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Listening to students’ silences – a case study examining students’ participation and non-participation in physical education

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Background: For years researchers have been engaged in revealing the impact of the hidden curriculum in PE on students’ participation and non-participation. The hidden PE curriculum encompasses the knowledge, the relations, the assumptions, the norms and the beliefs that students unconsciously and unintentionally learn through the process of education. As the hidden curriculum reinforces particular values and attitudes among students in a very subtle and often unnoticed fashion, it limits students’ possibilities for becoming aware of, and thus reporting, how the tacit messages communicated through the hidden curriculum impact on their position of participation and non-participation. Thus, in this article we argue, that examining students’ silences, that is the things students do not voice, is significant for the understanding of the impact of the hidden curriculum on students’ participation and non-participation in PE.

Purposes: In this article, we aim to develop insight into students’ silences in order to elucidate how aspects of the hidden curriculum serve to reinforce some students’ non-participation in PE. Much attention has been devoted to particular values and attitudes unintentionally transmitted by teachers in PE. However, in this article we examine how the everyday exchanges *between the students themselves* may also convey a hidden set of meanings, that impact on students’ actual experiences of the PE curriculum and thus, mitigate the intended effects of students’ participation.
**Research Design:** The backdrop for this article is a single-case study carried out in a multi-ethnic and co-educational secondary school in Denmark from January to December 2014. The article draws on material collected through focus-group interviews with 7th grade students (including participant-diagrams filled out by students) along with observations of their PE classes. The observations took place once a week throughout the whole calendar year.

**Findings:** In the article, we point to students’ intentional silences that are highly reflective of the normative expectations negotiated within the peer group. In addition, we show that the pressures toward social conformity have a direct impact on the positions of non-participation intentionally taken up by some of the less socially respected students in PE. These students were highly aware that how they behaved in PE and what they voiced in the interviews, might have consequences for their peer group connections within PE and for their social reputation among peers outside of PE. In addition, we add to current literature on student silence, by pointing to a category of non-privileged silences. These silences revealed that a minor group of students were not aware of or had not recognized their position as non-participants in PE. Moreover, they appeared unable to imagine that things could be different and to voice a desire for change.

**Conclusion:** We argue that our findings reveal critical aspects of students’ non-participation that would be difficult to access if we did not
listen to, hear and attempt to understand students’ silences. In order to extend the knowledge base on students’ participation and non-participation in PE, we hope that this article may also encourage other researchers to let students’ silences breathe and speak.

Keywords: Adolescent; Curriculum; Inclusion; Physical education; Voice

Introduction

For years research has highlighted the impact of the hidden curriculum on the reproduction of inequality and reinforcement of exclusion processes in PE and education more broadly (see, e.g., Bain 1975; Fernandez-Balbao 1993; Kirk 1992). The concept of the hidden curriculum refers to ‘the tacit messages, the daily regularities, the relations, and the norms and values that lurk undetected, behind, and beyond the content of daily lessons and subject matters’ (Dodds 1985, cited in Fernandez-Balbao 1993). As the hidden curriculum encompasses the knowledge, attitudes, norms, values and assumptions unconsciously and unintentionally learned by students through years of education (Kirk 1992), the hidden curriculum is embodied at a deep level (Sandford and Rich 2006). Thus, students are often not aware of and therefore, cannot negotiate and/or reject the messages sent by the hidden curriculum. Moreover, as the hidden curriculum acts as a ‘subtle and often unnoticed means of reinforcing particular values and attitudes’ among students, it is often neither recognized nor acknowledged by students (Laker 2000, 73). This makes it difficult for students to voice and communicate just how much the attitudes, the beliefs and the body practices reinforced by the hidden curriculum restrict their participation in PE. Thus, the argument can be made that the hidden curriculum serves
to *silence* students who take up a non-privileged position in PE and that aspects of the hidden curriculum might best be documented and assessed through students’ silences.

