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**THE CONSTITUTION OF THE 'ABLE' AND 'LESS ABLE' STUDENT
IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN NORWAY**

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Abstract

In recent years, the judgements that typically determine who is an ‘able’ physical education (PE) student have been sharply challenged. The research literature suggests that skills in sports, health-related fitness, toughness, competitiveness and effort typically play a significant role in assessment procedures. Although Evans lamented the paucity of research relating to ‘ability’ in PE nearly 15 years ago, little new empirical research has appeared based on studies of teaching practice. What exists relies on interview material from teachers (and students). However, few studies have investigated how the practices of teaching lessons constitute who is an ‘able’ or ‘less able’ student. Accordingly, our aim is to investigate how ‘able’ and ‘less able’ students are currently constituted in PE teaching practice. Our framework for this analysis is discourse theory, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. The empirical material consists of observations and conversations in 92 classes, produced during fieldwork at four separate upper-secondary schools in Oslo, Norway. Our findings reveal that achieving the status of being an ‘able student’ requires attaining specific scores on physical tests, in addition to exhibiting skills in traditional ball games. This finding is valid for both boys and girls. Regarding gender performativity, being perceived as a ‘spunky girl’ results in a positive evaluation, while being timid or shy is not similarly valued. Our findings support the conclusion found in prior literature that dominant discourses in health and sport produce relatively static conceptualisations/categories regarding ‘able’ and ‘less able’ students, while student potential for learning and improvement gets short shrift. However, beneath this surface consensus, we found that the constitution of ‘able’ and ‘less able’ students is generating negotiations and tensions between official educational policy and teaching practice, as well as between teachers and students.

Keywords: teaching practice, able student, less able student, discourse, Foucault, constitution

Introduction

A prominent question in Norwegian physical education (PE), as well as PE internationally, has been what kind of processes typically determine who is considered an ‘able’ or ‘unable’ student. In this article, we seek to examine empirically how discourses shape that determination (Hay & Lisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010). John Evans raised this issue 15 years ago in his agenda-setting paper, *Making a difference? Education and ‘ability’ in physical education* (2004). Evans argued that the criteria concerning ‘ability’ were taken for granted in the research literatureⁱ and raised a number of concerns about how it was conceptualised. He asserted that ‘if we are interested in improving the lot of more children in schools in the interest of social-democratic ideals, then we need to be as concerned with issues of ‘ability’ – how it is recognised, conceptualised, socially configured, nurtured, and embodied in and through the practices of PE – as with those of sport and health’ (p. 95). Powerful discourses of sport and health make the education aspect of PE blurry, according to Evans (2004); if the profession fails to address the question of what constitutes ‘educability’ within PE, the subject could be removed from the curriculum.

In 2006, the journal *Sport, Education and Society*, responded to Evan’s challenge by publishing a special issue on ‘ability’. The contributions attempt ‘to define and in that process, “openly trouble” the notion of ability within the context of curriculum and mostly, within the field of PE’ (Penney & Lisahunter, 2006, p. 207). Wright and Burrows (2006), for example, problematise the assumption that ability is a measurable and observable capacity. This conceptualisation of ‘ability’ remains deeply rooted within the field of PE, in large part due to language and concepts borrowed from exercise physiology and related subjects, which ‘naturalise’ a belief that there are individual differences of physical ability, and they are relatively easy to distinguish (Wright & Burrows, 2006). From this perspective, ‘ability’ is fixed and static; something students either possess or don’t. The prevalence of this premise is

evident in Hay and Macdonald's study (2010). Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, they assert that the importation of a belief in the primacy of capital from sports into PE context played a fundamental role in establishing the ability construct. They go on to explain that this process tended to depend on the resources (sports skills/physical capacities) a student possessed *prior* to entering PE, suggesting that 'less able' students lacked sufficient physical capital, to be assessed as 'able' (Hay & Macdonald, 2010). Clearly, 'ability' is not a neutral term; Wright and Burrows (2006) argue that the ways 'ability' is understood contribute to *differentiating effects* for students related to gender, race, and social class. The danger, they note, is that the attributes associated with physical ability will be those most often linked with hegemonic forms of white masculinity, and the skills and competencies associated with organised sport will continue to be privileged. However, Fitzgerald (2005), as well as Hay and Lisahunter (2006), have shown that not all skills and competencies are valued within the PE context. Fitzgerald (2005) argues that students who engaged in activities such as boccia and fitness, and acquired skills in them did not seem to benefit from normative conceptions of 'ability' (Fitzgerald, 2005). This was also evident in Hay and Lisahunter's (2006) study. They cite the case of a female involved in karate and drama outside school: her movement history/capital is not valued by her teacher. In this respect, Hay and Lisahunter (2006) conclude that in PE, the prevailing notion of 'ability' is not based on how students accumulate resources, but rather about how the resources a student possesses are recognised and valued. Furthermore, they argue that as constructed in particular versions of the field prevailing concepts of 'ability' marginalise or delegitimise certain students (Hay & Lisahunter, 2006).

