

# **“It’s really about understanding human beings...”:** *Exploring PE teachers’ perception of working in multicultural schools*

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**I**n the middle of the 1990s Sweden was declared a multicultural society in a Government Official Report concerning ethnicities, languages and cultures. How do the majority and minority cultures meet in the context of school and physical education? What do the compromises look like, and on whose terms are they developed and realized?

## **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to explore, with the help of a pilot study carried out in the autumn of 2004, how PE teachers in schools in multicultural areas perceive, define and describe their role and the role of the subject PE and Health. This is done by exploring the discourses formulated by teachers, in relation to the official assignment of the school system, and to PE and sports as a means of integration on a social, structural and/or cultural level. The socio-cultural practice that the PE teachers were asked to describe is how they acknowledge and understand their role and subject when interacting with students in the context of Physical Education and Health. In this study, school is seen as a place for learning and socialisation, in which PE teachers meet young people constantly shaping and reshaping their image of themselves and their identity, living in several contexts simultaneously.

## The question of pluralism – on whose terms?

The multicultural debate in Sweden during the past few decades has to a large extent dealt with questions about integration, and which values and/or attitudes are exchangeable and/or negotiable. In this article, the concept of integration describes the process in which individuals learn and become accustomed to a society's common values, linking the individual to society and creating inclusiveness and loyalty (Walseth, 2004). The opposite is often defined as marginalisation and/or exclusion. From a school perspective, the questions at issue have often been how to handle the organisation of schools, subject content, teachers' strategies, holidays, symbols and festivities linked to religion, and dress codes (Roth, 1998).

There is political awareness that contemporary Swedish society is characterized by one majority culture and several minority cultures, and is struggling with segregation not only on the labour market, in living areas, students' merit values, etc., but also in terms of health and well-being (SOU 1996:55; 143; SOU1999:137; Skolverket 2004). It is therefore of interest to focus on pluralism and the school subject Physical Education and its teachers in multicultural areas.

International studies indicate a lower grade of participation in organised sport and leisure time activities for young people from ethnical minority groups (Taylor & Doherty, 2005). Furthermore, studies present results showing girls from minority groups as having a significantly lower level of participation than boys. Often these patterns of participation are explained by socio-economical conditions, but, as several researchers emphasize, this does not explain the whole picture. Several studies have concluded that there exists ethnic discrimination and racism in the school context of PE and in the field of sport, leisure and recreation. These types of discrimination have been identified as having significant constraints to participation (Carroll, 1993; Benn, 1996; Taylor, Legrand, N. & Newton, J. 1999; Tsai & Colemann, 1999; Taylor & Doherty, 2005; Dagkas & Benn 2006). Examples put forward are attitudes from the teachers/leaders, expressed in comments on dress codes and facilities for showering, and choice of activities and respect for religious holidays. Other findings when studying experiences of PE in relation to different ethnic minority groups are that cultural background may affect how the instrumental values of participation are perceived (Siann & Lightbody, 1996).

Nordic research has focused mainly on participation in sports activities, membership in organised sport and sport as an arena for integration (Strandbu & Bjerkeset 1998; Pettersson, 2000; Strandbu, 2002, Riksidrottsförbundet (RF), 2002, 2003; Ibsen, 2003; Fundberg, 2003). Studies focusing on participation and attitudes towards PE and Health are almost non-existing. The results from studies of participation in organised sports vary, although the overall picture is that young people from ethnic minority groups have a participation pattern that differs from adolescents with Nordic backgrounds, and that the participation level in organised sport is lower than for young people from the majority culture. One study (RF 2002) stated that the participation level for boys with non-Swedish backgrounds was even higher than for boys with a Swedish background. The response rate for the enquiry was 51%, which may indicate that the result should be read with caution. Another study showed that adolescents with non-Swedish backgrounds are participating less in organised sport, but are more physically active outside organised sport. Again, this is not the case for girls with immigrant backgrounds, who show low levels of participation and physical

activity in both organised sports and outside it (Rasmussen et al., 2004). In a recent study from the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs (Trondman, 2005) young persons' participation in organized sports are measured in three different ways, and the results are the same: boys born abroad have the highest level of participation and girls born abroad have the lowest, whereas Swedish boys and girls are placed in the middle.

Two Norwegian researchers have tried to understand the significance of religion in relation to the participation in sport and physical activity. They conclude that religion *per se* is not the problem, although there are religious groups that interpret physical activity for girls and women as contrary to the proper way of acting in relation to religious principles. Mostly, this deals with clothing and ways of moving (exciting/sexually attracting), and if there are possibilities for men to watch the women moving (Walseth 1998, 2004; Strandbu 2002, 2004). They also state that the character of femininity worth striving for is defined by culture.