In PE, hidden curriculum research, has been particularly focused on revealing how assumptions held by teachers transmit stereotypical expectations of girls and boys’ behaviours; expectations that reinforce particular values and attitudes amongst students, construct gender differences and thus serve to uphold the culturally constructed and gendered order of sport (see, e.g., Azzarito 2012; Flintoff and Scraton 2006; Gorely, Holroyd and Kirk 2003; Oliver and Lalik 2004; Oliver, Hamzeh and McCaughtry 2009; Rønholt 2002). What this research also shows is that this type of learning might have significant consequences for students’ engagement in PE. Thus, some students learn that they are legitimate participants in PE while others learn they are not (Casey 2017). However, as this learning is not only ‘driven’ by the teachers in PE, the hidden curriculum is embedded in the everyday exchanges that occur between teachers as well as between the students themselves (Casey 2017; Rønholt 2002). Thus, students also support this learning through their own curricula (Casey 2017). For instance, the nature of students’ peer relationships and the values promoted by peer groups, such as cliques, might also convey hidden messages, that impact on students’ experiences of the PE curriculum. However, the significance of students’ peer group relations and interactions are aspects of the hidden curriculum, which have not yet attracted much attention in PE research. This suggests that there is still much to learn about the effect of the hidden curriculum from those students who are silenced.

With these considerations in mind, in this article we examine *student silence* as an important means of investigating the hidden set of meanings embedded in the everyday exchanges between the students in PE. By identifying issues that typically
remain unstated by students, yet have implications for students’ participation and non-participation in PE, we might prevent this hidden curriculum ‘from remaining a black box of unspoken truths’ (Tekian 2009, 823). Treating silence, not as an absence of empirical material, but as an integral part of language that can be studied in its own right (Minh-ha 1988), we agree with Poland and Pederson that ‘what is not said may be as revealing as what is said’ and as such, that ‘what is left out’ may sometimes ‘exceed what is put in’ (1998, 293).

**State of the art**

*Student voice research*

A number of researchers have theorized and argued for the significance of including students’ voices in educational research (Batchelor 2006; Cook-Sather 2002, 2006; Robinson and Taylor 2007). Within PE, the publication of Graham (1995) is often referred to as the methodological milestone, marking the important shift to extend the focus of researchers to provide students with a voice. The concepts, practices and meanings associated with the term ‘student voice’ and thus the approaches used to elicit students’ perspectives have proliferated considerably in the last 30 years and as such vary across different studies (Cook-Sather 2014; Hill 2003). However, what student voice proponents generally agree is that student voice work is important as it enables, supports and empowers students to take active and meaningful roles in decisions related to their learning and thus provides students with the opportunity to critique and reform education (Batchelor 2006; Cook-Sather 2002, 2006; Robinson and Taylor 2007). Moreover, arguments have been made that authorizing student perspectives motivates students to participate constructively in their education (Cook-Sather 2002).
With the growth of student voice research responding to and acting upon young people’s voices in PE, increased attention has also been given to students’ silences (Long and Carless 2010). However, as we will argue in the following, only a few empirical studies have been specifically devoted to analyses of students’ silences; that is, to the things students do not voice.

**Issues of silencing**

One major concern within the student voice literature has been the silencing of students; that is the voices we do not listen to, the voices we do not hear and/or the voices we do not acknowledge (Long and Carless 2010). In relation to the first, great efforts have been made to correct the imbalance in the voices that have shaped practice to date. For instance, much attention has been given to the voiced experiences of girls (Flintoff and Scraton 2006) and, more recently the voiced experiences of ethnic minorities (Harrison & Belcher 2006). In addition, some attention has been directed to the voices of the physically ‘less skilled’ and disabled students (Fitzgerald 2006). What is distinctive for all of this research on students’ voices is the priority given to the non-compliers and/or the non-participating students in PE (Long and Carless 2010). However, as shown in for instance O’Donovan (2003) it is crucial that the voices of those students presently taking up the most central position of participation in PE (typically the boys and/or the physically highly skilled students) are not silenced in research examining the development of more inclusive practices in PE.

Another concern raised within the PE literature in relation to the silencing of students, is the stories that are not acknowledged by participants themselves and so cannot be shared. Most notable, has been the research documenting how the hidden
curriculum ‘acts as a highly selective, powerful screen that filters what we pay attention to and what we ignore’ and as such limits students’ ability to become aware of their own ‘victimization’ (how they become victimized or victimize others) and ‘to envision other worlds and possibilities’ (Fernandez-Balbao 1993, 231).