A majority of critical scholars argue for a rethinking and reconceptualisation of 'ability' in the interest of greater social equity, and for 'constructing' a subject (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) concerned with *education*, in contrast to a curriculum framed by sport, exercise, and recreation participation (Evans, 2004; Hay & Lisahunter, 2006; Wright &

Burrows, 2006). Nevertheless, as Penney and Lisahunter (2006) remind us, rethinking the nature and purposes of ‘ability’ is inseparable from a larger debate about the nature and purposes of physical education. Penney (2013) argues that how ‘ability’ is conceptualised and represented in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are *the* defining issues in physical education. According to Penney (2013), as well as Evans and Penney’s (2008) study, the school curriculum/official policy will significantly influence our thinking about what constitutes ability in physical education and how knowledge and ability can be developed and demonstrated. Although it is important to acknowledge that the school curriculum might facilitate or constrain teacher and student concepts of ability, Penney and Lisahunter (2006), as well as Peter Hay (2008), argue that assessment is a powerful tool in legitimating certain concepts of ‘ability’. According to Hay (2008), assessment is an important site for articulating competence in PE and differentiating between students who possess the codes or dispositions employed or valued within the curriculum: ‘Assessment defines the valued constituents of a subject. In essence, it articulates what it means to be able’ (Hay, 2008, p. 41). Yet, we argue that to a great extent, assessment and grading practices articulate and exhibit what it means to be able or not. Accordingly, in our literature review, we sought to investigate what is valued in assessment and grading practices, giving priority to studies conducted in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia.

Previous research about assessment and grading practices

Research shows that when teachers assess and grade students, their physical fitness (as measured on fitness tests) is an important factor (Cale, Harris, & Chen, 2014; Moen, Westlie, Bjørke, & Brattli, 2018; Redelius, Fagrell, & Larsson, 2009). Moen et al.’s (2018) survey of PE in Norway demonstrates that fitness training is a frequent component in lessons, and students report that physical fitness tests play an important role in their teachers’ assessment

and grading practices. This practice seems to endure even though national education policies in Scandinavia stipulate that teachers should not assess and grade physical fitness levels (Redelius et al., 2009; Udir, 2015c). According to López-Pastor, Kirk, Lorente-Catalán, MacPhail, and Macdonald (2013), the practice of emphasising and assessing student physical fitness levels in PE is historically rooted, and this may explain why teachers still consider results on physical fitness tests when grading students. Consequently, measured physical fitness levels continue to define students as ‘able’ or not in PE.

Along with health discourses, sport discourses significantly influence ability constructions in PE (Kirk, 2010; López-Pastor et al., 2013). Annerstedt and Larsson (2010), as well as Redelius et al. (2009), argue that to receive the highest mark – i.e, to be defined as ‘able’ – students must demonstrate specific sporting skills. Moreover, Annerstedt and Larsson (2010) argue that Swedish PE teachers make judgments about student’s level of achievement without explicit reference to the national criteria in PEH (physical education and health). Instead, they rely on an internalised ‘gut-feeling’ (Annerstedt & Larsson, 2010, p. 109). Similar assessment practices are evident in Norway (Arnesen, Nilsen, & Leirhaug, 2013; Leirhaug & MacPhail, 2015). Leirhaug and MacPhail (2015) argue that even teachers who attempt to adhere to *Assessment for Learning* strategiesⁱⁱ appear to be retain the traditional emphasis in Norwegian physical education of linking assessment to classifying and grading students. In addition, their assessment (for learning) practices reflect norms concerning summative assessments of sports skills that narrow the concept of learning (Leirhaug & McPhail, 2015).

Furthermore, several studies show that PE remains a gendered practice (Rønholt, 2002; van Amersterdam, Knoppers, Claringbould, & Jongmans, 2012; Wright, 1996). Wright (1996), as well as van Amsterdam et al. (2012), conclude that what are traditionally viewed as masculine values continue to be highly regarded in PE. ‘Boys were described as strong,

active, physically capable, and naturally endowed with the capacities to perform well in sports (especially masculine ones like soccer and basketball)' (van Amsterdam et al., 2012, p. 790). Moreover, Redelius et al. (2009) found that to achieve the highest grades in Swedish PE, students must display skills in traditional (team) sports. Since more boys than girls participate in such sports outside school, Redelius et al. (2009, p. 257) contend that 'the chances to receive high grades are not the same for boys' and girls''. However, recent studies also reveal that PE is sometimes an arena where girls and boys can challenge gender stereotypes (Walseth, 2015), and, consequently, understandings and judgments of the abilities of boys and girls.

