This is the published version of a paper published in Sport, Education and Society.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Redelius, K., Quennerstedt, M., Öhman, M. (2015)
Communicating aims and learning goals in physical education: part of a subject for learning?
Sport, Education and Society
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2014.987745

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:gih:diva-3723
Communicating aims and learning goals in physical education: part of a subject for learning?

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Based on a socio-cultural perspective on learning, the aim of this article is to examine how aims and learning goals are communicated in physical education (PE) practice. A special focus is on scrutinising how teaching practices are framed in terms of whether and how the aims and learning goals are made explicit or not to students. The aim is also to relate these kinds of communications to different movement cultures. The result shows that many of the students taking part in the study do not understand what they are supposed to learn in PE. However, if the goals are well articulated by teachers, the students are more likely to both understand and be aware of the learning outcomes and what to learn in PE. The opposite is also true. If the goals and objectives are not clarified, students find it difficult to state the learning objectives and know what they are supposed to learn.

Keywords: Physical education; Movement cultures; Socio-cultural perspective; Communicating aims; Learning outcomes; Teaching practice

Introduction

It is a few weeks into a new term. My [one of the authors] thirteen-year-old daughter has just started Year 7 and has moved to a new school. At the breakfast table we discuss her new school and the new subjects to which she has been introduced. Spanish is one of them. ‘What have you learnt in Spanish?’ I ask curiously, and she gives me a long explanation about what she has learned. I go on to ask her about other subjects: ‘And what have you learnt in maths?’ She tells me a few things and the discussion continues: ‘What about English and science, what have you learnt in those subjects?’ Once again she patiently describes the things she has learned. ‘So’, I continue expectantly, ‘and PE? What have you learnt in PE?’ She looks at me as if I am simple, or at least naive. With an emphasis on the final words, she says: ‘We don’t learn things in PE, we do things!’

Throughout its history physical education (PE) has often been regarded as a ‘practical’ subject, with a focus on doing gymnastics, sport or play. Hence, the subject has been criticised for not being knowledge orientated, but rather a recreational subject where participating and ‘getting sweaty’ are regarded as ‘good enough’ (Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2008; Placek, 1983). Therefore, it is neither...
surprising nor remarkable that the girl in the introduction responds that PE is about
doing, not learning. To what extent and when do teachers discuss and communicate
what students are supposed to learn in PE?

The purpose of this article is to examine how aims and learning goals are
communicated in PE practice. Of particular interest is to scrutinise how teaching
practices are framed in terms of whether and how the aims and learning goals are
made explicit or not to students, and thus create different prerequisites for student
learning. Central questions are: Which aspects of learning are articulated and
highlighted before the lessons? Which aspects of learning are highlighted in the
teaching practices when the content of the lesson is presented? How are they played
out or articulated by teachers and students in relation to different movement
cultures?

These questions are posed against the background of previous research that has
revealed uncertainties about the goals and objectives of PE, as well as in the light of
new educational reforms in a goal- and result-oriented educational system: a system
that can be expressed in terms of an accountability regime (cf. Biesta, 2004; Lingard

In general, research on PE in Sweden shows a striking lack of clarity over the
purpose of the subject, particularly in terms of its educational purpose (Ekberg, 2009;
Larsson & Redelius, 2008; Redelius, Fagrell, & Larsson, 2009). The same can be said
about PE in many countries, and a number of scholars have drawn attention to the
subject’s diverse and often blurred educational objectives (e.g. Kirk, 1998, 2006;
way: ‘while physical educationalists may be in agreement about what the subject “is
not”, the matter of what the core aims of the subject are remains far less clear and a
source of apparent tension’ (p. 74). Kirk (2006) claims that ‘evidence suggests that
physical educators as a professional group are confused and disoriented about the
contribution of their subject to the educational goals of schools and to other social
goals’ (p. 69).

