

‘Now we have gym, now we have to perform’: Norwegian students’ perceptions of assessment and grading in physical education

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Abstract

Assessment has become a routine feature of school life, internationally. Little is known, however, about the consequences for young people of assessment and grading in physical education (PE) – a subject often associated with physical recreation. This paper explores young Norwegian’s perceptions of assessment and grading in PE from a sociological perspective. In doing so, it contemplates the penetration of neo-liberal discourses as part of wider processes of globalization

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and Europeanization in school PE in Norway. The study utilizes data generated by 31 focus groups involving 148 youngsters from the 10th grade (15–16-year-olds) in eight purposively sampled secondary schools in Norway. Norwegian PE teachers continue to use tests in order to set grades in PE. The upshot is that students' enjoyment of and engagement in PE, as well as their self-identities and self-esteem, can be compromised by apprehension towards assessment and grading. These processes seem likely to undermine or even erode the potential sociopsychological benefits of PE for some young people by reinforcing the impression that the subject is fast becoming just one more outcome-oriented subject on an academic treadmill. In this regard, the ascendancy of neo-liberalism – associated with the twin challenges of globalization and European integration – appears to merely reinforce the hegemony of competitive individualism within PE in Norway, as elsewhere.

Keywords

Assessment, grading, physical education, Norway, neo-liberalism, Europeanization, globalization

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Norway has not escaped the global trend towards performance and accountability in the education system (see, e.g., Hermansen and Nerland, 2014; Leirhaug and Annerstedt, 2016; Vogt, 2021). Around the world, a neo-liberal discourse of performativity has been a feature of the growing emphasis upon educational outcomes, performance indicators and educational standards – ostensibly in the service of making the results of education more measurable and comparable (Landri, 2017, 2021; Vogt, 2021). Consequently, standards-based assessment has become a routine feature of life for students during their school careers (Evans et al., 2007; Mølstad and Karseth, 2016; Putwain, 2009; Vogt, 2021). In Norway, assessment – and its corollary, grading – are part of successive governmental attempts to improve the quality of education, partly in response to concern with the gradual slippage of educational outcomes in the country according to PISA rankings (Hermansen and Nerland, 2014; Tveit, 2014, 2016).

While governments worldwide have introduced assessment reforms (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018), few countries 'have examined students' perceptions of such reforms' (Hopfenbeck, 2019: 255). Lentillon et al. (2018) have observed that student assessment in school – and, more specifically, in physical education (PE) – is characterized more by ideological assertion than empirical study. Little is known, for example, about the consequences of assessment and grading in PE, a curriculum subject associated in the popular imagination with sport and physical recreation and, by extension, physical and mental health – the focus of this study. We begin with a brief outline of how we set about theorizing assessment and grading in PE – particularly as it pertains to mental health outcomes – before then reviewing the extant literature on assessment and grading.

Theorizing assessment and grading in PE and mental health

In theoretical terms, the study adopted a sociological perspective on Norwegian youngsters' perceptions of assessment and grading in PE, particularly as it impacted their experiences of the subject and engendered feelings of stress and anxiety. Rooted in the so-called biomedical model, the orthodox approach to making sense of mental health issues has tended to be psychological, emphasizing the ostensible significance of individual personality traits. By contrast, sociological perspectives take as their point of departure the assumption that rather than being a 'personal problem'

(Wright Mills, 1959), mental health is more often a manifestation of the particular social situations of an individual or group. On this view, it is social life and social circumstances – rather than uncommon or atypical processes within individuals (Horwitz, 2009) – that is more likely to explain the prevalence of mental health issues in any given time and place; in other words, how good or bad people feel does not depend simply on their personalities but also, and crucially, on the sorts of social conditions they face (Horwitz, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018), especially in an everyday context such as school. Thus, sociological approaches to mental health focus less on the mental states *per se* and more on how social context creates the conditions in which particular states of mind (e.g. apprehension, stress and anxiety) tend to be more-or-less commonplace. From a sociological perspective, individuals sharing similar circumstances are also likely to share similar levels of mental health and illness (Horwitz, 2009). This perspective is grounded in the assumption that the self (as expressed in self-identity and self-esteem, for example) is a social product – an unsocialized self is impossible (Mead, 1934). Put simply, self-consciousness and self-identity develop as people internalize the views of ‘significant others’ with whom they interact and are more-or-less interdependent.

When it comes to the relationship between assessment, grading and mental health, a sociological perspective draws our attention to macro-structural features, from global processes of neo-liberal reform in education systems to reforms in national assessment practices (that may be more-or-less reflective of such processes). It also highlights micro-level developments in, for instance, the ‘school’ and ‘classroom (or, in this case, subject) climate’, in particular – the ‘norms, expectations and beliefs that contribute to creating a psychosocial environment that determines the extent to which people feel physically, emotionally and socially safe’ (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018: 122). A classroom or subject climate that emphasizes the need to perform and achieve manifests itself in a performance-oriented cultural context of expectations – from teachers, in particular – that poses a potential threat to youngsters’ feelings of emotional security, in particular.

Assessment and grading in the context of globalization and Europeanization

Developments in education in Norway reflect the internationalization and globalization of educational policy in the 21st century (Mikulec, 2017), as supranational political organizations (such as the OECD and the European Union (EU)) strive to promote more homogenous education systems subject to neo-liberal values. Internationally, education policy is now characterized by an intense focus on output measurement as part of a highly competitive environment heightened by national and international rankings, such as PISA (Gorur, 2016).

Aspects of neo-liberal-oriented policies have been manifest in the global north – including countries such as Norway – since the latter decades of the 20th century (Sulkunen, 2015). The accompanying pressures to introduce market reforms have stretched well into the public sector, including areas such as education. While Norway has never had a government fully committed to neo-liberalism as an ideology it has demonstrated a general propensity to embrace aspects such as a diminution of government regulation and oversight (Claes and Fossum, 2002; Sulkunen, 2015). Consequently, since the late 1990s, Norway, like its Nordic neighbour Finland, has by degrees implemented neo-liberal reforms – including decentralization and enhanced school autonomy (Muench et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Nordic countries, such as Norway, have tended not to view free markets as the natural order in the economic realm, let alone the public sphere. Rather, they continue to view markets as dependent on supportive (and regulated) political and cultural contexts (Hilson, 2015, 2020). Thus, the twin challenges of globalization and European integration have not significantly undermined the distinctiveness of Nordic

social democratic welfare states such as Norway. State solutions to social issues, including education, remain popular (Hilson, 2015, 2020). Unsurprisingly, therefore, as a so-called ‘halfway member’ of the European Union (Claes and Fossum, 2002), Norway (and Norwegian institutions) has grappled with such issues as whether they should respond to globalization and Europeanization by accentuating what they see as Norway’s distinctive socio-democratic features – in what would amount to a process of glocalization – thereby off-setting fears that the local flavours of education will evaporate when encountering the hegemony of globalization (Hilt and Riese, 2022). In this regard, the Norwegian school system has not undergone quite the same comprehensive market-based and accountability-driven reforms as fellow Nordic countries, such as Sweden, let alone elsewhere in the global north (Muench et al., 2022). Norwegian education, for example, is still largely based on what Muench et al. (2022) describe as ‘the professional trusteeship of teachers’, characteristic of the Finnish school system.