In terms of what and how messages are communicated, the silences initiated by the hidden curriculum are closely related to the silences initiated by the media and popular culture (see, e.g., Burrows 2010). As the hidden curriculum ‘foregrounds or backgrounds particular discourses and social relationships depending on whether they serve the purposes of the dominant groups’, so does the media and popular culture (Fernandez-Balbao 1993, 231). For example, Burrows (2010, 149) points to the important insight that interview commentaries ‘do not necessarily yield the ‘truth’ in children’s experiences of physical culture. Rather, their talk serves to illuminate the discursive resources children have available to draw on and the ways they position themselves as “healthy” (or not) subjects in relation to these.’ This same point might be claimed in relation to the discursive resources available to students in positioning themselves as participants or not in PE, and so is highly relevant to this article’s intention of examining students’ silence as an integral part of student voice. Listening to students’ silences we might be able to better understand how students give meaning to these discourses and as such go beyond the surface meaning of students’ voices.

Issues of silence
Closely related to issues of students being silenced are issues of students being silent. Enright and O’Sullivan (2010) add to this discussion with insightful empirical examples of students’ reluctance to speak and share their minds. Likewise, research has pointed to students’ distinct personalities and students’ social relationships as
reasons to why some students do not feel confident and/or able to participate in and contribute to group discussions (Fisette 2008; Lalik and Oliver 2007). Thus, in particular students who are socially isolated and/or quiet might refrain from voicing their opinions. In efforts to include these voices, which might fail to be represented within more traditional interview methods, alternative approaches for data collection have been suggested (Sparkes 2009) and widely employed in research with students in PE (Fitzgerald and Jobling 2014; MacPhail and Kinchin 2004; Oliver 2013; Oliver and McCaughtry 2010).

An important point made by Long and Carless (2010, 215) in relation to participants unable to share their stories, as well as in relation to participants unwilling to share their stories, is the potential that ‘these stories might have something new to offer, something qualitatively different from stories already told.’ To access these stories, one strategy may be to overcome the issues of silences and silencing referred to above. However, finding ways to analyse and better understand students’ silences may also enable us to access these stories.

**Silence as a possibility for learning about students’ non-participation in PE**

What is clear from this review is that students’ silences have been acknowledged and discussed within the PE literature. But, what also becomes evident is an apparent tendency to treat silences as ethical and/or methodological problems to overcome rather than as data alongside students’ voiced utterances. Closely related to this tendency is the observation that in the majority of this research, silence has been studied only implicitly and as a context for analysing and understanding students’ voices.

Within childhood research scholars have called for more studies to critically
reflect on and take account of silence when embracing children’s voices:

Given the overwhelming embrace of children’s voices in childhood research, one might expect that silence would constitute a central feature of voice-based accounts of children’s worlds. However, a search for published work which considers silence as an important feature of voice research in childhood reveals little to none suggesting that childhood scholars have failed to critically examine the more complex and problematic features which constitute voice such as silence (Spyrou 2016, 8).

Based on our review the same might be said about PE scholars. This is rather surprising since, we argue, the context of PE appears to offer a unique opportunity to explore and come to fully understand students’ silences. Physical education is notable in that to a large extent and in opposition to the more traditional subjects in school, students express themselves through their bodies. Thus, the bodily dimensions of the subject make it possible to analyse students’ silences in relation to what they say through their physical behaviours and performances.

**Theory**

In this article, our conceptualization of silence is based on Lisa Mazzei’s work on and categorization of silences. Mazzei, who is based in the USA, is associate professor in qualitative research methodology and curriculum theory. With reference to her study on racial identity and awareness among white teachers, Mazzei (2003, 2007) has theorized and written extensively about silence as data. From Mazzei’s perspective, silence is not just an absence of empirical material. Rather, it is ‘a place where the researcher goes to find out more, but unlike speech it is not always as identifiable, tangible, or observable’ (Spyrou 2016, 10). Despite this potential of the silences
contained within our data to reveal our subjects’ feelings, still the non-voiced and the silent are often treated as non-data and so ignored and left out of qualitative research (Mazzei 2003, 2007).

