedom involves preparing pupils to become autonomous citizens who have the right to plan and decide their lives by themselves, and that decision-making can only be learnt in the process of deciding (Freire, 1998). Therefore, teachers need to ensure that pupils practice choice and decision-making with their peers. Dialogue and problem-posing are central to Freire’s critical pedagogy since it allows teacher and pupils to come to both shared and new understandings about their places in the world and the possibilities for transforming society. For Freire, dialogue is not simply about people’s lived experiences. It aims to enrich the relationship between teachers and pupils, where the one who teaches learns while teaching, and the ones who learn teach whilst learning (Freire, 1998). Furthermore, the use of dialogue to develop a critical consciousness automatically enables participants to reflect upon their lived experience (Freire, 1998). The goal is to achieve what Freire called conscientização that involved ‘learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality’ (Freire, 1970, p. 35). Although Freire drew on the experiences of employers-workers in rural areas of Brazil, one could argue that in PEH some pupils continue to be oppressed and marginalized by the enactment of PEH practices associated with dominant discourses (e.g. sport, healthism, Whiteness, ableism), From a Freirean perspective, the PEH curriculum and teacher should therefore help pupils become critically aware of, question and transform such practices.

Freire (1970) suggested that the first step to achieve conscientização was for teachers and pupils to establish a respectful relationship. Teachers need to recognize the knowledge pupils bring to the school so that teachers and pupils together can co-construct learning based on both the curriculum and the knowledge that comes from pupils’ lived experiences. Freire’s dialogical approach is further based on trust between teachers and pupils, which, in turn needs to be underpinned by love, humility and faith (Freire, 1970). Horizontal pedagogical relationships in turn enable pupils to empower themselves through dialogue to ensure that ideas are presented in the form of guidance, rather than
instilled, and to co-create learning (Giroux, 2001). Freire (1970) further argues that through dialogue built on horizontal relationships, the practice of ‘problem-posing’ is enabled. This learning approach aims to generate knowledge and understanding about power in society and how this shapes structural social inequities. According to Freire, through ‘problem-posing’ learners empower themselves to become critical co-investigators in knowledge creation rather than passive, docile learners (Freire, 1970), which enables them to (co-)construct a new understanding of the world from which they can act upon it. Problem-posing education moves from the hierarchical patterns characteristic of ‘banking’ education to learning through dialogue between students and teacher. In this joint learning process, the teacher and student co-investigate and learn together in acts of cognition, where both the teacher and the student consider and reconsider their understandings (Freire, 1970). For Freire, critical reflection is inextricably linked with critical action – a dynamic termed praxis (Freire, 1970). Freire’s notion of praxis is the intentional process of reflection and action that is directed towards the structures of society to be transformed. Importantly, reflection and action must occur simultaneously to have transformative effect (Freire, 1970).

Freire’s critical and dialogical pedagogy offers a suitable theoretical framework for exploring pedagogical practices that foreground inclusion, equity and social justice in the school PEH context. It emphasizes that pupils have the agency to critically reflect on and ultimately transform oppressive practices (Freire, 1998). While research that advocates for, and give examples of, teacher’s enactments of social justice pedagogies has grown over the years (see e.g. Landi et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2022), there is a paucity of research that explores pupils’ experiences of such practices. This paper addresses this research gap and employs a Freirean lens to interpret pupil’s experience of more inclusive and socially just teaching practices in PEH.

**Methodology**

In order to explore pupils’ experiences of inclusion and social justice in PEH data were generated through a survey, observations, interviews and critical reflective texts. Participants in the study were pupils from three different upper-secondary schools (aged 16–19) located in southern Sweden. The selection of these schools was based on both convenience and purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016). The three schools were chosen since they were located in cities of different sizes (small, medium and large) but also based on the researcher’s previous relationship with some of the PEH teachers at these schools. All three schools are located in areas of mixed socio-economic status where the pupils come from low to high-income earning families. In addition, the three schools have in recent decades become increasingly multicultural mostly due to the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. In some ways, these schools and teachers were selected as ‘good examples’ of foregrounding inclusion and social justice in PEH practice with, for instance, some of the participant’s teachers having recently completed their teaching education training at the author’s university. The purposive sampling further involved selecting three different PEH classes at all three schools with each class representing a variation in terms of the study programme the pupils were undertaking (e.g. vocational training, preparing for higher education studies, sport’s profile). This variation was deemed as important in ensuring a wide range of experiences and attitudes towards the PEH subject.