Besides the above-mentioned confusion about the contribution of PE, the education
system has changed dramatically since the 1990s in many parts of the Western world
(Apple, 2001). Several authors emphasise that the new educational reforms reflect
neoliberal ideals in terms of an increased decentralisation and privatisation and
freedom of school choice (Englund, 1994, 2011; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012), and
this is especially true in Sweden, one of the countries that has gone furthest in this
endeavour (Ferry, Meckbach, & Larsson, 2013). The new reforms privilege discourses
of individual achievement and expectations of personal responsibility; something that
Englund (1994) refers to as education moving from public good to private good. The
new reforms can also be expressed in terms of ‘New Public Management’, which
means that the state has handed over full responsibility for the running of schools to the
municipalities, although the Swedish state is still responsible for the national
curriculum and the national objectives in the various school subjects. This has led to
the need for an intensified quality control by the state, not least because parents and
students require extensive information about which school to choose. Quality control,
and thus an accountability regime, is reflected in a goal- and result-oriented educational system that includes a new goal-based grading system and more national tests and evaluations (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012).

In consequence, the role of the teacher has changed. Being a teacher becomes that of a facilitator of learning; someone who is in charge of setting up environments that best facilitate the achievement of the national learning goals. In line with this, the Swedish National Agency for Education (SKOLFS, 2011) emphasises the importance of a clear dialogue about the learning goals, where teachers are supposed to clarify and share learning intentions and give constant feedback to students (see also Black, 2004).

In our view, the combination of voices from the research field showing uncertainties about the subject’s goals and objectives and the new goal- and result-oriented educational system warrants a study about how teachers deal with these new demands in their daily work. In an ongoing observation study about teaching and the prerequisites for learning in PE, we have looked more closely at how the aims and learning goals are communicated in PE lessons. We are especially interested in how this is expressed in the teaching practice and in relation to different movement cultures.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in which this study is grounded is a socio-cultural perspective on teaching and learning (cf. Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008; Wertsch, 1998). Even though it is the teaching that is in focus, with this perspective we are interested in studying how the teaching creates different prerequisites for student learning. Learning is accordingly seen as a social production of meaning in the relation between the individual’s situated experiences and the institutional context. It is described as the process in which human beings develop appropriate ways of acting that enable them to participate in different practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard, 1998). Consequently, knowledge formation and learning never occur in a void, but are always situated in an historical and cultural context. The enterprise of socio-cultural approaches is thus to ‘explicate the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional and historical contexts in which this action occurs, on the other’ (Wertsch, 1998, p. 24). This involves exploring and describing different aspects of the learning situation through the functions they constitute in the explored ongoing practice (cf. Quennerstedt, Öhman, & Öhman, 2011).

In this article, taking the context in which action occurs into account also means paying special attention to the prevailing movement cultures (Crum, 1993). A movement culture, for example, the practice of different forms of sports, exercise and outdoor activities, is characterised by certain intrinsic logics. Such an approach is inspired by Bourdieu’s (1990) notion about logics of practice, where actions are given meaning and govern certain actions. Engström (2008) points out that all sporting activities can be described on the basis of these notions, which are also reflected in participants’ (in this case teachers’ and students’) ‘collective
consciousness about which values and behaviours ‘apply’ and are perceived as self-evident’ (p. 322). A common logic of practice is competition, with the purpose of ranking. This is the self-evident and fundamental logic on which many, but certainly not all, sports activities are based. The logic in this movement culture is the structuring principle for how different championships, leagues, series and competitions are arranged (including children’s sports). If ranking is not included it is not regarded as competitive sport. The logic of practice in another movement culture is to create some form of impression that others can observe. What is valued, by both the performer and the viewer, is the aesthetic performance, the artistic expression or the actual performance in which the body is the tool. In all dance practised as an art form, the aesthetic expression is the obvious and fundamental purpose.

In this study, the socio-cultural perspective is used to direct our attention towards how teachers in different teaching practices situate PE lessons by communicating its aims and learning outcomes. We also relate these teaching practices to different movement cultures. In this way, the perspective makes it possible to scrutinise the prerequisites for learning and thus what kinds of learning that are privileged in different teaching practices.

**Method**

In the design of the research project in which this study is based, the focus is on exploring the decisive aspects of the content of the teaching that is important for students’ understanding and learning in ongoing PE practice. For this purpose, the method of approach includes pre- and post-lesson interviews with teachers, video-recorded lessons and post-lesson interviews with students (Quennerstedt et al., 2014).