Assessment and grading in the Norwegian educational policy context

In keeping with its comprehensive ethos, the Norwegian system is said to be characterized by an inclusive approach without organizational differentiation (Imsen and Volckmar, 2014). With an emphasis on equity and equality, Norwegian education reflects a social democratic ideology preeminent since the 1930s (Luimes, 2023). Accordingly, all pupils attend the same school system, independent of their abilities and needs. Such an inclusive approach to schooling is intended to contribute to social integration and the provision of equal opportunities. Teaching in Norwegian comprehensive schools is based on a national curriculum characterized by stability and the well-established position of academic subjects (Luimes, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Tveit (2014, 2016, 2018) observes that Norway has seen major changes in educational assessment since the turn of the millennium, following the 2001 ‘PISA shock’ that prompted wide-scale reform of the school system (at both elementary and secondary levels). The use of assessment (and grading, in particular) has been endorsed by both left- and right-wing governments (often in coalition), albeit with more emphasis on formative and diagnostic purposes under left-wing coalitions (Tveit, 2016). The Norwegian school reform (entitled *The Knowledge Promotion*) of 2006 introduced new national curricula for all school subjects. In line with neo-liberal developments in education across the Western world – characteristic of Europeanization and globalization processes – these new outcome-based curricula emphasized assessment overall as well as formative assessment, or AfL (assessment *for* learning) (Tveit, 2014, 2016), in particular. Norwegian education policy incorporated the goal of changing assessment in schools from what was perceived as an over-emphasis on assessment *of* learning (in other words, summative assessment of knowledge) to an emphasis upon AfL (formative assessment) (Leirhaug and Annerstedt, 2016). Subsequently, in 2015, the Norwegian government launched *The Renewal and Improvement Reform* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015). This policy reinforced the perception that assessment of student competences was intended to support practices likely to promote (‘deep’) learning (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015); that is to say, AfL. At the heart of this policy was the notion that students should be given opportunities to improve their skills before and until a final grade is set; put another way, grades should be more than a mere mathematical average of test scores (Røset, 2019). At the same time, the 2015 White Paper underlined the view that – because they are potentially crucial in determining youngsters’ future educational and vocational lives – assessment practices need to be ‘just’ (in the sense of being equitable), ensuring that end grades and examination grades represent an objective reflection of students’ competences in each subject, including PE. The most recent reform – *Renewal of the Knowledge Promotion* (LK20) implemented in 2020 across K1 to K13 – has largely continued the pattern of emphasizing

competences such that ‘outcome-based education still has structural primacy’ (Hilt and Riese, 2022: 235).

At this juncture, it is worth bearing several things in mind when it comes to Norway. First, despite evidence that teachers frequently comment upon student performance and sometimes indicate an unofficial grade (see, e.g., Svennberg et al., 2014), no *official* grades are awarded in the early years of schooling (grades 2–7, years 6–13). Grading begins, formally, when students enter lower secondary school in Grade 8, at ages 12 to 13. Grades awarded during the latter years of lower-secondary school determine whether young people are able to obtain a place at the upper-secondary school of their choice and can, therefore, affect Norwegian youngsters’ future career choices and trajectories (Røset, 2019). This includes PE.

Assessment and grading in PE

The shift towards ‘outcomes’ as a core concept in educational policy has positioned even practical subjects, such as PE, within an accountability system (Mølstad and Karseth, 2016). As Löfgren et al. (2019) note, no pupils remain untouched by the process of grading and appraisal in schools today. As a defining feature of education in neo-liberal times assessment and grading have, as a consequence, become routine features of PE (Evans et al., 2007) around the world – often seen as ends in themselves rather than as a way of securing progress in PE (Carter, 2020). In recent decades, assessment has become not only more prominent in the day-to-day practice of PE around the world (Hay, 2006; Tolgfors, 2018) but also more elaborate and complex (see, e.g., Tolgfors, 2018). The increased emphasis upon assessing the extent and nature of students’ learning has manifested itself in demands upon PE teachers world-wide to incorporate various forms of assessment at all levels of their work: from units or programmes down to lessons themselves.

While assessment has long been a feature of PE world-wide (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019) in the form of teachers’ judgements regarding student attainment, behaviour and ‘effort’, such judgements have tended to concentrate on sporting performance and commitment. The consequences of these assessments for young people’s perceptions of themselves as ‘sporty’ or otherwise – in short, their self-identities and self-esteem – while apocryphal, remain unclear. In the context of debate surrounding the pervasiveness of neo-liberal discourses associated with the Europeanization and globalization of educational policy and practice, it is important to recognize that the make-up of contemporary PE needs to be understood in relation to the 20th century globalization of sport, rather than merely the globalization of education systems and practices *per se*. While the curricula of some subjects explicitly incorporate a ‘European dimension’ (Carlson et al., 2018), the content of PE has long reflected the impact of internationalization (witness the global pervasiveness of football in PE curricula worldwide), Europeanization (e.g. the prevalence of handball in PE in central and northern European countries) and instances of glocalization (activities such as friluftsliv – what amounts to life in the outdoors – which accentuate what are taken to be the distinctive features of physical activity and recreation in Norway). Thus, while Carlson et al. (2018) observe that the Europeanization of education occurs in a context that is populated by contrasting (national and regional) notions of what education is supposed to be about, this cannot be said to be straightforwardly true of school PE – a subject where the legacy of the globalization of sport in the 20th century intersects with the glocalizing national and regional legacies vis-à-vis physical activity cultures.