As succinctly expressed by Spyrou (2016) because of its apparent nothingness a major challenge is of course to hear what silence is saying. According to Mazzei (2007), in order to recognize the significance of silence, we need to go beyond what is immediately observable and present in data. This means that silences are to be discovered in the ‘hidden, the covert, the inarticulate: the gaps within/outside the observable’ (Mazzei 2003, 358) and what should be ‘listened’ for, are the questions not answered, the sentences, phrases and expressions not finished. That is, what is being intentionally or unintentionally left out and repressed (Mazzei, 2007). Adding to Mazzei (2007), Lewis (2010) has argued that hearing silence and recognizing that silence is not empty requires the researcher to be reflective about why and how (s)he recognizes, notes, responds to and interprets children’s silences. Further, it requires the researcher to be reflexive towards the situational dynamics in which the interviewer and respondents are jointly involved in knowledge production (Lewis, 2010).

When our definition of empirical data is expanded to include the silent, we need to rethink how we take into consideration issues of validity and credibility (Bailey 2008, Spyrou 2016). This also accounts to the common use of quotes in qualitative research to validate the authenticity of children’s voices and perspectives (Spyrou 2016). Hence, not all types of (silent) voices may be quoted. Therefore, to provide insight into students’ silences without compromising the rigor of good qualitative research, we describe as detailed as possible the contexts in which students remained silent and the strategies used by students to omit, ignore and/or resist
questions from the interviewer. As our main focus is on students’ silences, their voices are shared only to the extent that they add in illuminating and/or explaining specific types of silences.

In this article, we use the categorization of silences suggested by Mazzei (2003) as a starting point for attending to and analysing the silences contained within our data material. In an effort to discern, articulate and clarify the various voices with which silences speak Mazzei (2003, 364–366) identified five types of silences: 1. Polite silences that happen when people fear to offend someone; 2. privileged silences, when people are reluctant to acknowledge or admit their privilege(s); 3. veiled silences when people disguise what or who they are; 4. intentional silences when people choose not to speak because they are not sure what reactions or sanctions it may provoke; and 5. unintelligible silences which do have a purpose, but are not readily discernable or comprehensible and so remain unintelligible to the researcher.

Although all five types of silences could be identified in our data material, in the analysis section, we devote our attention to students’ intentional silences. As we will also exemplify, yet, different types of silence may sometimes ‘overlap, reflect or refract one another’ (Spyrou 2016, 12) and as such categories may not be clearly bounded. Moreover, as no taxonomy of silence could be exhaustive (Spyrou 2016), we point to a sixth type of silence, which is not included in Mazzei’s typology of silence, however, which we identified in our process of analysing our data material.
Research methodology and methods

Research methodology

The backdrop for this article is a one-year project examining inclusion and exclusion processes in PE. To gain insights into the variety in students’ participation and non-participation, the project was designed as a single-case study. This design has several strengths including the ability to investigate a phenomenon in its natural setting, use a variety of research methods and obtain rich description and in depth insight (Merriam 1998). Thus, the case study design enabled us to understand the students as they engaged in practices and interactions within the context of physical education.

The case in focus is a strategically selected secondary school. Just like other Danish public schools, the selected school enrolled students from 6 to 15 years of age that attended the 10 compulsory school years. In focus in this project was the lower secondary school; that is the 7–9th grades. The secondary school was placed in a socially deprived neighbourhood and had a high percentage (60 %) of students with an ethnic minority background. Moreover, as in most other Danish schools, girls and boys were mostly being taught together, rather than in separate groups. As these are all characteristics known from earlier research to negatively influence students’ exclusion from PE (for a review, see, Munk and Agergaard 2015), the school is best thought of as an extreme case (Flyvbjerg 2006). That is a case in which the exclusion processes in PE were expected to be unusually strong.