Our literature review has prompted us to pursue these research questions:

- How do 'able' and 'less able' students appear in PE teaching practice?
- What do these constructs reveal about (student) equity and educability in PE?

Since we conducted our study in Norway, our findings are based on that specific context.

The Norwegian Context

In this section, we give a brief historical sketch of Norwegian PE and the Norwegian curriculum.

Historical constructs and practices related to student 'ability' in Norwegian PE

How ability has been conceptualised and expressed in Norwegian PE has evolved over time. Augestad (2003) argues that during the interwar years PE changed gradually from a military orientation to one promoting good health, based on concepts and practices drawn from the natural sciences and exercise physiology. Consequently, health and physical performance (i.e.

students' ability to throw, jump, run) determined what was regarded as an 'able' PE student during this period (Augestad, 2003). Following the Second World War, sports assumed a more dominant position in PE (Augestad, 2003; Kirk, 2010). The popularity of English ball games, particularly football, contributed to a growing interest in different types of sport, and consequently the skills required for these activities steadily assumed greater importance in determining what constituted 'the able student' in Norwegian PE. At roughly the same time, English gymnastics and dance practice also influenced the Norwegian PE curriculum (Gurholt & Jenssen, 2007). This was particularly true for girls, as can be seen in the adoption of programs focusing on the individual student, problem solving activities and cooperation, as well as a greater emphasis on musical and drama activities (as opposed to traditional sports) (Gurholt & Jenssen, 2007). Within this approach, creative, impulsive, rhythmic, expressive, and cooperative behaviour occupied a central role in teaching practice.

As this historical sketch indicates, physical performance and sporting skills have been important in shaping PE teaching practices and, ostensibly, how the PE profession has conceptualised student 'ability'.

The Norwegian Curriculum

The Norwegian educational system is highly decentralised. Few specifications define the content and methods of the PE curriculum (Leirhaug & Annerstedt, 2016). In upper secondary school, they require that students practice and learn movements through participation in team sports, individual sports, alternative movement activities (lifestyle sports), dance, and outdoor activities (Udir, 2015a). However, the sports and activities (content) that are taught are to a large extent the responsibility of the individual PE teacher. Furthermore, the Norwegian school curriculum is goal-orientated; a PE teacher is mandated to assess students based on

their ability to reach explicit competence aims. The competence aims describe the expected learning outcomes in which primarily center around each student's competence in *practicing* and *carrying out* movements and exercises – as well as their understanding of and reflections on targeted areas related to physical activity, the body, and health. How students *accomplish* the exercises and sport specific skills is regarded as of minor importance. However, and in contrast to many other countries, the Norwegian curriculum does not prescribe what characterises a particular mark. However, prior research has found that (influential) discourses are indicative of teacher decisions in this regard (Aasland & Engelsrud, 2017).

Noteworthy, in contrast to the national curriculum in other countries (Annerstedt & Larsson, 2010), the official policy statement in Norway requires that PE marks should partly reflect student *effort*ⁱⁱⁱ (Udir, 2015b). According to the national policy document, this means that if a student's competence level is considered low, significant effort should be rewarded with a higher mark (Udir, 2015b). To sum up, although the official competence aims for upper secondary PE promote student participation, practice, exercise, and learning in a variety of movement cultures and the official curriculum prescribes what a student should be able to learn, we have found that historical discourses 'live' within the curriculum. This leads to a variety of teaching practises that might reproduce a construct of 'ability' consistent with what we encountered in our literature review.

Analytical framework

In producing and analysing our empirical material, we have relied on discourse theory, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault (1972, 1977, 1978 and 1980). Consequently, we regard the concepts of 'able' and 'less able' student as constituted through discursive practices (Foucault, 1972). For Foucault (1972, p. 49) discourses are *practices that systematically form*

the object of which they speak. The object may refer to sexuality, madness, or, in this case, ability in PE. Moreover, according to Bøjesson (2003), discourses define and determine the boundaries related to what is accepted as ‘truth’, ‘credible’ and ‘reasonable’ at a particular moment. In other words, discourses ‘rule in’ certain ways of detecting and assessing who is able, and also ‘rule out’, limit and restrict alternative ways of acting (Hall, 2001, p. 72). In this respect, Carabine (2001) suggests that we could think of discourses as sets of socially and historically constructed rules designating ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’. Thus, at a given moment there are discursively produced ‘rules’, norms, standards, and traditions that determine who is an ‘able’ PE student, and who is not. Carabine (2001), however, cautions that discourses are closely related to power; some have more authority than others.