All that said, MacDonald (2011: 36) expresses a widely held view (see, e.g., Enright et al., 2020) when observing that globally PE ‘carries the stamp of neoliberalism’, not least in the manner in which many in the PE subject-community appear readily accepting of some of the central individualistic tenets of neo-liberal ideology. For example, according to its advocates,

appropriate and regular assessment can make a substantial contribution to raising student achievement through higher standards and greater accountability (Borghouts et al., 2017; Dodds, 2006; Marmeleira et al., 2020; Tolgfors, 2019). Consequently, so-called ‘high stakes’ testing has come to be seen as one of the defining features of contemporary PE in the global north (see, e.g., MacDonald, 2011). McDonald (2011) notes that these trends (and especially the focus on assessment), are ‘often espoused by the profession as a way of buying into the dominant policy agendas (e.g., accountability, reducing health costs, supporting choice) and gaining the ensuing recognition as a legitimate school practice’ (p. 36). Discourses of individualism and competition have long been features of school PE internationally; not least insofar as the subject has historically revolved around performance, competitive games and sport (Green, 2000; Kirk, 1992a).

Assessment and grading in PE in Norway

In Norwegian educational policy, subject specific ‘competences’ remain the core summative category to be assessed (Mølstad and Karseth, 2016), typically in the form of ‘learning outcomes’ (Vogt, 2021) – what students should know, understand and be able to do (Mølstad and Karseth, 2016). In keeping with wider educational developments, it has become commonplace in PE in recent years to refer to the latter – that is, formative assessment – as AfL (see, e.g., Leirhaug and MacPhail, 2015; López-Pastor et al., 2013; 2009; Tolgfors, 2019). The ‘renewed’ curriculum (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020) emphasizes the role of the PE teacher in providing formative feedback that enhances opportunities for students to demonstrate their sporting and physical competencies in various ways (e.g. understanding, reflecting and critical thinking). It also places a premium on effort, as an aspect of competency, to be included in the overall assessment. Given the broadening conceptualization of competence and the emphasis on basic skills in the recent LK20 reform – to include social and emotional skills within the context of an (re-)emphasis on *bildung*¹ (Hilt and Riese, 2022) – it is worth noting that PE may well be a setting within which such skills might be developed.

Although little was known about assessment practices in PE in Norway until relatively recently (see, e.g., Leirhaug and MacPhail, 2015) it is clear that, since the implementation of the school reform, assessment has become a significant issue for Norwegian PE. Greater focus upon formative assessment as an educational tool is reflected in the Norwegian government’s view that information garnered through assessment should be used by teachers to intervene and provide feedback to students that will help them develop their ability in PE (Leirhaug and MacPhail, 2015). Assessment should, in other words, be viewed as AfL. The assumption is that AfL allows for tasks to be differentiated to cater for students’ differing abilities, such that all students can be set individually oriented tasks to enable them to develop subject-related competences and knowledge and, ultimately, improve outcomes in PE. Nevertheless, an evaluation report on the development of individual assessment in four school subjects (Norwegian, English, mathematics and PE) observed how, when compared to teachers in the other three subjects, Norwegian PE teachers reported integrating formative assessment to a considerably lesser extent. In addition, they were less likely to set clear goals for student learning and tended not to use assessment to revise and adjust their own teaching (Sandvik et al., 2012).

Against this backdrop, the present study set out to explore young Norwegians’ perceptions of assessment and grading in PE, in terms of the consequences for how they felt about the subject and themselves, as part of a wider study of the relationship between PE and youngsters’ mental health (see Røset, 2019).

Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach, data being generated by 31 focus groups conducted between February and June 2017. In total, 148 youngsters (68 girls and 80 boys) from the 10th grade (15–16-year-olds) in eight secondary schools in Norway (four on the west coast and four in the eastern inland region) were included. Young people from across the sports participation spectrum – from high to very limited involvement (defined as three times per week or more and once a week or less, respectively) – were recruited from each school, in conjunction with membership of friendship groups and gender. The size of the focus groups varied from three to eight and were usually organized in single-sex groups. The age group was chosen for several reasons: first, being Year 10 students, they were in the midst of processes of assessment and grading; second, they were judged to be sufficiently mature to take part in a focus group and share their views with their peers; and, third, being in the third year of secondary school PE, the students had sufficient experiences of PE and lower-secondary schooling upon which to draw. The study was registered with the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD Project number 49218) (Røset, 2019). Participation was by written informed consent from parents and the young people.

A topic guide was developed comprising open-ended questions relating to such areas as the youngsters' experiences of school, perceptions of PE and, within PE, assessment and grading. The topic guide provided a departure point for the young people to raise what they considered to be pertinent issues (Krueger, 1998). Open-ended questions were used, such as: 'How would you describe assessment in physical education?' and 'How would you describe the process of grading in physical education?' A number of probes were judiciously used to help young people clarify and elaborate on their comments, including: 'What do you mean by . . .?'; 'Could you explain . . .?'; and 'Could you give me an example of . . .?'. In this way the focus group facilitator encouraged further interaction among the young people so that they were able to influence the direction of discussions. Thus, rich, detailed discussions were generated that gave access to students' perceptions and experiences of PE processes.

All focus groups were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Data analysis involved the construction of analytic categories from coded data, which were subsequently developed into overarching themes. In the first instance, this involved immersion in the whole dataset through reading and re-reading transcripts. The early phase of analysis then proceeded in a primarily inductive way using line-by-line coding, keeping close to the empirical data throughout the process, identifying words, phrases, sentences and sections of text generated by the participants. More focused and selective coding was then applied to the initial codes, which were grouped together by focusing on what was judged to be more frequent and significant in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021) in relation to shedding light on the study's aim. Sensitizing concepts were used to guide the selection and grouping in the sense of 'suggest[ing] directions along which to look' (Blumer, 1954: 7). Given the sociological orientation of the study, the relevance of social dynamics during PE lessons, especially during grading and assessment processes, was a general guide to making analytic sense of the text, as well as students' perceptions of how their experiences shaped enjoyment and engagement in PE and the consequences of these experiences for their self-identities and self-esteem. In this way, analytic categories were built up through a fluid and recursive process, which involved the interweaving of sensitizing concepts with empirical data in a two-way, iterative process. In order to enhance the credibility of the analysis, the process also involved ongoing dialogue between the paper's authors as tentative analytic categories were developed, challenged and often reconstructed. The outcome was the development of the analytic themes that were constructed to reflect a higher level of abstraction than initial codes and revealed patterns of shared meaning across the data set, which provided a theoretically informed sociological account of the findings. In

reporting the findings, selected quotations from the participants were translated into English and anonymized, with pseudonyms given to each individual and a code given to each school.

Findings

This section presents the Year 10 students' perceptions of grading in PE in particular – as well as assessment more broadly. Overall, students saw grading in PE as problematic on several fronts, ranging from the consequences for their enjoyment of and engagement with PE through to the process of grading itself and the likely consequences for their self-identities, self-esteem and general mental health.