Walseth, one of the Norwegian researchers, also emphasises that sports federations have to reflect on how sport, is presented and experienced as an integrating arena by participants with other backgrounds than, in this case, Norwegian. She declares that time has come for a new strategy that moves away from anti-discrimination work (to let minority groups in) towards influence: When aiming at integration the question at stake is how the minority groups will be able to get influence on the organisation and performance of sports (Walseth, 2004).

It is important to emphasize that international research have also shown that inclusive leisure and recreation participation can act as a positive experience and assist with social inclusion and identity formation for people from ethnic minority groups (See Taylor & Doherty, 2005). Several researchers conclude that these dimensions need to be focused in the future.

## **Theoretical frame work**

A socio-cultural perspective has guided my choice of method, analysis and interpretation of data, in terms of how socio-cultural practice is constructed, lived and understood. The experiences, but also the understanding of these experiences, give both acknowledgments and motives or non-motives for involvement in a practice, and this altogether makes the participation and /or acting meaningful. This acquisition and management of social practices are embodied, and tells us how to take in and handle given situations in given contexts. What we as socio-cultural beings experience as significant spring from an agreement of what is represented as meaningful. Therefore, with a socio-cultural perspective, our way of handling our choices will be dependent on the direct/ indirect interaction with others, where we use our intellectual (cognitive, language) resources and physical tools, together with material and immaterial values/products (Säljö, 2000).

## **Methods**

The pilot study consists of two interview studies, one with 32 adolescent pupils aged between 12 and 18, and one with their PE teachers. In this article, focus is on the PE teachers. The schools of the respondents were chosen through a strategic sample from the National

Board of Statistics. Representatives from the Swedish PE teachers' association helped with names of PE-teachers working in schools in the areas. In total, the cohort contains 10 PE teachers (four working in upper secondary schools and six in secondary schools). All of them had a PE teacher exam and had been working in the profession from four to more than 25 years.

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews with question areas focused on their role as PE teachers in schools in multicultural areas. Questions concerning content and implementation of PE, their students' participation in and attitudes towards the subject PE and Health, as well as questions about sport and physical activities during leisure time, were asked. Furthermore, questions about PE and sports as tools for integration were asked.

In my analysis of the interviews I have worked with discourse analysis. By taking up the PE teachers' "language in use" and how patterns in the used language show up, an analysis is possible of how the use of language becomes a part of the meaning-making practice both on an individual level and in relation to others. The uses of languages both create and act as meaning-making tools in the specific social meaning-making process. In my analysis and interpretation of the language in use I try to explore which discourses are used and how they interact (the discourse order). To be able to do this I have placed the explored discourses in a social, historical and cultural context, in relation to the official assignment of schools (in terms of common values and the right to equal education for every child in Sweden), and to how sport and physical activity is addressed as a means of integration on a social, structural and/or cultural level.

### **...the teacher role**

Which discourses, or ways of speaking, can be found in the material? How do these teachers look upon their role as PE teachers in multicultural areas, and how is their use of language to be placed in a socio-cultural context? Most of these teachers had been working at their schools for a long time, two of them for more than 25 years. All of the PE teachers except one gave me the answer that there is no difference at all working as PE teacher in multicultural areas:

I can't say that I see any big difference. (*female teacher, upper secondary school*)

[I]t is hard to discuss this... (*male teacher, upper secondary*)

[I]t's really about understanding human beings /.../ It doesn't matter if the students are Swedish or immigrants... it is exactly the same. It's like, those who like sport, they like sport, and those who don't like sport they don't like it. (*male teacher, upper secondary school*)

[W]ell... you know... sport is international. I never think (in terms of) immigrants or Swedes. I don't. I never think in those terms. See... I adjust the lessons to the stu-

dents, I always try to be flexible... I don't stick to a certain line. /.../ The most important thing is that they reach "the goal". (*male teacher, secondary school*)

But in each interview, several discourses concerning content and conducting eventually developed. Apparently, there are differences, or certain self-evident ways of handling the teaching of the subject together with the students. On the question if the teaching is affected by working in a multicultural school, answers could be:

[I]n fact not... if so, one gives alternatives. Of course I have put things aside, but it is not due to students with an immigrant background. (*male teacher, upper secondary school*)