As our review shows, discourses of health-related fitness, sport, and masculinity are powerful due to PE teachers’ conceptualisations of student ‘ability’ (Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Redelius et al., 2009; Wright, 1996). However, Foucault (1978, p. 100) urges us not to ‘imagine a world divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.’ In accordance with Foucault’s admonition, our challenge was to remain open to how a diversity of discursive elements can influence how ‘able’ and ‘less able’ students are constituted.

Investigating the constitution of ‘the able’ and ‘less able’ student in PE requires being attentive towards the ways in which ideas and practices (discourses) generated by history inform teaching practice (Kirk, 2010). The PE teacher operates within the ‘rules’, norms, and standards of a professional regime of a particular period. Although PE teachers enjoy considerable latitude, it is likely that they will teach and assess students in accordance with the ‘rules’ and norms generated by the dominant discourses, just as Foucault would have

predicted. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that teachers may resist dominant discourses, and instead apply other (curricular/educational) discourses in their assessments (Penney, 2013).

Research context and methods

This article is part of the first author's PhD project, in which he investigates how 'PE' is constituted in teaching practice. We base the analysis on his ethnographically inspired fieldwork at four upper-secondary schools in Oslo, Norway in the winter and spring of 2015, informed by a discourse perspective (Miller & Fox, 2004). He selected the four upper-secondary schools using convenience sampling. To achieve diversity in the schools, he recruited both older and newer institutions, offering various educational programs (academic, general, and sports). Eight teachers participated, two women and six men. They ranged in age from 30 to 55; all of them had at least 180 ECT credits in sports/PE. We provided them with oral and written information on the project before obtaining their consent to participate. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data approved the project.

Policy literature repeatedly highlights the significance of the context (Penney & Evans, 2005). However, in adherence to ethical research standards, we provide little or no information about the teachers and the schools. Consequently, some complexities of the context in which the teachers work has been omitted. However, given that our findings are consistent with well-established international research literature, we believe that the lack of contextual information does not undermine our analysis. The chart below displays an overview of the pseudonyms given to each teacher, and the school where she or he was teaching.

School A	School B	School C	School D
Lars (13)	Live (12)	Henrik (13)	Mia (10)
Ole (14)	John (10)		
	Frank (10)		
	Marcus (10)		

The first author observed the teaching practice of each teacher at least ten times (the number of observations is noted in the brackets). The fieldwork included observations of a total of 92 PE lessons, as well as conversations with teachers and students and semi-structured interviews with each teacher. Conversations with the teachers occurred in the course of nearly every observation – usually before and after a lesson, but sometimes during them.

In this article, we use material from the teaching practice/lessons, as well as from conversations with teachers. This combination reflects the purpose of the study: Using research material consisting of statements and actions that occurred in teaching practice, we ask this material; what statements and actions are involved in the constitution of an ‘able’ or ‘less able’ student.

Producing research material

The first author took a relatively open approach in the fieldwork (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2005), posing the questions: What do the teachers say and do in a practice called ‘PE’? In addition, how is ‘PE’ manifested in what the teachers say and do? Subsidiary questions that

guided first author while conducting the fieldwork were: What words and expressions are used? Do these words and expressions vary? What does the teacher repeat frequently? What content and activities do the teachers introduce? In addition, what activities does the teacher emphasise in teaching practice? The most common activities that the first author observed in lessons were ball games and exercise training. The teachers' lesson plans for the year included outdoor life, dance, ice-skating and orienteering, however such activities were introduced infrequently. The first author also paid particular attention to what teachers said to students concerning assessment/grading and how they might improve/learn more, as well as what student actions the teachers praised or corrected. The conversations between the teachers and the first author often involved situations that occurred during a lesson and were useful in obtaining a 'whole picture' of what was taking place.

Based on the first author's experience as a student, teacher, and teacher educator, and his reading of the critical literature, he expected that sport and health-related fitness discourses influenced the construct of ability. This is to be expected, because as researchers, we are part of the 'PE culture', and might share many taken-for-granted understandings concerning who is regarded as able or not (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, similarly, the first author perceived that some of the teachers were more influenced by the curriculum in their teaching and assessment practice than he had anticipated. He also, surprisingly, perceived that (some) students had a significant impact on teachers' teaching and assessment practices. Nevertheless, as Alvesson and Skölberg (2008) argue, being open to events as they unfold encourages researchers to be critical of their own preconceptions.