The process of grading

Many students were critical of the process of grading in PE. Central to their criticisms was the perception that teachers had often already arrived at a conclusion regarding their worth (in grading terms) prior to the formal process of grading: 'Then [teacher] said, "We have already put the [grade] on some of you, but there are some we are still uncertain"' (Stine, B₃). Hence, there was a commonplace perception among the 15–16-year-olds that first impressions of supposed competence tended to be lasting:

Oh yes, it is Petter, of course he's going to get that grade, and it is Thorsteinn, of course he's going to get [that] grade and that is Patrick and he will get [that] grade and it is Ole, he's going to get that grade. And then it goes sort of like that . . . It is just like you are who you are, you get this [the grade]. Not what you did, when you did it, not how you are that year, but how you are in general. (Endre, B₃)

In this regard, students commonly expressed the view that PE grades appeared to be arrived at by their PE teachers quite spontaneously, almost viscerally: 'Once a teacher has got a bad impression of you then it is very difficult, almost impossible to get it off' (Stine, B₃).

Students' perceptions of how their teachers' early impressions were used in grading was the basis for their view that the process in PE was not only unfair but stressful and anxiety-provoking. It was the seeming ambiguity surrounding which criteria counted the most in PE that typically initiated discussions. For example, on the grounds that PE tended to be linked to 'physical condition and strength and endurance' (Endre, B₃) students viewed being fit and in good shape as the most important criterion which almost inevitably gave rise to better grades, with little recognition of effort or improvement: 'Those who are in best shape, they get better grades than those who aren't in such good shape' (Sanna, A₃).

One aspect of the grading process that students often pointed to as a further injustice was what they saw as a gender dimension to grading in PE. PE teachers were perceived as displaying a tendency to grade on the basis of routine gender-stereotypes, although this tended to be viewed differently by boys and girls. Girls often viewed it as difficult to do very well: '4 is the best grade a girl gets in PE in our class . . . it is almost like: "OK, girl, 4" and then you assess boys' (Endre, B₃) (1 to 6 where 1 is low competence and 6 is excellent). For their part, boys tended towards the view that their PE teachers adopted a contrasting approach, tending to grade girls more favourably, based, as they saw it, upon perceptions of the desirability of and need for 'equality':

Hans: They constantly talk about girls being treated equally to boys, but when it comes to activities [and such] they always get things easier.

Tor: It is easier for girls to get 6 in PE than for boys.

Arne: Yes. I don't want to be mean, but I think some teachers favour someone specific in class. Especially girls. (E₂)

Some students (including females, notably) pointed explicitly to what they interpreted as the ways in which male PE teachers were influenced by girls' physical appearance when grading:

You know, some of the girls pulled their shorts up really high in order to get a better grade. And they did get better grade. They didn't contribute in PE at all, just wandered around, where as I really made-an-effort. And I was graded lower than them because they were wearing handball clothes . . . They were graded higher because of appearance and because they pulled their shorts up. He graded them 5 and 6. (Ellen, F₃)

Another pervasive feature of students' perceptions about the grading process was the dearth of formative feedback. Some expressed concern regarding how difficult they found it to estimate how they were doing in PE, in terms of their likely or anticipated grade: 'It is very difficult to know how you are doing in PE because you don't have theoretical tests and such. So, it is a bit like "Am I down at 3 [grade] now or am I still at 4? Or have I reached a 5?"' (Trine, B). In other words, 'You don't really know what the teacher actually is looking for' (Elin D₁). This was associated with a perceived need for teacher-student dialogue as a form of formative feedback so students could improve, which was seen as especially important in PE: 'Then you would know "OK, now I have 4 [grade]. If I work harder I can get 5. If I don't shape-up I will get 3"' (Trine, B₁). Thus, the students' perceived need for feedback (and, as a corollary, understanding of why they were graded the way they were) was a leitmotif of discussions.

The constraining effects of grading in PE

The grading process in PE was perceived by the young people to have a number of consequences which limited their experiences in several ways. Students regularly and repeatedly pointed to the loss of the fun element in PE, which they perceived as an almost inevitable consequence of an increased seriousness in secondary PE that culminated in grading:

In elementary school I loved PE very much. I was looking forward to having PE. But when I started secondary school I felt that my effort . . . wasn't good enough when I tried. So, then . . . I started to dread having PE because I felt that it wasn't fun anymore. (Mia, E₃)

Relatedly, the process of grading was also seen as being detrimental to participation in and engagement with PE more generally. Overall, it seemed that grading not only increased the pressure to perform but at the same time eroded any recreational dimension to PE: 'I think many of those who try to avoid having PE would include themselves more if there was less pressure on grading in PE' (Jenny, C₄). In response to a question regarding what might happen if PE were no longer graded, one student replied to the effect that those less able in sporting terms would experience 'less performance anxiety, really' (Oda, B₃). In this regard, there was a commonplace view that those who did not view themselves as sporty (in other words, lacking the necessary sporting skills and physical attributes), and with poor self-esteem in terms of their bodies and physicality, would be especially likely to disengage from participating: 'I think that maybe they who experienced problems regarding their body image . . . would maybe back off. Because they see no meaning in even trying' (Hege, C₄).

In this regard, the grading process seemed to particularly constrain the participation, engagement, and enjoyment of those who were less 'good at sport'. Thus, students expressed concerns about the wider consequences of grading in PE, pointing to its impact on their peers' attitudes and interactions during PE lessons. This often became manifest in terms of those who were good further marginalizing those who were less good, which often constrained the experience and opportunities for development of those less competent at sport:

But everyone isn't equally good in different things. That can cause people not to like it [PE] as much because it is harder to get better grades since those who are good just pass, if we have football . . . to the others who are good . . . those who are not good in football never gets the chance to at least try. (Sofie, G₃)

This was perceived as likely, in turn, to restrict the opportunities for less-able students to engage and, in doing so, demonstrate what amounted to their own worth – in assessment terms – while benefiting from the intrinsic reward of becoming a meaningful participant in PE: 'If you aren't provided with any opportunity it does become difficult. But the very instant you are provided with an opportunity to try it becomes more enjoyable because you get to participate more' (Monika, G₃). The grading process thus seemed to influence the dynamics between students themselves, as well as students and their PE teachers, during PE, and this played out in terms of how engaged or marginalized some tended to feel – during team games, in particular.