**Participants and context**

The participants in the study presented in this article are teachers and students from three secondary and three upper secondary schools in Sweden. The age of the students ranges from 14 to 16 years. The schools are located in three different cities in Sweden. In all, six PE teachers and about 150 students participated in the study. At each school at least three PE lessons, in total 24 lessons, were video-taped.

**Data collection**

During the video recordings, two cameras were used. One camera was placed on a tripod in a corner of the gym in order to capture the gym area as a whole, including the environment and the artefacts used, and the collective actions of students. The other camera was held by one of the researchers moving around the gym with a view to capturing important instructions, relations, communications and movements at close range (cf. MacPhail, Gorely, Kirk, & Kinchin, 2008; Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2008; Rønholt, 2002).
In the study, pre- and post-lesson interviews were conducted with the teachers. The interviews were directly connected to the video recorded lessons and the questions asked related to the knowledge, teaching and processes of learning that were expected or targeted in the forthcoming lesson. The post-lesson teacher interviews were conducted immediately after the lessons, and here the questions were related to how the lesson had gone in terms of knowledge, teaching and processes of learning in the lesson.

After all the lessons at a particular school had been video-recorded, the researchers viewed and reviewed the recordings in order to identify events in the lessons that, from our theoretical point of view, could have significance for student learning (Quennerstedt et al., 2014). With a point of departure in the identified events, the teacher and at least three students from each school were interviewed when watching four to six events (1–4 minutes each) on a screen.

Data analysis

The data-set was analysed in terms of how the lessons were framed in the teaching practices concerning the communication of aims and learning outcomes, as well as how teachers and pupils communicated the learning outcomes in PE in the pre- and post-lesson interviews. In a first step, the practices of all the lessons were scrutinised in order to acquire a comprehensive picture of the content in terms of movement cultures. After that, the pre-interviews with the teachers and the introduction to each lesson were analysed in terms of how the teacher expressed the aims, outcomes and what was to be learned. The ways of communicating aims and learning outcomes in the PE lessons were then categorised into different teaching practices.

Themes emerged when we compared how the teachers communicated the learning outcomes in the pre-interviews and in the lessons with how the students communicated the learning outcomes of the lesson. In a socio-cultural perspective, the function of teachers’ actions in relation to students’ actions are in focus. The identified themes were then compared and critically examined by the researchers in the group in relation to different movement cultures, and the data was revisited in order to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Results

The analysis reveals that in some of the teaching practices the teachers are quite clear about the aims and outcomes of the lessons and communicate these to their students. In some of the teaching practices, teachers express the aims and outcomes of the lessons in the pre-interviews, but do not communicate them to their students during the lessons. In other teaching practices, teachers find it difficult to communicate the learning outcomes of their lessons in the interviews and when teaching. These different teaching practices will create different prerequisites for student learning. In the following, we show how these different ways of communicating aims are expressed. Quotes and descriptions from pre- and post interviews as well as from
PE lessons will be used to illustrate how the aims and goals are traced (or not) in the different teaching practices.

*Aims are not defined—and not expressed to the students*

Typical for the category presented below is that teachers are not explicit about the expected learning outcomes in their teaching practice. When asked about these issues both in pre- and post- interviews, the teachers find it difficult to answer and want us to clarify the question. They often start talking about sports activities, the importance of having fun and organising the class in a suitable way. In their teaching, the emphasis is mainly on telling the students what to do during the lesson and asking them to get on with their physical activities as quickly as possible.

When the teachers try to answer our question about the aim of the lesson, they talk about the aims in terms of ‘giving the students opportunities to try different things’. In one pre-interview, a teacher formulates the aim like this:

*Can you tell me about the coming lesson?*
We are going to do some different fitness tests so that the students can try them out. I’m not going to assess how good they are, but it will give them a chance to try different kinds of tests.
*So, what do you want them to learn?*
Ahh … they [the students] … will get the hang of what the requirements of different sports are. They will try the different tests and get to know what they are for and what they measure. Sometimes I say: ‘if you are a guy and you want to become a policeman, you need to do better than 16 seconds on this test’. I also tell them about other similar tests. (Teacher School A)

Teachers also describe the aims in rather vague terms, such as wanting the students to become more ‘comfortable’ when dancing or when playing ballgames. However, the teachers sometimes do express specific aims in the pre-interviews, albeit in a rather narrow way. For example, one aim is that ‘the students should be able to dribble a ball with both their right and left hand’ (Teacher pre-interview School A). Such an aim could make sense in a movement culture in which playing ballgames is made explicit and communicated to students. Since the pattern is rather the opposite—no overall aims are articulated, and the content of the lessons changes from week to week—being able to dribble a ball with both hands could be seen as a decontextualised and arbitrary aim.