Analysis of data material

The first author chose the theme of ‘ability’ for this article. He was inspired by situations recorded in the empirical material relevant to issues that other researchers have identified as important in the PE context (Evans, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Kirk, 2010). We followed Carabine’s (2001) recommendations on how to complete a Foucault-inspired discourse analysis. The first author carried out the initial analysis, in which the material was read through and then re-read to provide a better understanding of the empirical material regarding who is ‘able’ or not (Carabine, 2001). In the next phase, the first author read and re-read the material to identify situations that signal a student as ‘able’ or not. He then became aware that situations related to assessment, grading, etc. were significant in this regard. In the course of these readings, he identified a relatively large amount of material related to this article’s theme. In the following phase, all three authors separately perused the material selected and then discussed relevant topics and situations to establish a starting point for further analyses. Our particular focus was on material that illuminated how ‘able’/‘less able’ students appeared in teaching practice. (At this point, we encountered that two of the teachers, Lars and Ole, had given us greater access to their formal assessment conversations with students than other teachers did.) Then, based on situations related to assessment/grading, or situations that signaled something was (un-)important to do/achieve, we identified some patterns and regularities. Regarding these patterns and regularities, which indicate discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), we structured our analysis under three themes/headings. Thereafter, we selected the situations that we believed illuminated the discursive effects that influenced the construct of an ‘able’ or ‘less able’ student (Carabine, 2001). In the process of analysis, we strived to remain open to the ways in which a diversity of discourses might be brought into play, and thus, how different discourses influence the constitution of ability in teaching practice. Analysis involved an interplay between ‘letting the material speak’ and

acknowledging that we were basing it on our theoretical perspective. Thus, our work with the material was characterised by a combination of pre-understanding and openness. After several readings and discussions, we were able to identify themes embedded in statements and actions of the teachers. In discussing our findings, we also reviewed our analytic lenses, and referred to the history of PE in Norway, as well as previous literature on ‘ability’.

We acknowledge that our prejudices and methodology have influenced on the production and analysis of the empirical material (Miller & Fox, 2004). In this regard also, our study is a discursive construction which shows *one* possible version of how the constructs of ‘able’ and ‘less able’ student is constituted in teaching practice. However, we have sought to be consistent and transparent in our research process. Based on our research question and our empirical material, we chose some situations which we believe ‘unmask’ (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 185) naturalised and taken-for-granted understandings about ‘ability’ and add something ‘new’ to the research literature. Consequently, other aspects of our material, for example the student perspective on ability, or variations between teachers and schools, receive limited attention here in our analysis.

Findings

We have structured our findings under three themes/headings: 1) *If you want a mark of B or A, you need to run at a certain speed.* 2) *You lack the required skills.* 3) *I like spunky girls!*

If you want a mark of A or B, you need to run at a certain speed

All the teachers in our material conducted aerobic fitness tests, and physical fitness tests occupied a central role within the material. Henrik, one of the teachers, stated that ‘to get the highest mark in PE, the student must achieve an adequate time on the running test’. This

assessment criterion is writ large in several of the teachers' student assessments. At the end of a lesson, Ole gathered his students and informed them about the beep-test^{iv}:

Ole: In two weeks, a beep-test will be held. It is important that you participate and complete it. You should run for your own sake, not for the mark. It's good for you to see how you do.

Some of the students immediately ask how the test results will affect their marks.

Ole: Actually, I don't set mark requirements in PE, but if you aim at a mark of B or A, you need to run at a certain speed. Level 12 is equivalent to a mark of B for boys; if you hit level 14, you're up for an A.

By informing the students that a beep-test will take place in two weeks, Ole signaled the importance of student participation in the beep-test. However, he was cautious to inform the students that that they should focus on themselves, rather than the marks. Yet the students quickly asked him about the mark requirements. Ole responded that he does not 'use mark requirements in PE', but then backtracked and told them that if they 'aim at mark of B or A', they were expected to 'run at a certain speed'. In this situation, Ole appeared reluctant to admit that physical fitness tests did have an impact on the student marks. Based on informal conversations with him and other teachers, we found that they are aware that Norway's current curriculum guide advises against the use of physical fitness tests in setting marks (Udir, 2015c). We suggest that health-related fitness discourses and the use of physical fitness tests are deeply embedded within our material from PE teaching practice, which is consistent with historically valued abilities in PE (Augestad, 2003; López-Pastor et al., 2013). We discovered that it seemed 'easy' and 'normal' for the teachers to defend the use of 'traditional' tests, arguing that they are useful in providing students (and teachers) with 'objective' and reliable feedback on their physical fitness/health status.