There were also more direct consequences of the process of grading. Students appeared particularly concerned about the impact of grading on their images of themselves (their self-identities) and others. Among those less successful in PE, the shift – from a focus upon worry-free enjoyment of PE towards performance and the concomitant anxieties about being good enough during the years of secondary schooling – was exacerbated by assessment and grading. The perceived focus on performance and physicality (alongside the perceived emphasis on fitness and physical condition) during the grading process heightened some youngsters' awareness of their own shortcomings, especially when compared with their peers. This, in turn, led them to dread PE. In this vein, the perceived difference between PE and the rest of the (academically focused) school day decreased over time as performance and grading became increasingly overriding in PE. In short, the pressures and worries that they associated with the rest of school now became a feature of PE – the one school subject that, hitherto, had served as an enclave for physical recreation and sociability.

One particular aspect of PE that was perceived as potentially damaging to self-esteem and self-identity – and one which was aggravated by the process of grading – was its public nature. Grading was viewed as exacerbating the youngsters' everyday predispositions towards comparison with peers, which shaped – by degrees – their views of themselves. The relative differences in sporting and physical competency became evident during grading and potentially served to undermine youngsters' evaluations of their own performances, as well as erode the intrinsic enjoyment of being physically active while diminishing the inclination to sustain engagement:

Vetle: If you are a little behind and realize that you won't get a good grade and like everybody else manages, then it's easy to give up.

Jarle: Then you don't become motivated . . . You might stop exercising and have no joy from it because you feel you're much worse than everyone else. (C₁)

Teachers were perceived as intensifying youngsters' inclination to compare themselves with their peers, by invariably assessing and grading normatively. The youngsters observed that they were well aware of the comparisons the teachers routinely made across their group in order to arrive at a specific grade for each person:

I perceive PE teachers, or teachers, to compare a '6' pupil, let's say if one person gets 4 or 5, then the teacher compares to a better pupil and thinks like 'You cannot get as good grade because you aren't as good as that person'. Rather, they should think individually. (Berit, E₁)

In this regard, youngsters saw the consequences of such practices for their peers' views of themselves. Frank (F₁) – one of those good at sport – for example, highlighted the potential for assessment generally in PE but grading, in particular, to negatively influence youngsters' self-esteem:

It's often in relation to the rest [of the class] . . . Often you have an opinion yourself about what is good and not good, and what you expect from yourself . . . if you are kind of satisfied but still are much worse than others, then it destroys [you] a little. That way, how everyone else around performs has a lot to say as well, I think.

All-in-all, grading was perceived to be a process of communicating (directly or indirectly) an assessment of students' capabilities – in physical and sporting terms. Unsurprisingly, therefore, many youngsters experienced grading in PE to be one more dimension of a process of feeling 'othered' by PE teachers and peers (see, e.g., Røset et al., 2020a). The process of comparison inherent in PE but intensified by grading heightened the potential for undermining youngsters' self-esteem and self-identities, at least as far as sporting competences was concerned.

Despite the pervasiveness of such unenthusiastic views, students' perceptions of grading in PE were far from uniform or straightforward. For example, the same student who spoke of 'performance anxiety' in relation to grading added that it also constrained her to make a concerted effort in PE lessons: 'Now we have gym, now we *have* to perform' (Oda, B₃; emphasis in the original). Thus, negative perceptions of grading in PE were interwoven with perceptions that the loss of constraint that grading provided would result in students feeling (even) less committed to PE: 'Fantastic! Then I would have sat down and done nothing, I think. Because it wouldn't have mattered anyway' (Stian, E₄). In this regard, some girls' groups viewed grading in PE as having a moderating effect when it came to behaviour – and boys' behaviour in particular: 'For the boys at least, there are many boys who find PE really enjoyable. That way [with grading involved] they remember that they have to behave as well, in a way. It's not all about fun because they are being assessed' (Mette, A₂).

The students who felt that they were good at sport and, therefore, likely to be awarded a 'good' grade, tended to be ambivalent about grading, occasionally acknowledging that – on grounds of effort at least – they were sometimes unworthy of the relatively high grades they achieved: 'Because you don't always bother, because you're a little like: "OK, it's PE at school. I manage to get a pretty good grade anyway, so . . . I don't bother"' (Kine, G₂). At the same time, some of those likely to be perceived as good at sport were also sympathetic to what they saw as the plight of the less-able – those likely to perceive the grading process as fundamentally flawed and unfair, resulting in lessons that were uncomfortable and de-motivating.

Some who stated that they had, in effect, given up trying, pointed to a lack of being rewarded for effort to be the cause rather than not caring about their grade:

Sanna: When you try your best, and you don't get a good grade, in for example running and such, then you kind of give up.

Grete: Then you don't try anymore, so what's the point? (A3)

The above caveats notwithstanding, overall, these 10th grade students were aware that grading was a way of 'sorting' students into categories and hence were considerably critical of grading and its consequences for PE lessons and, by extension, themselves.

The preeminence of sporting skills and physicality

The perception that PE was graded mainly based on skills and physicality – rather than effort and improvement (as required by the guidelines on assessment and grading in PE) – was evidently considered unfair, not least because 'Some are better equipped to do such physical work than others' (Oda, B₃) and 'That's something you can't control . . . I can't control whether I can go into the "splits" or not [laughing a little]' (Elisabet, H₁). Discussions around the issue of effort were

common and tended to take the form that, regardless of what was said, it did not count in the grading process:

Tuva: There are some who exercise a lot, and then there are others who don't exercise at all, and then it is self-evident that it's a big difference between them. But they still *say* [emphasis in the original] that effort does count much more . . . But, in reality, it seems like it's only about performance . . . and effort isn't looked at. (C₃)

Such comments illustrated a recurring theme among the youngsters; namely, the ever-present tension between competency and effort whereby grading was seen as being more dependent upon the former than the latter. Nonetheless, some of those competent at sport tended to view grades as being dependent upon effort and attitude and what was referred to as 'fair play':

Trond: You have to make an effort and be happy and then you should help others and cheer and such. Pretty much.

Jonas: That's actually the only thing you need to do to get 6 [the best grade] in PE. . .

Geir: It's fine for those who aren't interested at all. But it can be boring for those who take it very seriously too. That it takes so little to get the best grade, in a way. (F₁)

Students also perceived their teachers to be frequently 'incorrect' in their grading, in so far as they often failed to recognize, among other things, sporting competence:

Stine: She's good.

Endre: But she got 4.