Since no personal or sensitive data were collected and all participants were 15 and older the study was considered as low-risk and given ethical approval by a regional ethical committee (DNR: EPK 774–2021). Before the study commenced the pupils were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary, that their anonymity and confidentiality would be guaranteed and that the data collected would only be used for research purposes. All pupils signed consent forms and any names referred to in this paper are pseudonyms.

The first phase of the study involved distributing a survey to all of the participating pupils (in total 154) that was used to get an overview of the pupils’ previous experiences of PEH and their involvement in physical activity and sport beyond school. The survey also included questions about what
they believe is the purpose of PEH, if PEH teaching and assessment practices are inclusive and equitable, and what they think should be done to make PEH more inclusive and socially just.

The next phases of the data collection were then based on the critical incident technique (CIT) methodology (Tripp, 2012). ‘Critical incidents’ in the context of this study focused on PEH practices that foregrounded issues of inclusion and social justice (c.f. Philpot et al., 2021).

The CIT classroom observations that were all conducted by the author focused on identifying critical incidents (e.g. teaching behaviours, strategies, decisions and artefacts) that appeared to be addressing issues of social justice based on an observational template generated from previous research on teaching for social justice (c.f. Philpot et al., 2021). Importantly, the scope of the observations endeavoured to move from broad concepts of quality PEH teaching to focusing on critical teaching incidents that aimed to help students identify, challenge and transform existing unequal power relations. Although the observational template helped guide the observation, the template focuses on rich descriptions of practice rather than having observations being overly dictated by observational categories (Tripp, 2012). Prompts for the observations for instance included recording: ‘Description of pupil interaction and behaviour’, ‘Critical incident linked to inclusion and equity’ and ‘Addressing social justice’. In total 45 PEH lessons were observed over the course of six months from June to December 2022.

The interviews were semi-structured (Bryman, 2016) and also guided by principles of CIT methodology (Tripp, 2012) as well as stimulated-recall interviews (Lyle, 2003). To interrogate the pupils’ experiences of the critical incidents identified during the observations individual interviews were also conducted using an interview guide which involved a combination of open-ended questions designed to enable the pupils to suggest incidents for inclusion and social justice and specific questions designed to afford the pupils an opportunity to explicate their experiences of inclusive and socially just PEH practice. This also included asking the pupils how PEH can/needs to change to become more inclusive and socially just for everyone. In total 25 interviews were carried out and ranged in duration from 20 to 45 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author.

The critical reflective texts consisted of an open-ended, written questionnaire that was designed to encourage pupils to reflect on their experiences of inclusion (exclusion) and (in) equality during PEH lessons. The reflective texts were used to explore critical incidents that pupils perceived as significant in their PEH lessons and to examine their perceptions of inclusion and socially just teaching methods. Some of the prompts included: ‘In today’s lesson in physical education and health, I felt that I and/or others in the class were included because …’, ‘Describe an important event from today’s lesson that you believe demonstrates that physical education and health is an inclusive and equitable subject’ and ‘Based on your experiences of physical education and health so far suggest how this subject can become more inclusive and equitable’. Critical reflective texts were collected from the nine different PEH classes at three stages of the study (in total 325). The responses from these reflective texts along with what was recorded from the CIT observations also informed the interviews conducted with the pupils.

In order to analyse the data generated from the survey, observations, interviews and reflective texts, a six-phase thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013) consisting of familiarization with the data, initial and advanced coding, identifying and naming themes and reporting findings was used to seek out central themes that were important to the research questions. In practice this meant reading, sorting and coding the data in terms of identifying examples of practices seen to promote inclusion and social justice in the PEH classroom. Initial coding as associated with, for instance, ‘care’, ‘trust’, ‘empathy’, ‘building teacher–pupil relationship’, building pupil–pupil relationships’ was turned into one of the key themes of the study – ‘care and relationships’. Other coding similarly led to an additional three themes being generated from the data: ‘pupil involvement’, ‘use of modified and non-traditional activities and spaces’ and ‘learning about and acting on social inequities’. The analysis further drew on theories of critical and dialogical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) to explore how the themes identified in the thematic analysis could be understood as representations of teaching practices for greater inclusion, equity and social justice in PEH.
Results and discussion

In the following section, the results are presented and discussed in relation to four central themes: (1) care and relationships, (2) pupil involvement, (3) use of modified and non-traditional activities and spaces; and (4) learning about and acting on social inequities.