Yes, I do believe so, because we have students who have been here (in Sweden) for such a short while.... we have to adjust to the students... but I don't reflect on why I make adjustments – that it may depend on the students coming from different cultures. (*female teacher, upper secondary*)

The discourse of not doing things differently may be interpreted in terms of teachers with long experience having internalised a practical professional strategy for conducting their role as PE teacher. They make lessons work; they meet each student as an individual and try to offer content suitable for the subject and the student. None of the teachers had had any specific introduction to or education in how to handle newcomers in relation to the Swedish schools system, to students, parents, families, etc. The knowledge of different cultures, traditions and religions had been learnt mainly through experiences made by themselves together with the students, or in some cases by contact with mother-tongue teachers or by some meetings with religious leaders (e.g. imams). None of them spontaneously mentioned any conflicts with the formal guidelines or the value bases for the Swedish school system. There were certain problems with small groups of students and swimming instruction. This was seen mainly as a problem for the school in terms of finding economically feasible solutions for extra training in separate groups for girls and boys, and not as a problem specifically for the PE teacher.

Some of the PE teachers mentioned religion as a barrier for participation, mainly in connection with swimming or in relation to fasting during Ramadan. One teacher mentioned religion as a hindrance for participating:

For some students who are strictly religious... it feels as if this (religion) is their barrier. They believe that they are doing something wrong. And then one has to discuss with them... and I'm not that well informed about the Koran, but one has to speak with people who are... to make it possible for them to lessen their bad conscience. (*Secondary school, female teacher*)

## Content and the figuration of the subject

### *Learning sport*

Concerning the content of the subject an important issue for the teachers was to let new students come in contact with the sports culture, a culture that some of their students were quite unfamiliar with. But this was not only mentioned in the context of newcomers. The level of skills in general, the uneven level of skills between boys and girls, attitudes towards female teachers, the inexperience of being outdoors and in some cases the non-tradition and non-interest of sports and sports culture were expressed as parts of these teachers daily work.

What may make a difference compared to other PE teachers in more homogenous schools is these teachers' awareness of their students' lack of experience of sport as a phenomenon in society as well as on a more individual level. These discourses and the order of discourses reveal that it is important for these teachers to emphasize the skill level of their students in sport. According to the teachers, the students, and mainly the male students, are eager to learn the skills of sports to be able to use them as a way of getting status in a student group or as an investment for a needed social skill. Learning about sport and the codes of sport become a way to allow integration for boys, and this also becomes an important issue for the teachers. The importance for boys to learn skills in sport is also reported in other studies (Braham, 2003). Learning to swim was mentioned as a special skill which needed extra support and where extra training was arranged for students both in secondary and upper secondary school.

From the interview material, a reflection that arises is how Swedish Physical Education is conducted with its roots in Western society in terms of what sports is, which values that are connected to it, and why it is important for the individual and society.

### **PE and outdoor education**

In the Swedish syllabi for compulsory school and optional school (upper secondary school), outdoor activities have, since the beginning of the 1900s, been a part of the content of the subject and the activities throughout the school year. In 1928, as many as 12 days per year could be reserved for different types of outdoor activities, in upper secondary schools. Today the most common number of days for outdoor activities is 2-3 for secondary schools and even fewer for the upper secondary schools (Lundvall, Meckbach, Thedin-Jakobsson 2002). When PE teachers were asked about outdoor education, and of their views on how their students practise outdoor activities, a pattern emerged. Outdoor activities are seen as something which young people from different minority groups have less experience of. Both students and teachers in the pilot study said this:

[T]he forest is at the most a park, where one goes with the family to barbeque... to spend a night in a tent, go hiking, canoeing... that is for the majority totally unknown... we have a forest close by, and we do have outdoor education days, but they are so few, and they (the students) in fact don't have any equipment from home... it's a question of learning... to give positive experiences... to make them realise it is

fun, not dangerous /.../ but we have to surrender due to practical obstacles. (*female teacher, upper secondary school*)

Clearly this is an area of bad conscience for the PE teachers, except for one whose school supported hiking and skiing for all students. Although outdoor education is highly valued by the PE teachers, the practical obstacles, the time factor, the skill level of the students, the unawareness of clothing and equipment, the lack of mentors and, of course, economical barriers, hinder the implementation of outdoor education. My reflection is that this also has to do with the order of discourses, where the sport discourse is placed above the outdoor recreational discourse which may explain the lack of priority for outdoor education, together with the overall working conditions.

Our education when it comes to outdoor education is below all critique if one says so... we don't have it and if it is due to us or due to the students and what they think and say? (*male teacher, secondary school*)

## **The body's present absence**

The skill level in sports is also present when the concept of body awareness is mentioned by some of the teachers (two female, one male).