Research design

The research project was organized in two parts; the first taking place from January to June 2014 and the other from August to December 2014. In the first part of the study the intent was largely interpretative (Merriam 1998). So, the aim of this part of the study was to understand how the inclusion and exclusion processes play out in PE.
To listen to and hear students’ voices also means to respond (Cook-Sather 2002; Robinson and Taylor 2007). Therefore, the insights provided by the students on the inclusion and exclusion processes in PE served as the knowledge base on which we developed a new PE curriculum approach aimed to promote students’ participation in a way that also enhanced their experiences of being socially included in the PE context. The new curriculum approach was implemented in the second part of the project in which the intent of the study was largely evaluative (Merriam 1998).

The change of curriculum approach
In the first six months of the study the PE programme was observed to be based on a multi-activity curriculum, which was seen to emphasise competition and winning in leisurely sporting activities rather than students’ individual progress and development (Agergaard et al. 2017). Followingly, the purpose of the curriculum change was to offer students more opportunities for differentiated self-improvement and learning. More specifically, it was hypothesized that inclusion of non-participants in PE can be promoted by a mastery oriented curriculum model.

To promote the curriculum change the TARGET approach was applied (Ames 1992). TARGET is the abbreviation of the words Task, Authority, Recognition, Grouping, Evaluation and Time, which describe the main element in the model. As a particular strength, the TARGET approach both takes into account the structural and behavioural characteristics that may be developed through the organization of PE classes and through the behaviour of the teacher. Thus, while lesson plans were designed in line with the structural, content-based TARGET elements - Task, Authority, Grouping and Time - an external teacher was instructed in the two teaching-behaviour elements; Evaluation and Recognition.
The external teacher was a female in the late 30s. Most significantly, however, the external teacher differed from the observed internal PE teachers in her teaching approach in PE. Hence, whereas the internal PE teachers appeared most experienced with applying a performance approach, the external teacher had extensive experience with applying a mastery approach.

In the curriculum change two units where taught. In the first unit, the theme was ‘Motivation and the joy of movement’. The theme was taught, discussed, reflected upon and understood alongside the planning and testing of an ‘adventure-race’. In the second unit, the theme was ‘Sport in society’. This theme drew from Quidditch, a team ball game known from the Harry Potter series. A detailed outline for the teaching of a PE class based on the TARGET-approach and an example of a lesson plan can be found elsewhere (Agergaard et al. 2017).

Data collection
This article draws on data material collected in the 7th grade class participating in the intervention. Twenty-four students were enrolled in the class; 13 of them being girls. The students in the class were ethnically diverse. Thus 8 of the students had a mother and/or a father who was not born in Denmark.

The data material included in this article comprises a) focus-group interviews which included use of participant-diagrams filled out by students and b) observations conducted throughout the whole study period from January to December 2014.

Observations
Descriptive field notes were taken in every PE class for the whole of the study period. The PE classes took place once a week. In total, the first author observed 31 PE lessons (18 lessons prior to the curriculum change and 13 lessons in the period of the curriculum change). Observations were focused on students’ patterns of participation
and non-participation, their verbal and non-verbal communication, their body language, their interactions with peers and the ways in which they related to each other, to the teachers and to the practices and values in PE. Thus, the observations were essential for understanding the physical education context in which the inclusion and exclusion processes occurred. Finally, data from the observations informed the activities and discussions at the focus group interviews.