Before presenting these results, it is worth pointing out that the lessons observed and reported on were not explicitly conceptualized by the teachers as enacting social justice pedagogies (c.f. Philpot, 2023). Rather these practices can be seen to have emerged as a result of the teachers having recently completed their PEH teacher education training in a programme with a strong social justice focus and that the schools where these teachers work have for many years been involved in PEH teacher education placements and professional development. As such, it could be argued that these ‘good examples’ of PEH practices account for here are not representative of practices elsewhere. Yet, they do provide insights into pupils’ engagement with and responses to pedagogies that foreground inclusion and social justice that has implications for future PEH research and practice.

'Someone who you can come and talk to’ – care and relationships

The first theme in the pupil data on their perceptions of social justice pedagogies is related to caring teaching and building relationships. Indeed, in his focus on conscientization as a process and a goal, Freire (1970) emphasized the need for teacher–pupil relationships that are based on love and humility. Many of the pupils, when they highlight their positive experiences of their PEH classes they talk about PEH as a space where the PEH teachers as significant adults working in the school seem to genuinely care about them and want to know more about them not only as pupils but also as people outside of school. One of the pupils, for instance, said that the PEH teacher ‘is someone who you can come and talk to when something’s not right, either at home, with your friends, or even at school in other classes’ (Jonas). Another pupil said:

Yeah our teacher is just amazing. You know, when you come to school one day and the first thing in the morning you have is PEH and you’re really down because you’re not feeling that great you can always go and talk to him. He always takes time to talk to you about things that matter to you. (Gabriel)

One of the participant girls further accounted for how her PEH teacher helped her get through some ‘really tough times’ when her older brother was getting ‘into all sorts of trouble’ (Clara). These findings echo those of Fitzpatrick (2013) who found that the critical pedagogue in her study (Dan) spent a great deal of time on building the environment in all of his classes based on a deeply humanist approach to teaching (hooks, 2010) that included getting to know his pupils and their hopes, dreams, talents and families (Fitzpatrick & Russell, 2015).

Another common theme in the survey that the pupils completed before the interviews took place is that there is something about the bodily interactions in PEH and being close to other pupils both physically and emotionally that helps with building relationships in the class and creating a sense of belonging. One of the pupils wrote in the survey that:

Yeah it is really in PEH you get to know each other and your teacher and he gets to know you. You know because you do a lot of physical stuff together. (Mats)

The building of relationships between the teacher and pupils also involved physical touch:

Our teacher quite often gives us hugs or touches us when demonstrating an activity like dance or when helping us with improving our technique like when doing gymnastics … I feel like it means that they care about us. It is quite different from other subjects in that way. You know it feels like you have more of a physical bond in PEH. (Emma)

Although physical touch is often seen as risky in contemporary PEH practice (Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2017), it can also be used as pedagogical tool to show the pupils empathy and care (Andersson et al., 2018; Mordal Moen et al., 2020). In one of the focus groups another pupil said:
It feels like PEH helps you feel a bit more at home at school if you know what I mean. Like you are not alone and part of a group. (Emily)

It seems from an inclusion and equity point of view that the nature of PEH and the opportunities for interaction and socializing that this subject offers are important to the pupils. One of the pupils commented on how ‘it is great in PEH that there is time to really talk to each other … before, during and after the lesson’ (Lucas).

In terms of observing some of these lessons, the teachers come well ahead of the lessons and while preparing the lessons taking their time to talk to their pupils.