You lack the required skills

Our material shows that being designated an ‘able’ student requires mastering certain sport skills. In one of the lessons, a male physical education (PE) teacher conducted individual formal assessment conversations with each student in the class. A student approached the teacher, who had just handed out first-term report cards, during a lesson break. The student asked why he had given her a mark of C, rather than B:

Lars: You do not have the required skills^v. Simple as that. Nevertheless, I agree that you show real effort.

Female student: Yes, but you always tell us, ‘I just expect you to try hard, bla bla bla’. Yes, I know my skills aren’t that good.

Lars: But the sports we engage in at school require practice at home.

Female student: But I enjoy being physically active, and I always do my best in the school sessions.

Here, two different discourses – effort and sport – are brought into play and negotiated (Foucault, 1978). The female student’s impression was that if she demonstrated effort during class, her performance would be ‘good enough’ for a B. At the same time, she seems to agree with Lars’ statement that her sports skills ‘aren’t that good’. When Lars recommends more practice outside school, he is indicating that PE lessons, or the structure of the units, do not provide sufficient school time for students to practice and develop the skills necessary to achieve high marks. Consequently, students who demonstrate ‘effort’ (Udir, 2015b) but are nevertheless perceived as deficient in sport skills can expect low marks (C, in this case) no matter how much effort they make. The student enjoys being physically active and always does her best in the class. However, as a PE teacher, Lars has to adhere to certain ‘rules’ in his assessments. These ‘rules’ are produced by sport discourses, and thus, according to Lars, since the student’s skills aren’t strong, he cannot award her a mark better than C.

In another lesson, in which the first author observed a class for the first time, the students played floorball, different variants of dodgeball and basketball. When the lesson ended, the teacher said this to the first author:

Frank: I have three A-students in this class. Are you able to identify them?

The first author had observed this class' teaching lesson for approximately 60 minutes, during which the students had played some ball games, and Frank assumed this would be sufficient to pick out the A-students. Through the lesson content and this comment, the teacher communicated that students' sports skill level would be easily identifiable and determine who received an A. Frank's statement appears 'normal' and logical within sport and exercise physiology discourses (Foucault, 1980). Embedded within such discourses, it is 'natural' that ability hierarchies between students exist (Evans & Penney, 2008), and such differences are relatively easy (for everyone?) to distinguish (Wright & Burrows, 2006).

We also identified students that acted as 'gatekeepers' on issues of assessment and awarding marks. The following exchange illustrates this theme. At the end of a lesson, some students approached Henrik (the teacher):

Student: If someone participates and does his best, can he get an A?

Henrik: No, skills count as well. So does theoretical knowledge.

When the first author spoke with Henrik after the lesson, he explained that these students were resentful that some of their peers who were less skilled than they were had also been awarded a B. He explained to first author that the students' first term mark largely depended on a competence aim, which students should plan and engage in a self-training program. This afforded less skilled students an opportunity to improve their marks.

All the teachers in our material emphasised the importance they assigned to sport skills in their assessment and grading decisions. At the same time, the teachers differed in the

weight they assigned to this criterion. In a conversation with first author, Mia and a colleague mentioned a boy, who, according to her, lacked ball sport skills, but had improved and performed very well on a physical fitness test. This student achieved a mark of B in the first semester. In this teaching practice, the student's performance on physical fitness tests compensated for his lower sport skills. In the example below, a female student was able to make up for her lack of football skills by exhibiting an attitude that the teacher valued.

I like spunky girls!

During an end-of-first-term lesson, Lars had a conversation with his students about assessment and grading. Here is his exchange with a female student:

Lars: You were awarded a B this semester, but in my eyes, you are an A student.

Female: Okay, how can I do better?

Lars: How can you do better? It is not so much what you can achieve. You'll never become a better football player after three lessons. You just have to keep trying, and above all do your best.

After the lesson, he talked to first author about this student, to whom he would award an A.

Lars: She has skills, particularly in volleyball. Her skills in football aren't that good, but she performs well against the boys on the field, so she'll get an A. A god-damned machine. I like spunky girls!

In this conversation with the student, Lars told her that 'in his eyes' she was an A student. This comment echoes the observation of Annerstedt and Larsson (2010) that teachers have internalised expectations of what grades students deserve. However, when the student asked what her options were to improve her grade, he had no advice to offer her, besides telling her to 'keep going and do your best'. This situation demonstrates that students have limited possibilities for learning and improving the skills that teachers assess and grade.

Ultimately, even though this student lacked football skills, Lars would give her an A. His two primary reasons, he later explained, were that she was 'skilled in volleyball', and she

had exhibited movement characteristics which the teacher appreciated. His comment that he ‘likes spunky girls’ was telling. For girls, being considered ‘spunky’ implies exhibiting characteristics such as toughness, fearlessness, and competitiveness that are traditionally associated with males and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987).