**Focus group interviews**
In addition to the informal conversations and interactions with all students during the observations, a total of 16 students were interviewed in focus groups (each consisting of 4-6 students). 3 focus group interviews were conducted just prior to the curriculum change, while a further 3 focus group interviews were conducted towards the end of the curriculum change. The intent of these interviews was to develop a sense of students’ perspectives; their feelings, their thoughts, their intentions and the meanings they attached to what goes on in PE. Moreover, as focus groups allow data both from the individual and from the individual as part of a group (Massey 2010), the focus groups interviews offered an opportunity to explore how views are ‘constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified’ by students during the course of conversations and as such to observe the process of collective sense-making (Wilkinson 1998, 186). Closely related to this direct outcome of interaction, is the capacity of focus groups to reveal social, and otherwise unarticulated, norms, values and expectations among students (Massey 2010). As succinctly expressed by David L. Morgan, a qualitative social research professor widely recognized for his expertise in focus groups, the real strength of focus groups is not simply providing access to what students have to say, but providing insights into the sources of students’ complex behaviours and motivations (Morgan 1996).
The groups were composed to reflect the diversity of students in the class and thus, were based on our initial observations and on inputs from the internal PE teachers. First, students were selected so that each group was representative of the class as a whole in terms of gender and ethnicity. Second, to ensure dialogue and discussion and the sparking of ideas across the range of perspectives pertaining to students, students from diverse positions of participation and non-participation in PE were represented in each interview. Moreover, in the second part of the study students were selected so that the ones who had shifted position in various ways (in the direction of increased participation, in the direction of decreased participation and in shifting directions respectively) were all represented in each interview. Third, to stimulate discussion between participants, students’ social relations and peer groups dynamics were considered.

The focus group interviews were structured around a discussion guide. To stimulate students’ interactions, the guide was built around a number of informal and creative activities. Moreover, these activities encouraged the interest and engagement of the non-participating and and/or verbally less articulating students. To augment engagement with students’ own concerns and agendas, and thus to avoid transferring my own preconceived notions of students’ participation and non-participation in PE, the starter activities and questions tended to be open ended. Likewise, discussions were generally allowed to flow with the direction of students’ answers.

Yet, efforts were made to limit those students who tended to dominate discussions and who tended to sway discussions in particular directions. Likewise, shy and reticent students were encouraged to contribute to discussions by, for instance, catching their eye or direct questioning. Being sensitive to students’ distinct
personalities, dispositions and reasons for staying silent, however, however, ‘silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay’ was also respected (Minh-ha 1988, 74).

These efforts did, however, not change the circumstance, that the social dynamics within a focus group interview are always to be “a mixture of contextual and personal influences, some assisting rapport and the exchange of ideas, some impeding it’ (Hill, 2005: 73). This is exactly what makes listening to silence rather than or, at least, in addition to voice essential.

To capture the complexity of students’ experiences and ways of participating in PE (or not) we developed a diagram consisting of four circles. The four circles were formed to indicate different levels of participation with the central circle indicating a high degree of involvement in PE and the outer circles indicating more peripheral engagement. In the focus-group interviews conducted toward the end of the curriculum change, students were asked to consider what they perceived as the defining features of the four levels of participation and to mark their own level of participation prior to the curriculum change, in the first unit of the curriculum change and in the second unit of the curriculum change on an individual diagram.

All interviews were conducted by the first author, tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the analysis to follow, all students and teachers mentioned are anonymous and information about individual students and teachers is limited.

**Analytical strategies**

For this article, we have worked intensively with analysing the informational and in particular relational intentions of students’ communication in the focus group interviews (Tammivaara and Enright 1996, 219). Whereas the informational intentions refer to what students communicate, the relational intentions refer to ‘how
the information is understood within the relational context of the interactions’ (Dunn 2005, quoted in Freeman and Mathison 2009, 93).

In particular, we were inspired by associate professor in Child and Family Studies, Oliver Tom Massey. In his article from 2010, Massey describes a qualitative data analysis model that emphasizes thematic analysis and which specifically takes into account the capacity of the focus group method ‘to uncover the unique experiential data that determines the complexity of social situations’ (2010, 25). Thus, the data analysis model explicitly refers to information contained within ‘group meanings, processes, and norms that add new insights and generate new hypotheses and is the unanticipated product of comments and exchanges of group members’ (Massey 2010, 25).

**Results**

*Listening to student voices*

Based on the diagrams completed by students we have developed a schematic overview of the changes in the students’ positioning of themselves as participants in PE (see figure 1). The figure consists of 16 fields each representing the individual diagram of one student. So, each field contains the indications made by one student on his/her individual diagrams.
Figure 1: The 7th grade students’ self-perceived position of participation in the 1st unit (■) and the 2nd unit (○) of the curriculum change as compared to before the curriculum change (Δ). Thin arrows illustrate outward movements in the direction of decreased participation in the period of the curriculum change and thick arrows indicate inward movements in the direction of increased participation in the period of the curriculum change. The colour of the field illustrates if the position of the students’ change in the direction of non-participation (light grey), participation (dark grey) or both (white) in the period of the curriculum change as compared to before the curriculum change. The thick dashed line indicates the border between positions of participation and positions of non-participation expressed by students.