The teaching of PEH begins with building good relationships between both pupil and teacher before any content/learning objectives are introduced. The teacher seems to show genuine concern that all pupils participate in the lesson by adapting the lesson to the collective and individual conditions of the specific class and, for example, does not allow certain pupils to do something else if they didn’t bring their PEH gear like going for a walk (a common practice in Swedish PEH). (Logbook entry, 2022-06-02)

The observation data further demonstrates how the teacher teaches the class/group as a whole and works with the class being a ‘team’ but at the same time finds time to help individual pupils ‘a little extra’ by giving them support, extra teaching and providing resources needed for everyone to be able to participate on equal terms. By creating an inclusive, safe and supportive environment, the teachers have the opportunity to engage with the pupils on a personal level, building horizontal relationships with them that are underpinned by mutual trust and respect (Freire, 1970).

‘We know what are learning and why’ – pupil involvement

A second theme about pupil involvement first revolves around the purpose and learning objectives of a lesson being clearly formulated and followed up during the lesson and/or lesson series. As pointed out by Redelius et al. (2015), many pupils do not understand what they are supposed to learn in PEH. However, if the goals are well articulated by teachers, the pupils are more likely to both understand and be aware of the learning outcomes and what to learn in PEH (Redelius et al., 2015). In the context of PEH, being clear about the aim and purpose of the lessons involves moving from a focus on the activity (what the class is doing) to a focus on what the class is learning. The participants talked about the importance of knowing the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ they learn things and secondly, that they are actually given time to learn and practice in PEH. One of the pupils stated:

Our teacher really takes time explaining why we are doing things in PEH … he kind of breaks it down into step by step instructions … he also helps understand how what we do in the lessons is part of the curriculum and how we will be assessed on it. You know so that we know what are learning and why. (Thomas)

Another pupil claimed that:

At my old school we didn’t really learn anything … no time, just doing, but this teacher gives us time and talks about how we can learn … like how to be stronger or have better stamina … you know he explains stuff and then gives us time to practice. (Sophia)

As previously found (see e.g. Modell & Gerdin, 2022; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018) pupils often perceive that they do not learn anything in PEH and that little time is spent on understanding and discussing what is (to be) learnt in PEH. Conversely, when talking to these pupils and observing some of their PEH lessons, the teachers were, for instance, seen using learning statements from the curriculum to link with specific lesson objectives and providing the pupils with a rubric of what and how the assessment of their learning would be determined. However, being clear about the aims and communicating these to the pupils is only the first step towards more inclusive and socially just practices in PEH. Going one step further means also involving the pupils in making decisions about content and assessment. As one of the pupils explained:

Louise: Yeah so this term our teacher has been letting us plan what activities that we want to do based on what the curriculum says. Like he gives us some of the knowledge requirements we are meant to achieve and then
tells us ‘Now you need to plan what activities these lessons should include for you to achieve these require-
ments’. We then work in groups to come up with these activities and also how are going to assess each
other. So we kind of have to come up with our own criteria for assessing each other. He (the teacher) of
course gives us some feedback on both the activities we plan and how we are going to assess it.

Göran: So, what you do think about this?

Louise: I think it is great. I mean everyone really gets involved and much more engaged in the lesson compared
to when we do normal lessons, I mean when he (the teacher) decides everything.

Freire (1970) argued that banking concepts of education could contribute to young people’s alien-
ation and disengagement since learning becomes an act of depositing, in which the pupils are the
‘depositories’ and the teacher is the ‘depositor’. Instead, Freire calls for a learning that is co-created and re-invented, through a process of inquiry in which teachers invite their pupils to be co-investi-
gators of knowledge learning in dialogue with them; as such they become ‘jointly responsible for a
process in which all grow’ (Freire, 1970, p. 80). Indeed, democratic classrooms where teachers and
pupils are equal partners and co-investigators as a community of learners (Freire, 1970) can be
seen as another important feature of enacting pedagogies of inclusion and social justice in PEH.