In contrast to the ‘spunky’ girls, in the teachers’ eyes, some of the other girls appeared to be introverted and shy. Here is a comment by a teacher during an assessment conversation with a female student:

Ole: You are shyer than average. I think you should become more assertive. You will benefit from that.

The teacher’s comment indicates that in PE teaching practice, being unassertive is *not* regarded as positive. Together, the contrasting comments of the two indicate that ‘spunky’ girls – those who are tough and competitive – are considered by teachers to be superior in a PE setting to students who are timid and shy. Thus, in these situations, the construct of an ‘able’ student is closely associated with characteristics that have historically been regarded as masculine (Larsson, 2013; Lundvall, 2016). Other studies on gender in PE support this finding (Rønholt, 2002; Wright, 1996).

Furthermore, students who are impulsive and have a good sense of rhythm appear not to be regarded as positively as those who are tough and skilled in ball games. In one lesson, students were engaged in strength training to loud music.

Suddenly, a groovy salsa melody is heard, inspiring a boy and a girl to jump up from the floor and start dancing salsa. Their movements are ‘soft’, rhythmic, and in sync, and they smile and laugh at each other. Some of the other students look at them and comment.

Student (sounding impressed): I don’t know how they do that.

The two teachers (Live and John) glance at the couple, but do not comment on their dancing. They direct their attention toward the other students, who are following their directive to perform strength-training exercises.

When the salsa music ceases, the two dancers rejoin their classmates and resume doing sit-ups.

In this situation, when salsa music came on during a lesson, two students spontaneously began to dance, engaging in rhythmic and spontaneous movements. Based on the reaction of some of their peers, these students danced with great skill. However, the reaction of their teachers was different, and their silence indicated that they did not appreciate it. Even though dance and alternative (modern) movement activities occupy a relatively central role in the national curriculum (Udir, 2015a), our observations of teaching lessons and the year's lesson plans show that in practice, such activities are rarely introduced (only in one or two lessons per class during the school year). Thus, such movements and the skill exhibited in performing them well do not appear to be important criteria in determining what constitutes 'able' in PE (Fitzgerald, 2005; Hay & Lisahunter, 2006).

Discussion

The research interest of this article was to examine how 'able' and 'less able' student are determined in PE teaching practice. Consistent with previous research, we find that powerful discourses of sport, health-related fitness, and masculinity are embedded in teaching practice, thus influencing the constitution of 'ability'. Our findings show that to be considered 'able', students must exhibit certain team sports skills and be physically fit. Moreover, female students that evince personal characteristics such as toughness, fearlessness, and competitiveness are positively valued in assessments. This supports the conclusion that traditional concepts of masculinity are important features in conceptualisations of being 'able' in PE. In contrast, students who lack traditional team sports skills, a 'satisfactory' level of physical fitness, and appear shy and timid are consigned to the 'less able' category.

Based on our findings we argue that conceptualisations of an 'able' or 'less able' student are not conducive to learning/education, or even official curricular policy. However,

the official curriculum directive does not provide clear direction; it must be ‘translated’ into teaching practice. We suggest, in line with Kirk (2010) and Redelius, Quennerstedt and Öhman (2015), that constructs of students who are ‘able’ or not tend to build on and reproduce ‘old’ ideas and practices in PE. Developing physical fitness, for example, is closely connected to what can be measured and tested, which have traditionally occupied a dominant position in PE (and still do). Since the 1950’s, research in physiology has produced extensive ‘proof’ that health is closely related to exercise, physical activity levels, and physical fitness (Kirk, 2010). Based on this premise, the use of physical fitness tests has become normalised (Foucault, 1977) in teachers’ assessment and grading practice. In this respect, health-related fitness discourses continue to predominate in both instruction and assessment practice, leaving little room for doubt that to be regarded as ‘able’, a student must be well trained. Nevertheless, we suggest that the guide to the curriculum (Udir, 2015c) influence on the teachers, and thus they are cautious to explicitly state that physical fitness tests are used to determine grades. In this respect, curriculum discourses produce some effects on teaching practice, and this illustrates that new directives in the official curriculum may cause changes within PE teaching practice.