[I]t is hard to generalize, but if I do it I would say that many of the children and adolescents in the areas do have inferior body awareness. They become anxious when the heart starts to beat faster, when they get breathless, when they get red in the face. This is not a natural condition. They don't understand what it is caused by and that becomes a source of anxiety. (*female teacher, secondary school*)

Other views put forward were how important it was for the male students "to look good". Appearance was seen to be linked to pride and status. For girls different pictures were given:

Yes, it is important in many cultures... about the girls... I don't know... if one goes in to the inner city on a Friday one may see a big variation... some immigrant girls will try to show off a sexual appeal; décolletage, high heels, heavy make up and push up bras... some have bodies... some don't. /.../ I get questions about the body and training from all students... but not from any Muslim girl. (*male teacher, upper secondary school*)

When asked about the students' attitudes towards their bodies in PE, several teachers expressed how some female students from minority groups don't assert themselves, while, on the other hand, the male students do:

The female students keep themselves very calm and silent. They do what they are told, but the male students are more expressive and noisy and take more place... and that may be due to hierarchical traditions where boys are more highly valued in relation to the girls, and that they know from home that they are like girls, but a little bit better. (*female teacher, secondary school*)

The awareness of the body as a project, as a part of self-identification, is obviously not part of some of the girl students' life world. The placement of the body as a project and/or as a place for self-identification has its roots in Western society (Featherstone (1998); Schilling (1993). A reflection is that time has come for a more complex and inclusive discussion (Benn 1996; Dagkas & Benn, 2006; Holroyd 2003).

### **The passive girls?**

The image of the predominantly passive girl students is invoked by all of the teachers. This discourse in the field of sport is not new or unfamiliar; it has existed since the emergence of sport as a phenomenon, and partly still exists. A medical discourse related to the biological differences between the male and female body make a difference in the view of what, how and when the feminine body may become involved in sports activities. The responsibility for reproduction has given the female body its position as fragile, less active, weaker and less aggressive (cf. Hargreaves 1994). This discourse is found in the interview material, in combination with the view of females in foreign cultures as oppressed. Are there any counter discourses against traditional role settings in PE coming through in the material? The organisation of PE lessons is highlighted in the interviews. Several teachers express a strong belief that separate instruction is good for their students:

R: I do believe in separate instruction, unfortunately I must say, because it's such fun to be together, but the differences are too large...

I: And in the end one has to decide...?

R: Yes... mm... if the Swedish girls and the immigrant girls meet and interact better, perhaps that is as important... (*female teacher, upper secondary school*)

Other teachers have chosen, or have been given, co-education as the only alternative due to the organization of the school, and have to handle it: "I have to cope with it until it works" (*female teacher, upper secondary*).

### **Life style issues**

The teachers in the secondary schools stress the importance of encouraging students to find some leisure time activities with focus on sports and physical activities. Different strategies for opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity are mentioned. One school has a very active sports association, founded by the PE teacher. Other schools try to guide their students to possible activities. Teachers in the upper secondary schools accentuate the issue

of health and health instruction in terms of how (three out of four) schools encourage the students to become active or to continue with some physical activity. Gym cards are often distributed by the schools. However, these mostly attract the male students. The teachers are well aware of the deficiencies of the areas where their students live and how this may affect the students' activity patterns:

[T]hey have difficulties in leaving X-town – to look for something outside – so the activities that they wish to participate in have to be situated here...they won't travel to the city... but some sports are non existing and then it (living in the area) is restricting, and their parents can't help... so we try to help them find possible clubs. (*female teacher, secondary school*)

The prevalence of activities, sports clubs is very patchy... and there are fewer activities for girls than for boys (*male, secondary school*)

Along with talk of opportunities in the residential areas of the students, the teachers were asked how they conceive of their students' leisure time. Here the unequal possibilities for leisure time between boys and girls are emphasized. Several examples of what determines the structure of the girls' time after school is given: house chores, responsibility for younger brothers and sisters, the need of being at home etc.

The girls are very tightly linked to home... many of them are. And they live one type of life in school, and another at home... and many of these girls that we have as students are second generation immigrants. They have a very, very tough time... the parents have kept their traditions, and the girls... they have a tough time. (*female teacher, upper secondary school*)

Several of the PE teachers describe how they try to help girls to join leisure time activities and how they work for the possibility to place school leisure time activities as part of the ordinary school day, as a way of helping the female students to participate.