In this study, the involvement of the pupils also importantly included a focus on more holistic and
subjective perspectives on health as opposed to the teacher trying to make the pupils healthy
(Quennerstedt, 2019). At one school the pupils were tasked with doing a ‘health project’ which
involved them planning and reflecting on activities that promote or detract from their health.
Rather than simply planning, carrying out and evaluating activities that promote physical health
the pupils were asked to also consider how these articulate with their mental and social health.
This importantly involved planning activities and ‘actions’ that would promote other people’s
mental and social health such as inviting someone ‘new’ or ‘excluded’ to participate in an activity
or helping someone else develop their skill/ability in a particular activity. This is what Martin
wrote in his reflective text:

One of the best things we have done in PEH is this health project thing. This is the first time I have really had to
think about what makes me feel healthy but I mean not only physically but also mentally and socially. I didn’t
really know what the teacher meant by mental and social health at first but because of this health project I am
now able to think about it differently rather than just doing things in PEH to be healthy. (Martin)

According to Freire (1970, p. 95), ‘revolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring
them a message of ‘salvation’, but in order to come to know through dialogue with them’. Martin’s reflective text provides an example of how pedagogies of inclusion and social justice
involves facilitating a dialogue between teachers and pupils; a dialogue where dominant under-
standings and practices can be critically reflected on and even resisted or transformed in order to
become productive and meaningful for the pupils in their own lives.

‘Level the playing field’ – the use of modified and non-traditional activities and spaces

The third and perhaps strongest theme in the data is that pedagogies of inclusion and social justice
for the participants in this study involve using modified and ‘non-traditional’ activities and spaces. A
wealth of research has over the years drawn attention to how PEH practices are shaped by dominant
discourses associated with, for instance, sport, health, masculinity, sexuality and ethnicity (e.g.
Gerdin & Pringle, 2017; Stride et al., 2022) that (re)produce exclusion and inequities. In Sweden,
the prevalence of ball games and fitness training has been particularly critiqued for privileging limit-
ing (gendered) notions of physical activity and health when it comes to what constitutes knowledge
and ability in PEH (e.g. Ekberg, 2021; Larsson & Karlefors, 2015). However, in one of the interviews in
this study, Marcus said:

Yeah it is great how we don’t play ball games all the time or do a lot of running around the track instead we do a
lot of problem-solving and cooperation activities that everyone seem to like. (Marcus)
This approach to the teaching of HPE can be similar to what Fitzpatrick and Russell (2015) highlighted and is, as they argued, another important strategy for further building relationships through pupils building trust, care and respect for each other. Using modified versions of traditional games, sports and physical activities that help ‘level the playing field’ (Jonas) is another pedagogy that pupils perceive promotes inclusion and more equitable outcomes in the classroom.

Doing PEH in other spaces like when having outdoor education (‘friluftsliv’) also seems to offer more inclusive and diverse learning experiences. Indeed, previous studies have shown how it is not only certain PEH content and practices that are imbued by dominant discourses that (re)produce exclusion and inequities but also the spaces of PEH (e.g. Gerdin, 2016; Vertinsky, 2004). That is, the spaces of HPE are not mere settings or backdrops where lessons take place, but they also shape the pupil’s experiences since spaces embody specific values, beliefs and traditions (Fitzpatrick, 2013).

Notions of what constitutes PEH is, for instance, materialized by the design and provision of PEH spaces as ‘sporting places’ (Kirk, 2010). One pupil (Lars) explained why he liked being outside better than being in the gym:

Well yeah being away from the gym and not being stuck inside those four walls … but instead you are outside doing things … everything is different then … more about enjoying yourself and being together, … not focus on winning and stuff. (Lars)

While another pupil talked about why she liked ‘friluftsliv’:

I love doing friluftsliv … not about winning and being on display … being together and feeling good. (Emma)

The use of non-traditional activities and spaces appear to some extent have been facilitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of online teaching (this study was conducted both during and after the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2022). Although many studies have pointed out the limitations and problems with online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Varea & González-Calvo, 2021) some pupils in this study talked about the positive aspects of online teaching where either they themselves or other pupils were more engaged and participating in these online lessons than before. They believed that this is because they could participate in the lesson at/from their ‘own places’ and that the teachers seemed to be more clear about the purpose and learning objectives of these online lessons compared to regular lessons in the gymnasium or on the sports field. Oskar thought that:

Doing the learning in your own time and in your own space is much better. Maybe not all the time but sometimes it is really nice because when you are doing PEH at home you get more freedom to choose things that you like doing and using stuff that you have. (Oskar)

The teachers further talked about getting to know another side of their pupils and that the pupils who never really participated before during online teaching now were, which meant they could establish a better relationship also with these pupils compared to normal times.