Within this category we also find practices by teachers who state that the aim of a lesson is the same as the activity, such as: ‘the aim is to continue with floor ball’ (Teacher pre-interview School D). An expression like this is often accompanied by statements such as ‘I want them to be really active and become sweaty’ or ‘I want the intensity to be high’. When trying to answer questions about what the students should learn, the teachers often pause and then continue by telling us what the students are expected to do during the lessons: ‘they will practise different ways of shooting in floor ball, and also where to position themselves so that we can play a game’ (Teacher pre-interview School D). We believe this uncertainty has to do with
the prevailing movement culture in PE. Students play different ballgames, such as
floor ball, but the logic is not competition and ranking and thus it is difficult to
express the aim.

The teaching practices that are placed in this category involve teachers who find it
difficult to express what the aims and learning goals are when asked directly about
them. Moreover, these teachers seldom express such things in front of the class. In one
lesson the teacher says: ‘Today we will do circuit training’ (Teacher PE lesson School
B), and then explains what the students should do at the different stations. He does
not say anything about what the different exercises are good for, or what the students
are supposed to achieve in terms of skills, abilities and knowledge. When we
interviewed a boy after the lesson, and after watching a video sequence, the discussion
went like this:

What are you doing here?
I don’t know
What happened here? Did you learn anything?
(pause)
Did you learn anything from this?
No …
If I put it like this, what do you think the teacher wanted you to learn?
Er, I don’t know.
Have you done a lot of circuit training before?
No …
(Student School B)

A common answer in pre- and post-interviews from all teachers in the study, but
especially in this particular category, is that ‘the students should learn to cooperate’.
It is as though they have nothing else to say, and in this respect cooperation sounds
like a legitimate answer.

Cooperation is also mentioned by many of the students in the interviews when we
ask them what they think they should learn in PE. One example is especially striking
and emerged in an interview with a girl after a mini trampoline lesson. In the lesson,
the students had mainly stood in line and one by one run towards the mini
trampoline to try different jumps. When looking at this sequence of the video after
the lesson, and being asked to say what she thinks she should learn, she says: ‘I don’t
know … cooperation perhaps’ (Student School D). Cooperation thus seems to have
the function of legitimising the lesson content at a general level regardless of what the
content may be.

Aims are well-defined—but not expressed to the students

A common feature in the second category is that in the pre-interviews, the teachers
are quite explicit about the aims and the learning outcomes when talking about the
coming lesson. They seem to know what the students are supposed to learn, and why
the specific activities are on the agenda. The teachers are also clear about what the
students are supposed to achieve in terms of skills, abilities and knowledge, and why.
However, in front of the class, and only a few minutes after the pre-interview has been conducted, almost nothing is said about learning outcomes, aims or specific knowledge. It is more a question of organising and managing the class and telling the students which sporting activities they are to take part in. This reveals a teaching practice where teachers know what the aims and learning outcomes are, but do not communicate them to the students.

In the pre-lesson interviews with the teachers, clarity of expression relates to learning techniques in volleyball, practising gymnastic skills, such as handstands or cartwheels, or learning to dance:

The goal is to be more able and confident to the music … in the dance project … where they have chosen the music … and then they have done a music analysis in terms of beats and beats per minute and looked at intro, verse, chorus and bridge and looked at how the song is constructed, and then made dance moves from how they fit the song … both regarding the text, if they want, and the music. The purpose is to work in groups and also to learn to move to music. (Teacher School C)

The teachers are particularly articulate when it comes to describing what the students are supposed to learn in terms of sports techniques, and clearly communicate the different technical skills and exercises the students are expected to learn during the lesson. The teachers are also quite articulate about the purposes of fitness training, both in terms of the physical training aspect and the longer term benefits of PE activities as a whole:

The purpose is to try different things that can help to deepen their understanding of something. This might help them to lead a spinning class on their own, or take part in a body pump class in their spare time, which is quite popular. … The idea with PE is that they continue in one way or another … that they are prepared … when they attend a spinning class they know what to expect and what to do. (Teacher School F)

The analysis reveals that the teachers seem to know what the students are supposed to learn, and why the specific activities are on the agenda in PE as a whole. The teachers are also clear about what the students are supposed to achieve in terms of skills, abilities and knowledge, and why.