Stine: She can do more than me on the 'beep-test'. (B₃)

However, grading was sometimes perceived to be based not only on sporting ability – or even effort – but on physical appearance and whether, for example, an athletic appearance betokened a healthy lifestyle. To some degree, students were rather more accepting of being judged about sporting behaviour than they were about being in good physical shape:

If there wasn't any assessment as such, you could still have assessment based upon behaviour and whether you do what you are supposed to. But not anything like whether you are good, are in good shape, whether you are strong and such. (Oda, B₃)

It was evident that because of the visible nature of PE, students noticed what was happening during grading processes and interpreted them in particular ways. In this manner, PE teachers were viewed as too often extrapolating from what they interpreted as significant symbols of sportiness (e.g. local football and handball club kit, bodily appearance) to sporting ability and, by extension, PE performance, and hence grade:

Yes, in 8th grade we had this PE teacher . . . There was this one girl who plays handball, she wore a handball shirt . . . and she participated in two PE classes out of many. She was graded 5. Whereas I participated in every PE lesson and performed as good as she did and was graded 3+. But he graded her based on appearance – that you have to look good and play handball or football. (Lena, F₃)

All-in-all, while according to the students at least, their PE teachers claimed that effort was considered crucial when grading, the bulk of the youngsters considered the reality to be completely different: in their eyes, and especially among the girls, it was those who were good at sport, possessed

‘sporty’ bodies, and performed well who tended to be rewarded with good grades, not least because their performances were seen as betokening effort and commitment.

Discussion

The findings in this study add to the available research on assessment and grading in PE in Norway in several ways. First, if the students’ perceptions are anything to go by, assessment and grading in PE neatly demonstrate Tveit’s (2018) observation that Norwegian teachers have struggled to integrate formative assessment into their national testing programmes. PE teachers appear to rely, intuitively, upon ‘traditional’ and taken-for-granted approaches to (summative) assessment focused upon outcomes (e.g. sporting accomplishments) rather than processes, and on student competence and performance rather than (formative) assessment for progression of learning (Svennberg et al., 2014). This tendency is likely to be exacerbated by the difficulties that teachers, in general, are said to experience integrating formative assessment (Tveit, 2018). For these reasons, our findings appear to challenge the view that PE teachers in Norway regard formative assessment as the key to student learning (Tolgfors, 2019).

The continued emphasis upon summative assessment, and limited use of AfL, generated a social climate in PE that impacted on students in several ways. Thus, the findings also provide support for the observation (see, e.g., Lundahl et al., 2015) that while, rhetorically at least, assessment and grading is believed to be motivational, for many students it can be quite *de*-motivating and a potentially debilitating process which can engender feelings of anxiety and, ultimately, stress through esteem judgements and conditions of acceptance from significant others (Putwain, 2009; Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Part of this anxiety is rooted in the difficulty students experience in trying to make sense of teachers’ assessments of their performances (see, e.g., Sivenbring, 2019), a consequence of which was their inclination to adopt various instrumental strategies to stand out and be perceived as good students. Hence, students’ perceived that grading jeopardized their intrinsic enjoyment of PE leading them to be more anxious, even exhausted, by schoolwork (see, e.g., Löfgren et al., 2019). Inasmuch as the influence of neo-liberal policies towards outcome-oriented approaches to assessment may have reinforced Norwegian PE teachers’ seeming preoccupation with perceptions of sporting performance then it is likely to exacerbate youngsters’ perceived levels of stress and anxiety. This appears especially so for those less competent in sporting terms. In this regard, the study lends weight to the argument that a classroom or subject climate that emphasizes performance and achievement poses a threat to youngsters’ feelings of emotional security. Striving to meet particular standards and levels of performance is a well-established source of individual and group stress (Brolin Låftman et al., 2013), which can negatively impact students’ self-identities and feelings of self-worth. This is particularly the case in relation to grading processes. The stress and strains associated with striving for what they perceived to be reasonable, let alone high, marks appeared significant for many youngsters’ self-esteem and self-identities, with girls in particular tending to drive up stress levels by talking to each other about pressure at school while comparing themselves with their peers (Brolin Låftman et al., 2013). In sum, our findings support research that increased pressures to perform in school is a partial explanation for mental health problems among youngsters and girls especially (Banks and Smyth, 2015; Lillejord et al., 2017; OECD, 2017). Such increases in levels of anxiety and apprehension, that are often difficult to manage, seem to increase as youngsters get older. This is particularly the case in relation to grading processes in a subject, PE, where performance is highly visible and informal as well as formal public comparison commonplace.

Repeated references by students to their desire to simply be allowed to ‘play’ in PE lessons points to another perhaps unintended consequence of the current Norwegian policy focus on outcomes; namely, the implications for youngsters’ mental health and well-being of what was perceived to be the growing seriousness of PE. Relatively less sporty students’ enjoyment of and engagement with PE will continue to be compromised as a consequence of their apprehension towards assessment and grading (Røset, 2019).

Current policy suggests that practical/aesthetic subjects should not function as a ‘time-out’ from the rest of schooling (see, e.g., Ministry of Education and Research, 2015; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). In order to prevent subjects such as PE being perceived as less academic and, hence, strengthen the probability that students prioritize these, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2019) has sought to use assessment and grading to strengthen the status of the subject in the eyes of students as well as teachers. Whether or not such attempts to bolster assessment and grading in PE do, indeed, result in improved status for the subject, our study suggests that it is likely to have unintended and undesirable consequences not only for young people’s enjoyment of and engagement with PE. Grading – with its overtones of the ‘negative backwash’ of assessment (Carter, 2020) – threatens to undermine or even erode the potential socio-psychological benefits of PE, that many students crave, in the form of fun, physical recreation and sociability. By making students feel that they are under constant surveillance – unable to simply play sport, irrespective of their sporting abilities – assessment and grading is likely to undermine or even erode the potential socio-psychological benefits of PE by reducing the fun and spontaneity, and the associated catharsis, while exacerbating the negative feelings some experience in a subject that, by its very nature, tends towards a performance-orientation (see, e.g., Røset, 2019; Røset et al., 2020a; 2020b).

All-in-all, from a sociological perspective, the causes of stress and anxiety among young people is most adequately explained in terms of the structure and processes of PE (and, in particular, the emphasis on assessment of performance as manifest in the process of grading) and mediated by their relationships with their PE teachers, as significant others, as well as their friends and peers. Insofar as they are largely responsible for creating the (formal and informal) social conditions for young people’s sense of wellbeing (OECD, 2017), positive teacher–student relations, in particular, can influence students’ emotional mental health (García-Moya et al., 2015); not least by protecting young people to varying degrees against depression and anxiety (Wang et al., 2013). Focussing upon the context in which youngsters interact (with their teachers and each other) holds out the promise of better comprehending what Busfield (2002) identifies as the three main facets of youngsters’ mental health – their thoughts, emotions and behaviours – and how these lead to them being labelled in particular ways: as more-or-less successful in sporting terms, for example.