Both the modified and non-traditional activities and spaces are further examples of moving away from a concept of banking in education by allowing the pupils more practices/spaces of freedom (Freire, 1970) which in turn have the potential to facilitate more inclusive and socially just practices in PEH. As pointed out by Freire (1970):

Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (p. 81)

These practices and spaces of freedom can through Freirean understandings be seen as ‘invitations’ for the pupils into a dialogue, critical reflection and problem-posing about the structural social inequities (re)produced by domination notions and discourse inherent in certain (forms of) activities and spaces. The emergence of a critical consciousness (conscientização) through these practices has the potential to help both the teachers and pupils transform the ‘reality’ in PEH together. These educational practices are also important in letting pupils, through relationship building, dialogue and
problem-posing, practice making mutual decisions (Freire, 1970) within the context PEH that can be used beyond PEH to ensure democratic and more socially just societies.

‘Make us question some of the things we see’ – learning about and acting on social inequities

The fourth and final theme is centred around learning about and acting on social inequities. These findings draw further attention to that teaching for social justice importantly requires teachers to both teach for and about social justice (Gerdin et al., 2021). Teacher actions that act on social inequities in school without explicitly talking about and publicly naming social inequities run the risk of leaving pupils ill-prepared to be their own agents for change and not sufficiently prepared to act on social inequities beyond PEH (Philpot et al., 2021). Drawing on Freire (1970), critically reflecting on social inequities while simultaneously acting on these inequities is what is needed for transformation in praxis to occur.

Some pupils report that they think it is good that the teacher is open and clear when it comes to raising awareness and educating them about the various social inequities that may exist in the class. This they believe helps to increase everyone’s awareness of ‘differences within the group’ (Emma) and also how they as pupils together ‘can help each other’ (Jonas) deal with these inequities. One of the pupils claimed that:

We have this new teacher who made us watch this documentary on how immigrant girls struggle to get into sport in Sweden… As a girl this really made my realize how hard is for some people to have the same chances to be involved in sport just because of their different background. (Lena)

Other pupils provide examples of when teachers actively teach about stereotypes around gender, sexuality, ethnicity, bodies and in particular how these stereotypes are currently reinforced by various forms of social media. Lucas stated:

Yeah our teacher has been doing this thing on what stereotypes circulate on TikTok… I guess he is trying to make us question some of the things we see on there… you know stuff about how boys and girls should look like and what they should be seen doing… being good at and so on. (Lucas)

The example provided by Lena can be seen as a further example of a pedagogy of discomfort that Shelley and McCuaig (2018) used in a university course to help students focus on unpacking their biographies in terms of the significance and role of cultural heritage and privilege. Both examples are also similar to how the teacher Dan in Fitzpatrick’s (2013) study used the study of critical topics as a way of enacting social justice pedagogies.

Some of the other pupils further reported on how their teacher made them critically reflect on their own privileged or marginalized positions. Fredrik wrote the following in one of his critical reflective texts:

Today our teacher made us question our own beliefs about what it means to be physically active and healthy… We had to write down these statements about why we think we are active and health and stuff and then he kept asking why we think this… I mean I think I am quite sporty and healthy or am I? I play a lot of competitive sports and I am not overweight… But does that mean I am healthy? I think today’s lesson really made me question some of my own biases and how these might affect how I treat other people. (Fredrik)

In one of the interviews another pupil (Sophia) said:

Sophia: Yeah after many of our games or lessons our teacher usually asks us ‘So who do think were included and excluded today?’ When he first started doing this it was kind of whatever but now after a while I think it really makes us, also when we are doing an activity, focus more on making sure everyone gets involved. It also makes you realize who the dominating ones are in the class and the ones that are being dominated (Sophia)

Göran: And so what do you with this knowledge?

Sophia: Well with the help our teacher we then discuss how games can be fairer and more inclusive of everyone. So, we come up with these new rules or even different games that we agree are more fair and inclusive.
The form of critical reflection that the pupils are talking about here can be thought of as further attempts by the teacher to move beyond ‘banking’ education (Freire, 1970) where pupils store or acquire knowledge (in this context through playing games) unproblematically to focus on exploring issues of context, positionality or power. Furthermore, this teaching about and acting on social inequities is akin to Freire’s (1970) notion of conscientization where the raising awareness of inequities simultaneously leads to an acting on, a change in praxis, with pupils playing a central role in this process.