## **Sport and integration**

In the interviews the potential of the school subject PE and Health is suggested as a tool for social and cultural integration. Indeed the PE subject was mentioned, by several of the teachers, as an important area for "integration" with an even greater potential than organized sport: "The subject has a greater potential than the sport movement itself" (*male teacher, upper secondary school*). This integration has its emphasis placed on the social and culture aspect in terms of norms and values of the sports culture of the majority, and values connected to this; meeting new friends, getting to know other areas of the town, etc.

Less is mentioned of the other way around – how students from different minority groups influence the subject or the figuration of the subject. Instead teachers gave examples of how students could get upset when different minority groups were given the opportunity

to lead their local dances or games. This was expressed as of no interest for other students from other minority groups.

The PE teachers' awareness of the deficiencies of residential areas became apparent in the interviews. They seemed to be both concerned and frustrated. As long as the cultural identity of the students and their families was constrained by the lack of contact with other parts of society, this was a threat to structural integration, and not something that sports, or the subject PE could contribute to.

Two secondary schools worked more intensely with the subject as a platform for activities bound for integration. Sports and outdoor activities were used for breaking the socio-cultural borders of the students' residential areas.

[W]e received some money from the school to enable us to buy (equipment) second hand so the board of the school supports us... and we want to show them (the students) some Swedish activities... I do think that we do more of these activities (skiing, hiking, swimming) than other schools do /.../ so we do quite a lot of these things... we believe it is important to practise "being out in society" as it were, to get away from X-town. (*male teacher, secondary school*)

## Discourse orders

My reflections based on the pilot study and the review of literature reveal a need for further studies in Sweden on how attitudes and experiences of teachers and youth from different minority groups may make a difference in terms of making PE an instrument for assisting social inclusion and identity formation in relation to movement culture and specifically body awareness. In this research there is also a need to include the settings for physical activity for boys and girls (Riddoch, C. & McKenna, J., 2005).

What is put forward as meaningful education in PE is to teach the students' sport, and that is also what the students ask for (Lundvall, 2005). The issue of skills is not present in other studies about PE and PE teachers in Sweden (Lundvall & Meckbach, 2004; Thedin Jakobsson, 2004). The dominating educational discourse in Sweden is to look for the individual needs and development of each student, and there exists, among the interviewed teachers, a certain way of looking at their students' needs. It may be translated as the need for skills in sports, to be able to, in some cases, catch up with years in another country without sport, or the lack of opportunities to interact with the sports culture.

Contributions or benefits of having students from different countries are only mentioned together with the input of cultural dances. No other movement culture is put forward as contributing to the PE education. Outdoor education seems to be highly valued in research about health and well-being and in public discussion, but not necessarily rendered legitimate in relation to sports. Why is this? Clearly this has to do, not with the implications of the curriculum or syllabi, but with the fact that the subject is dominated by traditional sports with roots in Western society.

As a researcher, the fact that the interviewed teachers had had to develop teaching strategies by experience, flair and intuition surprised me. As the body is deeply involved in

the learning processes of the subject, questions about the role of the female and male body, views on clothing, and movements, will appear as soon as you leave a traditional, secularised Swedish standpoint. How should one handle this in relation to the common values of the Swedish curriculum schools? The discourse of “handling” to make it function will become the only strategy. Is it right or wrong to exempt an 18-year-old girl from PE due to religious reasons? Is it right or wrong not to let girls and boys have segregated instruction? Is it right or wrong to offer girls only swimming lessons? Is it right or wrong to expect students celebrating Ramadan to participate in physical activity during their fast? On whose terms and on what basis are decisions made? I miss this public discussion among teachers themselves, teacher educators, and the Swedish National Agency for Education.

Will the physical education in Sweden lead to an involvement in physical and recreational activities for students from minority groups in a life long perspective? Will knowledge in the subject and the skills that the students internalise make the difference in terms of changing the statistics concerning health and well-being? How will it be possible to let sports become an arena for integrating, not only shared knowledge about the sporting rules and how to play – but to find good examples of how sport can be implemented taking into account the different views on movement and body culture?

The dominant discourses that came forward in the pilot study were mainly based on the sporting discourse with quite a narrow view on gender, movement and physical activity. Supporting activities are needed for young people, especially for girls, with non-Swedish backgrounds where there is contact with movement cultures other than traditional sports. The nexus of gender in relation to physical activity has its implications, and needs to be put on the agenda, not in terms of adjusting the girls to the boys, but in terms of identifying which democratic values we need to protect.

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