Against the backdrop of the context of pupil-teacher interaction and the subject/classroom climate, it was noteworthy that when asked if and how they would change school PE given the opportunity, the tendency of many of the students to point immediately to the elimination of grading rather than, for example, the sporting content of PE lessons, teaching styles or even organization (such as mixed-ability groupings) appeared indicative of the prominence of assessment and grading in PE in youngsters’ minds. Unsurprisingly, the process of grading in PE threatens to undermine relationships between students and their teachers, as well as students and the subject matter itself as ‘authentic relationships between teachers and pupils [are] replaced by judgemental relationships’ (Evans et al., 2007: 56) involving ‘command style’ teaching and directive acts rather than dialogue (Otnes and Solheim, 2019).

Based on the students’ perceptions it seems that one of the crucial ways in which PE has the potential to benefit mental health is through the opportunities it provides for sociability. Because youngsters are inevitably and always located in relations of interdependence with their teachers

and peers, school and subject contexts that promote positive interactions appear to promote a positive sense of wellbeing on the part of young people (Aldridge et al., 2016; Riekie et al., 2017). In this regard, the study provides some indirect corroboration for Nordbakke's (2019) findings that organized sport (in one form or another) can be an important social arena where friendships are made and/or sustained through shared experiences. By extension, therefore, where youngsters are denied opportunities to develop, sustain and strengthen peer and friendship bonds through sport, in settings that suit them, then PE runs the risk of reinforcing feelings of social exclusion among those who do not participate in organized sporting activities in their leisure time. Given LK20's emphasis on the development of social and emotional skills, this is worthy of note.

As well as throwing light on assessment and grading in PE in Norway, the findings may also tell us something about the relationship between globalization and Europeanization and PE. Globalization has impacted education policy and practice in some significant ways; not least in terms of degrees of convergence around educational policies and practices in Europe (Batista, 2014). Given impetus by the EU, Europeanization has, among other things, involved national changes towards European standards (Carlson et al., 2018). Despite the fact that the European project is now viewed as contentious in many EU member states, in the field of education Europeanization continues to be viewed as a force for social good. Hence, policy initiatives seek to revise school curricula and standardize outcome-oriented assessment. For some (see, e.g., Ringarp, 2016), globalization and Europeanization become manifest in a homogenization not only of educational systems, generally, but also, in relation to assessment policy and practice, more specifically (Carlson et al., 2018). Nonetheless, given that the effects of such processes tend to be uneven – impacting educational policy and practice in different countries in different ways – the question remains whether globalization and Europeanization have resulted in a growing similarity among European education systems or differences and specificities remain not merely significant but more important in shaping educational practice on the ground (Batista, 2014). As far as the present study is concerned, school PE in Norway reminds us not only of the tensions and unevenness in globalization and Europeanization processes but also that the differences and specificities do indeed remain significant, particularly in relation to PE.

In Norwegian PE such specificities appear manifest in a high degree of continuity alongside elements of change in practice, despite developments in educational policy. On the one hand, some of the central tenets of neo-liberal discourses linking contemporary processes of Europeanization and globalization (Mikulec, 2017) in education dovetail neatly with longstanding and well-established 'philosophies' and ideologies in PE, internationally, including discourses of competitiveness and individualism (Green, 2000). The notion that school PE discursively reinforces characteristically neo-liberal values – such as an ideology of meritocracy and the notion that (sporting) success revolves around individual abilities and application – is well-established (see, e.g., Green, 1998; Kirk, 1992a). PE teachers have, for instance, long been pre-occupied with physical performance (Kirk, 1992b). Thus, neo-liberal discursive emphases upon competence, performativity and outcome-oriented school curricula – and the corresponding shift towards what is measurable in education practice (Landri, 2017) that is said to characterize a globalizing education system – are likely to have keyed into and reinforce PE teachers' individual and group habitus in Norway, as elsewhere.

On the other hand, however, although grading as a mechanism for ascertaining 'performance' plays an increasing role as a tool for measuring and controlling education quality and outcomes in Norway as elsewhere, our findings suggest that, on the ground, such constraints can be met with a good deal of apathy and indifference from PE teachers as well as resistance from students, as the comments of the latter in this study suggest. In line with Löfgren et al.'s (2019) Swedish findings, it was noteworthy that while some youngsters did what they felt they could to adapt to the grading

system, others endeavoured to ‘resist the dominant discourse, or protect themselves from an agenda of accountability’ (Löfgren et al., 2019, p.259). In this respect, the present study serves to remind us of the continuing relevance of Kirk et al.’s (2012) question regarding what constitutes valid assessment in PE – what subject knowledge and skills should be assessed – remains very much alive for students, at the very least. We might add that PE teachers have long demonstrated a reluctance or inability to embrace change wholesale, resulting in the perhaps inevitable slippage between policy and practice (Penney and Evans, 1999). Indeed, as well as demonstrating the relative agency of PE teachers when it comes to the actual practice of assessment, as manifest in assessment and grading ‘on the ground’, it also illustrates the interdependence of teachers, schools and educational policy-makers with the very youngsters they ostensibly serve. In short, although assessment and grading in PE in Norway might be seen as promoting (in principle, at least) outcome-oriented and harmonized Europeanized educational policy, the slippage in practice on the part of teachers between rhetoric and reality, along with the resistance of students to assessment and grading, may serve as a substantial bulwark against neo-liberal globalizing tendencies. Furthermore, the fact that no official grades are awarded in the early years of schooling (grades 2–7, years 6–13) (Leirhaug and MacPhail, 2015), reinforces the impression of a degree of exceptionalism from globalizing neo-liberal discourses and outcomes-oriented education in Norway, in the early years of schooling at least. Indeed, it points to the continued preeminence of social democratic norms of cooperation, inclusiveness and equity in Norwegian educational policy and practice. Interestingly, the resistance to outcome and performative-oriented practice in the early years of the education system is mirrored in the world of sport in Norwegian sporting culture in the form of the requirement for sporting bodies in Norway to refrain from constructing league tables until age 12.

Finally, we wish to insert a methodological caveat. The limitations of focus groups – in terms, for example, of recruiting a diverse sample with differing perspectives and the tendency towards the expression of culturally expected views, as well as the logistical issue of facilitating the participation of all youngsters in the group – are well-established. Nonetheless, the use of focus groups in this study enabled a relatively large sample of young people to voice their perceptions of the topic and, in doing so, generated rich and detailed data. Similarly, while the analysis of focus group material is challenging, we engaged in continual reflection, discussion and re-reading of the data while being theoretically sensitive to the knowledge claims on which our account was developed. This process provided a degree of confidence that the analysis was congruent with the data and thus that the account was credible and plausible in terms of how it described and explained youngsters’ perceptions of grading in PE.