In sum, these forms of critical and dialogical pedagogies that have been reported on here by the pupils can be seen to promote the conscientizacao process (Freire, 1970). A transformative educational process where pupils and teachers working together, can reimagine more inclusive, equitable and socially just individual and societal outcomes. Ultimately, the enactment of such pedagogies has the potential to prepare critical learners who will conceive a transformative, not reproductive, future (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2001).

Conclusions

This paper has drawn attention to what pupils perceive as inclusive and socially just teaching practices in PEH. Teachers showing that they care, have empathy for their pupils and actively build good relationship between both teacher and pupil and the pupils themselves can be seen as the first step towards affording an inclusive and socially just learning environment in PEH. Indeed, Freire (1970) suggested that in order to achieve a critical consciousness and make a change in praxis, horizontal relationships built on trust and love must first be established. In this sense, caring teaching and building relationships can be seen as a foundational pedagogy for social justice in PEH (Mordal Moen et al., 2020).

The findings further demonstrate the importance of explicitly stated aims and purposes of learning in PEH (Redelius et al., 2015) and an alignment between curriculum intentions, pedagogy and assessment (MacPhail et al., 2023). However, involving the pupils in both understanding/negotiating and enacting aim, purposes, pedagogies and assessments are equally important in realizing more inclusive and socially just environments. Engaging pupils in an ongoing dialogue where the pupils practice choice and decision-making with their peers is according to Freire an important part of developing autonomous democratic citizens (Freire, 1998).

The pupil’s perceptions also highlight how the use of modified and non-traditional activities and spaces seems facilitate a more inclusive and socially just learning environment which also invites the pupils to critically reflecting on issues of positionality and power that certain activities and spaces are constituted by. These findings signal the importance of teachers assisting their pupils to ‘live with and learn from what is different’ (Freire, 1998, p. 24) than we might commonly find in the PEH classroom.

The fourth key theme elucidates that in order to achieve more inclusion and social justice in the PEH classroom and beyond, pupils need to be made aware of (and learn to act on) social inequities (Philpot et al., 2021; Tinning, 2016). Both the PEH curriculum and PEH teachers’ practice should therefore facilitate and value this type of knowledge and learning (Freire, 1970).

On a critical note, it should again be mentioned that the schools and teachers involved in this study were purposefully picked as ‘good examples’ of PEH practices that foreground inclusion and social justice. As such, they are, for instance, not to be seen as representative of Swedish PEH practice but still offer ‘a glimpse of hope’ in terms of what can be done in the name of inclusion and social justice in PEH. However, even when reflecting on these good examples of practice one could question the extent to which these practices really adhere to notions of social justice and Freire’s critical pedagogy. It could still be argued that the teachers’ practices and pupils’ responses to these reflect a focus on inclusion and managing inequalities within the framework of given teaching and taking for granted knowledge within the subject (Philpot et al., 2021). The question and challenge therefore remain regarding how teachers can be encouraged to deal with the inequalities that
the pupils bring to the classroom, but at the same time try to challenge the norms that make these inequalities matter. Then again, we need to ask ourselves what is actually possible to achieve in the name of PEH and social justice, perhaps a modest critical and social justice pedagogy (Tinning, 2002) which focuses on more modest but realistic outcomes, such as developing a more inclusive, equitable and socially just PEH classroom, is a more achievable goal for PEH.

Nevertheless, the findings in this paper as represented by the four themes can be seen to represent the three interconnected concepts at the heart of Freire’s philosophy of education – dialogue, critical consciousness and praxis, which ultimately seeks to encourage pupils to problematize and look critically at their own and others’ positions within the social world and challenges them to consider how their own and others’ ‘reality’ may be transformed for social good. As such, Freire’s critical and dialogical pedagogy can offer a fruitful framework for challenging the current status quo in PEH practice particularly when informed by both teacher and pupil perspectives (MacPhail & O’Sullivan, 2010). To conclude, this paper thus calls for future studies where teachers and pupils collaborate to develop PEH practices underpinned by inclusion and social justice.

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