In the post-lesson interviews, the teachers in this category elaborate on what the students are supposed to learn. One teacher states that even if it is difficult to achieve a high level of physical activity, ‘I think that they reached the learning goals I set up for them’ (Teacher School F). Also, the teachers are explicit in relation to knowledge about the different activities and in relation to fitness training:

An important part of knowledge about physical training is to be able to lead and to evaluate a lesson. And this is actually that so they can carry out a lesson. […] Our theoretical parts are then connected to the grading criteria, that you should be able to explain context and all that in the theoretical assignment. (Teacher School F)

In this way, the teachers contextualise the particular PE lesson and what students are supposed to learn beyond the learning site, and how they might relate their
knowledge to a movement culture of sports in their spare time, or in relation to a future profession, where a movement culture involving strength training, fitness and ergonomics are important aspects to learn.

However, our analysis of the video-recorded PE lessons shows that when standing in front of the class immediately after the interviews, the teachers say next to nothing about aims, learning outcomes or specific knowledge. As in the first category, when assembling the class the instructions are more related to organising and managing the lesson, and telling the students which activities they are to take part in:

Today we are going to get used to handstands and forward rolls. Everybody will go to all the stations, but over there is a preliminary exercise. (Teacher School C)

The instructions are mainly oriented towards the here-and-now. For example, the teachers tell the students that: Today … We will practise … We will do … We will work … We will execute. Interestingly, the reference is often to ‘we’, including the teacher, and not to what the students are supposed to learn or what the purposes or objectives of the lessons are. Also, only brief instructions are given before beginning the activities:

Today we are going to dance. Bugg. It is good that you like it. We will do three dances. Linedance, cha-cha slide and Bugg. Quite easy and if we have time cha-cha slide up-tempo. Good … the most difficult thing with this class is to split it into boys and girls … so … how do we divide? … You lot stand here and you girls stand here. (Teacher School F)

Here we can see that the lessons are clearly framed by the activities, and in other lessons also how the activities are organised in terms of what to do at the different fitness training stations, or when doing different sport technique activities. In this way, the wider movement cultures seem to be taken for granted.

When the students in post-lesson interviews are asked what they have learned in PE, or what they are supposed to know after nine years in school they do not really seem to understand the question. One student responds like this:

Yeah … I think that you should participate in most lessons […] try the best you can … and have some knowledge of all sports. […] I attend all classes, I bring my trainers and everything and I also do my best. (Student School C)

Another student says:

He he … I think you are asking the wrong person now … because I really don’t have a clue. I only know that you must be able to cooperate, and you must be reasonably good in many different sports, and that you should probably understand some kind of relation between things like food and exercise. But I really don’t know. (Student School C)

In the excerpts, the students have at least some sense of what the purpose of PE is, although this may not necessarily coincide with teacher’s ideas expressed in the interviews with the teachers. The students have some general ideas, but that is all. Some students also think that they have not learned much at all in PE, and that they
already know everything. In other words, the teacher’s instructions do not help the students to recognise what to learn.

Well … yes … I don’t know actually … I don’t think I learned much, but I maybe learned that … No … I actually don’t know. I think that most things we do I know already. […] Maybe I should learn things but I don’t know what these things are in that case. (Student School F)

Sometimes comments about health, for example, in terms of that PE is being good for their health, are expressed in terms of what they have learned, but again, not in any specific way.

Taken together, our analysis shows that students who are subjected to the teaching practices in this category find it difficult to make the learning and knowledge of PE explicit. They are actually clearer about what is expected of them in terms of PE being fun, that they should do their best and that they at least try what is on offer during PE. As one student puts it, if you do your best ‘then it doesn’t matter if you can or if you can’t do or know things … then you are not worried’ (Student School F).