According to the diagrams very few students took up a position of non-participation in PE prior to the curriculum change. Moreover, several students appear to have moved from a position of participation prior to the curriculum change to a position of non-participation in one or both units of the curriculum change. This data is supported by the general opinion voiced by students in the focus group interviews that they would like PE to return to ‘normal’.
However, our observations prior to and during the period of the curriculum change made us consider some of the more complex and problematic features that constitute voice. In particular it made us eager to go beyond what was immediately voiced by students and to critically attend to the students’ silences.

*The non-privileged silences*

First of all, based on our observations and contrary to the diagram, Emma and Ethan were not the only students taking up a position of non-participation in PE prior to the curriculum change. Quite a few students were observed not to participate (Munk and Agergaard 2015). Many of these did not have the required physical skills, or at least the physical skills they had, were not recognized by other students (Munk and Agergaard 2015). So, they were often found at the periphery of the activities, for instance on the side-lines or behind a post. Likewise, they mostly avoided any contact with the ball and they made sure not to interfere in the game. If unintentionally coming into possession of the ball, they immediately passed it to another player. The higher skilled students did not appear to pay much attention to these students. They only seldom passed the ball to them or in other ways engaged them in the game. Likewise, the non-participatory students were rarely invited to take part in negotiations about the rules of the games or the composition of the teams.

So why did these students not place themselves in a position of non-participation prior to the curriculum change? And why did they not voice any dissatisfaction with PE prior to the curriculum change, despite the observed lack of involvement?

As pointed out by Mazzei (2003, 364) when explaining privileged silences: ‘If we don’t agree that we experience privilege or are unable to identify this privilege, then we are also unable to speak about this privilege.’ The same point might be made
in relation to the non-privileged silences. Thus, many of the lower skilled students seemed to have neither recognized nor acknowledged their position of non-participation and the non-privilege of being physically lower skilled. These students did not make any complaints about their position in PE, or refer to any of the above situations when asked about their own or other’s participation in PE, both during observations and in the focus-group interviews.

In addition, many of these students placed themselves in the inner circle of the diagram, indicating that they did not perceive themselves as non-participants in PE. It is possible that these students did so to protect themselves - to conceal that they were (lower-skilled) or who they were (non-participants) - and as such are examples of what Mazzei (2003) describes as veiled silences. However, our interview data indicates that these students might actually not have been aware of just how much their non-privilege of being lower-skilled limited their scope for participation prior to the curriculum change. For instance, when talking with students about the diagram, most of them were opposed to skill level having any significance on their own or other’s (non)-participation in PE. Rather, non-participation appeared to be linked with an unwillingness to participate or a lack of interest in doing sport; it was the students’ attitudes rather than their skills. In the case of students referring to other students’ position in PE, their rejection of skill level having any significance to participation, might also be an example of the type of ‘polite silences’ described by Mazzei and as such indicate a fear of offending other students in terms of their low skill level.

Correspondingly, observing these students, they appeared quite satisfied with how things were in PE. They seemed happy just to be with their friends and to be allowed to play on the team. Although often assigned or taking up a very passive role, you never heard them complain or protest. What seemed to matter more for these
students were their social relationships to other students, to show their affiliation with these and so keep up a more general sense of belonging. This was particularly noticeable among the female students often found arm-in-arm. The significance of students’ social relationships was also supported by the focus group interviews prior to the curriculum change in particular when students’ talked about team selection. Hence, students told that, when forming the teams, many girls as well as many lower skilled students in general, made use of a strategy of choosing ‘their good friends’ (Munk and Agergaard 2015). Turning to the curriculum change, many of the lower skilled students, who were apparently satisfied with their current position, appeared resistant to the teachers’ attempts to encourage engagement in PE. Likewise, based on what they disclosed in the focus group interviews about their experiences of the curriculum change, they did not seem to either recognize or appreciate the possibilities of changing their position of participation that were offered to them through the curriculum change. Indeed, the curriculum change did not seem to make the lower skilled students acknowledge their non-privilege, it just became a veil through which students’ vision of participation became clouded (Mazzei 2003, 357). As such students remained unable to imagine that things could be different, to envision a more central position of participation in PE and to voice a desire for change.