Conclusion

For more than two decades, PISA has fuelled debates on educational issues, such as assessment, around the world (Caro and Kyriakides, 2019). Social science researchers have long been encouraged to think beyond fixed and nation-state bound categories. Concerns with processes of globalization and Europeanization have exacerbated that necessity. National identities are said to have been challenged by European integration and globalization (Sautereau and Faas, 2022). Carlson et al. (2018), for example, talk of ‘concurrent processes of Europeanization and denationalization, both of which are . . . linked to general globalization’ (p. 395). Set against this are claims that there has been a resurgence of concerns for nationhood and national identity, begging questions regarding just how homogenous education systems have, and are likely to, become. In this regard, Roberts (2016: 68) reminds us that social scientific analyses must aim for ‘historically specific explanations of the outcomes of particular mixtures of ideas and circumstance’. If developments in Norwegian PE tell us anything about wider social processes, such as Europeanization and

globalization, it is that these processes need to be seen as contingent; in other words, a blend of particular conditions (e.g. the globalization of neo-liberal educational policies) and particular states of mind (e.g. the deep-rooted nature of social democratic values, generally, and the cultural traction of sport and physical activity in Norway, specifically). Hilt et al. (2019) highlight the ways in which the presence of homogenizing global ideas co-exist in Norwegian educational policy with the heterogeneity of the Norwegian policy context. Hilt et al. (2019) observe that Norwegian policy documents tend to construct an ideal-typical image of a Norwegian student ‘who is creative, responsible, cooperative, engaged, self-regulated and in complete control of herself, her learning and her future’ (p. 384) which reflect not only pronounced neo-liberal discourses but also the well-established social democratic progressivism discourses characteristic of the Norwegian context.

In this vein, the study reminds us of the importance of a cultural sociology of PE and sport in Norway (and elsewhere) in recognizing the enduring potency and traction of (sporting and physical recreational) cultural heritage vis-a-vis whether and how the Europeanization of education and the globalization of assessment has significantly impacted PE in Norway. In exploring how particular social systems – for example, nation-states such as Norway – tend to shape the values and beliefs, as well as practices, of a group of people, cultural sociology draws our attention to the consequences of particular social structures (such as education and schools in Norway), social processes (PE, for example) and (positive or negative) processes (such as assessment and grading within PE) on youngsters’ mental health. While the findings from this study suggest that the impact of a heightened focus on assessment and grading is potentially detrimental to students’ engagement with PE – and sport more widely – we need to keep in mind two things. First, that in a region (Scandinavia) and a country (Norway) where participation in sport is so high in relative terms and, crucially, such a deeply-embedded aspect of the cultural fabric and collective identities (see Green et al., 2018), youngsters are clearly well capable of challenging – even resisting – dominant neo-liberal discourses that constrain even practical subjects such as PE towards more outcome-oriented assessment practices. Second, to borrow from Sundby and Karseth (2022), if the current curriculum reform initiative for primary and secondary education in Norway tells us anything about PE it is that the competency-oriented curriculum model prioritized in current policy is inevitably in tension with the kind of content-oriented curriculum deeply entrenched in school PE across Europe and the global north.

All that said, and despite the fact that what appears remarkable, from pupil testimonies, is not the demise of conventional school PE but its apparent resilience. If assessment and grading in PE in Norway provides any lesson for the wider PE subject-community, it may be that the more physical educationalists at all levels are distracted by the subject’s educational status (or apparent lack thereof) the more they will put at risk youngsters’ enjoyment of and engagement with PE, as well as the subject’s potential to act as an enclave from an increasingly pressure-laden and stressful academically-oriented curriculum (Røset et al., 2020b). Institutions and processes whose norms are antithetical to the norms of youngsters (for enjoyment and sociability, as well as perceived fairness and recognition of effort) are likely to foster expectations that result in frustration and unhappiness, at best, and stress and anxiety, at worst, on the part of those youngsters who do not come up to the mark in sporting terms. Sport is a zero-sum activity typically presented by advocates as quintessentially meritocratic. The upshot of this can often be that youngsters who fail at sport can tend to blame themselves and focus upon their own failing as well as the perceived injustices of the system which, in turn, can lead to increased levels of anxiety and distress. This is, perhaps, the ultimate irony. If, as is typically assumed, the main aim of PE is the encouragement of lifelong participation in sport and physical activity (see, e.g., Green, 2014), and if ‘being with friends and peers while engaging in joyful activities are generally the most often reported reasons for taking part in sports’ (Persson et al., 2019, p. 11), then grading in PE seems likely to prove

counterproductive with the very young people on the margins of sports participation that the subject seeks to recruit.

This study was grounded in the sociological assumption that the kinds of societies we live in (for example, more or less egalitarian) and the sorts of cultural values and beliefs that we share (with regard, for instance, to the emphasis placed upon being physically competent or sporty) circumscribe individual and group mental health outcomes (see, e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018). In this regard, a sociological perspective anticipates that particularly demanding (physically or mentally) circumstances (such as intensifying school pressures associated with examinations and grading) are likely to be related to relatively high levels of perceived stress and anxiety and low levels of psychological well-being, quite apart from the strength of character and psychological resilience of the particular youngsters who must deal with these situations. **Rather** than viewing the issues raised by the students as ‘personal problems’ – best explained in terms of their particular personalities – the youngsters’ perceptions of the consequences of assessment generally and grading in particular were, we suggest, more adequately understood as manifestations or expressions of the particular dynamics of school PE lessons and, in particular, the norms and conditions in which particular states of mind (e.g. stress, anxiety, feeling apprehensive and so on) tended to be more commonplace. These norms were associated with the wider sporting culture in Norway alongside and in conjunction with the expectations and beliefs characteristic of PE and PE teachers.

All-in-all, the situation regarding grading in PE in Norway serves to remind us of the ‘urgent’ need for research ‘to investigate the relationship between the now stronger pressure to perform in [Scandinavian] schools and the pupils’ mental health’ (Löfgren et al., 2019: 259), with a particular focus upon pupils’ experiences of stress.

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Note

1. Bildung is a German term that conceives of education as more than merely the passing on of knowledge of a valuable kind, highlighting, in particular, the importance of self-cultivation in both personal and cultural senses.

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