**Aims are well-defined—and expressed to the students**

In the third category, the teachers are detailed and expressive about the forthcoming lesson’s aims and learning outcomes in the pre-interviews. Teachers in these teaching practices seem to be well aware of the kinds of knowledge, abilities and skills the students are supposed to learn. For example, one teacher state that the students should learn various kinds of endurance training, where knowledge about maximum and resting heart rate is important, and that they should be able to calculate their own heart rate. The teachers are also very clear about aims when it comes to different ways of moving to music, learning the basic steps of various dances, rhythm and students creating their own dances. In front of the class, the teachers express these things to the students and use the same vocabulary as they did in the pre-interview. They are able to articulate and argue for the activities, and the learning outcomes and aims are often related to various national curriculum documents.

In the post-interviews, the teachers talk about the students’ actions in relation to the learning objective: ‘It feels as though the students are able to analyze their heart rate, and they understand different ways of endurance training’ (Teacher School B), or ‘now, they have learned the basic steps of this dance and they move to the beat of the music quite well’ (Teacher School E). In these two examples they talk about the lessons in terms of learning.

The students experiencing these teaching practices also seem more familiar with the aims of PE. The students’ ways of talking about the learning outcomes stand out compared to the teaching practices in the other categories. It seems as though the clarity exercised in this teaching practice has the function of encouraging students to talk about what to learn. However, it is important to emphasise that how students respond to aims and learning outcomes depends on how the questions they are asked
are formulated. When we ask general questions, such as ‘Why do we have PE in school?’, the students in this category answer in almost the same way as other students: ‘it is about physical exercise, that you should be physically active, not just sitting at home and being lazy, arouse interest in any sports, to have fun and learn to cooperate’ (Student School E). But when we pose questions such as: ‘What have you learned this term?’ or ‘What did you learn in class today?’, they are clear about the learning outcomes: ‘I learned to calculate my heart rate and how many heart beats I should have in the various endurance training sessions’ (Student School B).

In this category, the analysis shows that there is a clear link between the teaching and the students’ use of language when talking about aims, knowledge and learning outcomes. The following example shows, in a more detailed way, what this linguistic relationship looks like.

In the pre-interview, one teacher says that he is working with a theme of physical training consisting of fitness, intensity and workload—endurance training at the different levels of A1, A2 and A3:

Students should learn about their bodies, different effort levels and what their heart rate is after the different exertions. Today, they will practise exercise at the intensity A3, about 90% of the maximum heart rate. Students should ask themselves: ‘What is my heart rate when I work with this activity?’ (Teacher School B)

At the beginning of the upcoming lesson, the teacher tells the students that the goal of this lesson is to practise intensity A3, i.e. 90% of the maximum heart rate. He says that the maximum heart rate is about 220 minus age. When the teacher talks about endurance training, he uses concepts like intensity levels, A3, heart rate, cardio exercises and oxygen uptake. These concepts are to some extent picked up by the students when they in post-lesson interviews talk about what they have learned in class: ‘We have themes where we are supposed to get to know our bodies in different ways. I have learned about endurance training at different intensity levels, for example, A1, A2 and A3’ (Student School B). Another student expresses it like this:

I already knew how to practise fitness and different intensities, but I had no idea that there was something called A1, A2 and A3, this is something new. We’ve been given some darned good information. It is thorough and it is good. It is not too much or too advanced. We are not doing the sports programme you know, but the construction programme. So what we are told is quite sufficient. (Student School B)

Several students in this category point out that they appreciate teachers’ clarity. One of them spontaneously reflects on the different teaching and teachers she has experienced in PE over the years. She says that the teacher she has at present (Teacher School E) is more prepared and more explicit than others she has had in the past:

The teacher we have now teaches in a much clearer way … he really explains what we are supposed to do, why we should do it and how we should do it—so we all know how we are supposed to do things. (Student School E)
When we ask whether each lesson has explicit goals, and if everyone knows what they are supposed to learn, another student says:

Not really when we have ball games … but when we have dance it is very clear. Because he says: ‘Now it is important that we learn the four beats to the bar (learn four stroke when we’re dancing) that we can move to the right beat, and to move our arms and legs at the same time … because that is what he says one should do. But when we have ball games, when we play floor hockey, we play. We usually do warm ups and dribble with the ball’. (Student School E)

The above student states that the learning outcomes are more obvious when the content of the lesson is within a movement culture of dance, as opposed to a movement culture involving ballgames. This is a clear tendency in the analyses in general.