We also find that for girls, toughness is more highly regarded than being considered shy and timid. Historically, this represents a sea-change in our culture. As recently as the 1950’s, exercise physiologists depicted female athletes (other than gymnasts) as ‘abnormal’ or ‘mannish’ (Larsson, 2013). In contemporary PE, the valuation of toughness and traditional masculinity seems to have become the normalised and taken for granted approach to assessing ‘ability’ among girls as well as boys (Redelius et al., 2009; Rønholt, 2002; van Amsterdam et al., 2012). Moreover, based on our observation of lessons and annual plans, we argue that performing aesthetic movements extremely well seems to be less valued in teacher assessments than being skilled in traditional team sports. In this respect, being spontaneous,

rhythmic and a good dancer are not attributes that mark a student as able (Gurholt & Jenssen, 2007; Lundvall, 2016). Our findings shed light on the current incorporated and normalised conceptions of what is considered an able student, and we argue that these conceptions of ‘ability’ are formed through a myriad of past ideas and practices (Foucault, 1977). According to Kirk (2010), as well as Gurholt and Jenssen (2007), historically, the male and female versions of ability were shaped by different movement cultures. While traditional sports/games and fitness training dominated the ‘male version’ of PE in the years after World War II, the ‘female version’ emphasised expressive, creative, dance, and rhythmic movements. However, when PE became co-ed, both internationally and in Norway, the male version dominated (Gurholt & Jenssen, 2007; Kirk, 2010). One might question why it should be more important to reward characteristics such as toughness and competitiveness rather than shyness and timidity in a school subject that is in theory promoting education and learning. One possible answer is that learning is placed in shadows (dimmed); what counts are sport skills.

Furthermore, consistent with prior research (Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Redelius et al., 2009), our findings indicate that possessing good sport skills *prior to* entering a PE class plays a significant role in achievement of ‘able’ student status. Due to the prominent position of sports in the history of PE (Augestad, 2003; Kirk, 2010), powerful sport discourses make it appear logical that one must exhibit a high level of sporting skills to be considered an ‘able’ PE student (Evans, 2004). Yet, as our findings illustrate, there is a shortage of time to *practice and learn* the sports skills assessed by the teachers (Kirk, 2010; Larsson & Nyberg, 2017). Due to the discursive producing rules, norms and traditions in PE (Foucault, 1972), students who lack experience from sport participation prior to entering PE teaching, will have limited opportunities to achieve the highest grades, no matter the effort they make. A question

indicated by our findings is: Should PE continue to follow practices that exclude students who make considerable efforts to improve from being designated ‘able’?

As previously noted, several scholars have argued for a reconceptualisation of ‘ability’ in PE to foster social equity and educability (Evans, 2004; Hay & Lisahunter, 2006; Wright & Burrows, 2006). However, sport discourses make it logical and legitimate that ability hierarchies will continue to exist, based on sport performance standards. Both teachers and students engage ‘in the processes of “differentiation” to identify what is absent from students’ performance and assess what each can or cannot achieve’ (Evans & Penney, 2008, p. 41). Students who possess superior sport skills might find it unfair and unreasonable if so-called lesser-skilled students achieved the same marks. Consequently, PE teachers may find it difficult to justify a grading practice more consistent with official curricular standards when challenged by students with superior sport skills.

Conclusion

In this article, we show how influential discourses of health-related fitness, masculinity, and sport shape what constitutes an ‘able’ and ‘less able’ student in PE teaching practice (Evans, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Wright & Burrows, 2006). We are concerned that conceptualisations of ability, and thus what is valued in student assessment unfairly privilege some students over others. For example, our findings show that characteristics traditionally associated with boys are privileged in the concept of ‘ability’. This indicates that many more boys than girls will have a chance to achieve the best marks in PE. In addition, we find that students who lack experience in particular (team) sports outside school have limited or no opportunity to achieve the highest marks. In this respect, as currently taught, PE is not a subject that provides all students with opportunities to learn, improve, and be assessed as

‘able’. This is contrary to the official Norwegian PE curriculum in their instruction and assessments. When teachers adhere to it, even students who are perceived to have limited sport skills can achieve ‘able’ student status. We believe that PE educators could make an important contribution to contemporary education and teaching values if they re-examined and revised their construct of an ‘able’ student. Further research is needed to develop teacher assessment practices that would encourage student learning and improvements in their abilities more effectively.

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ⁱ Some literature on this topic has been published based on different concepts – for instance, the talented, gifted, good, or excellent student (Bailey, Tan, & Morley, 2004; Hunter, 2004; Kirk, 2010).

ⁱⁱ Assessment for Learning strategies means that the students are expected to: 1) understand what they learn, 2) Receive feedback on the quality of completion, 3) receive advice on how to improve, 4) assess their own progression in PE.

ⁱⁱⁱ We use 'effort' here as a translation for the Norwegian word 'innsats'. In this context, the word 'innsats' connotes a student's commitment to the subject, and their exertion in lessons.

^{iv} A multi-stage fitness test.

^v Due to our knowledge of the Norwegian PE context, and also the teachers' annual plans for teaching, the teachers refer to (traditional, games) sports skills.