Discussion

In a goal- and result-oriented educational system, such as that in Sweden, a stronger emphasis should be placed on what students learn and their level of knowledge in relation to the stated goals. The teacher is thus expected to provide environments that best facilitate the achievement of the national learning goals. These new requirements related to transparency regarding goals and objectives may demand other teaching practices that are different than the ones earlier research has shown exist. In this study, we have looked more closely at how aims and learning goals of lessons are communicated in the teaching practice, and also how they are articulated in relation to different movement cultures.

Our study shows a wide variation regarding the clarity of learning goals in the teaching practice. One category is consistent with previous research and the teaching practice shows a striking lack of clarity when it comes to learning goals and what students should actually learn in PE. Another category highlights a combination of awareness and the importance of learning goals, but where the traditions and habits of school subjects seem to take over in practice. The third category presents a different picture than previous research, and shows a teaching practice where learning goals are clearly communicated.

Our study also shows that teachers’ clarity when expressing aims and learning outcomes often seem to depend on the type of activity, or rather the movement culture, being pursued. It appears more difficult to communicate aims and learning outcomes in relation to movement cultures involving ballgames, than those involving dance or fitness training. The dominant logic of practice in ballgames is mostly competition with the purpose of ranking (Engström, 2008). However, this logic is not the fundamental principle in ballgames played in PE in school, at least not in Sweden. What is the logic then? Our interpretation is that when there are uncertainties about what the logic should be, communicating aims and learning outcomes are difficult. In other words, ballgames are not an obvious movement culture to relate to in terms of what is supposed to be taught or learnt.
When it comes to dance activities, we observed that teachers usually give the students an explicit task to work with. One such task is to work in groups of four to five students and come up with moves and create a dance together. It is very rare for students to be given similar assignments when the content is ballgames. The logic of practice in a movement culture involving dance is often to create or express some form of impression that can be observed by others. The aesthetic performance gives the practice meaning, and such performances are also often expected when students dance.

An interesting and remarkable result in this study is the category ‘Aims are well-defined—but not expressed to the students’. Here, teachers in interviews provide us with a clear picture of the aims and what they expect from the students in terms of learning before the lesson, but do not communicate this to the students in class. Why is that the case? One interpretation of why teachers do not take the time to communicate goals and learning outcomes may be that teachers expect that the students want to start with their physical exercises as quickly as possible. One teacher in the study explained that he is afraid that PE will be boring or not enjoyable enough, and that he does not want to complicate things when the students just want to be active.

The teaching practice in a school subject is often deeply rooted in habits, traditions and customs, and teachers normally regard the content as natural and obvious. The teacher in the above example expresses a fear that the lesson will not be enjoyable if he talks too much. In PE there is a strong tradition of doing fun physical activities, rather than paying attention to aims and learning outcomes. Is the unintended secrecy regarding aims and learning outcomes in PE a consequence of the ‘tyranny of enjoyment’ in PE? Do PE teachers create a particular movement culture in school PE, where the logics of practice are about fun rather than learning (cf. Placek, 1983)? Due to the dominance of habits and traditions, the communication of the aims and learning outcomes are not always obvious.

In this study, we have also shown that when teachers clearly articulate the goals, students seem to be more able to understand what they are expected to learn in PE. The opposite is also evident. If the goals and objectives are not clarified, students seem to find it difficult to state and thus know what they are supposed to learn. There are differences in students’ understanding of learning if the aims are expressed in a clear way: ‘The aim of today’s lesson is to create an understanding of endurance training’, or ‘Today we will learn the basic steps of a dance, and learn to move in time to the music’. This can be compared with more unclear statements when it comes to learning like: ‘Today we’re going to run an obstacle course’, or ‘Today we’re going to dance’.

To conclude, we have shown that articulated goals appear to help students to understand what teaching is all about; the language constructs sense and meaning and allows students to relate to the educational aspects of PE. The results in this study indicate that communicating aims is important if students are to perceive PE as a subject for learning. However, more studies need to be conducted to explore the intricate and complex relationship between teaching and the prerequisites for learning in PE.
References