The curriculum change

Turning our attention to the curriculum change, students’ positions of participation and non-participation were often more complex than immediately audible in the focus-group interviews.

First of all, our observations suggested that there were certainly more students who enhanced their participation in PE in the two units of the curriculum change than
the diagrams suggested. For instance, several students were observed to welcome the changes initiated by the external teacher and to gradually change their position of non-participation into a position of participation. For instance, many of the students previously taking up a marginal or outsider position in PE now appeared physically engaged in the games played and highly occupied in the tasks given by the teacher. Moreover, some of the students now also began to take part in discussion and negotiations with other students. So, why did not all of these students disclose what they liked about the curriculum change and share their experience of increasing participation in PE in our interviews with them?

Secondly, our observations identified a group of students who moved from a position of participation into a position of non-participation. In this regard, in particular four girls stood out and deserved further attention. Not only did these four girls change their participation in PE in a very visible and bodily expressive manner. Based on our observations they also had a very dominant and respected position within the social hierarchy of the class both within and outside of PE. However, it was not until much later that we came to recognize just how significant these social relations appeared to be for other students’ norms, behaviours and patterns of participation in PE and their voices; regarding what they shared with us and what they kept silent about.

As mentioned above the four girls, along with other dominant and socially respected students in the class, showed a striking resistance towards the curriculum change. When introduced to activities the four girls verbally and/or bodily expressed this resistance; they stared at the ground, looked indifferent or simply refused to participate. Also of note was their desire to turn the planned activities into their own games if the opportunity arose, while keeping their efforts to a minimum if they
deigned to take part in anything the teacher planned.

Our study suggests that the rebellion initiated and maintained by these girls also had a significant influence on the positions taken up by the socially less respected and influential students in the PE classes during the period of the curriculum change. So, although in our observations many of these students appeared physically and cognitively engaged in and preoccupied with the activities in PE during the curriculum change, they were unquestionably also very aware to take note of how the most dominant and socially respected students comprehended the activities and to modify their involvement in accordance. Likewise, although a few students were obviously observed to welcome the changes initiated by the external teacher and to gradually ignore the behaviour and expectations of the most dominant and socially respected students, in the focus-group interviews they were tentative when disclosing what they liked about the curriculum change and sharing their experiences of increasing participation in PE.

It seems, therefore, that the fear of being socially sanctioned by the socially most respected students in the class controlled and restrained some students’ participation in PE during the time of the curriculum change. Also, others have found that the peer group dynamics within PE significantly influence students’ participation in PE (Grimminger 2013, 2014; Hills 2007; O’Donovan 2003). However, while these researchers find that the most dominant students in the class may limit or hinder the participation of other students, in this study we find that the socially less respected students may themselves reject or resist participation in PE in order not to break the established norms and lose their reputation and acceptance among classmates.

As the fear of being socially sanctioned controlled some students’ participation in PE, so it also seemed to restrain their voices in the interview. In
particular, the socially less respected students appeared to be torn between the expectations of the interviewer and the expectations of the most dominant and socially respected students in the class; between sharing their experiences of participation and refraining from praising the curriculum change. In several instances, the former concern seemed outmatched by the latter. Except for a few students’ utterances, most of what was voiced in the interviews with the 7th grade students was dissatisfaction, anger and critique of PE in the period of the curriculum change. This ‘downward spiralling’ of dissatisfaction and in particular how this appeared counterintuitive to the observations made by the first author throughout the period of the curriculum change, left us with a feeling that students withheld something: Something that could only be accessed by critically attending to the social dimensions of their voices and to that what was expressed through students’ silences.

**Students’ intentional silences**

According to Mazzei (2003), intentional silences happen when participants intentionally choose not to answer because they fear what their voice might reveal about themselves and what the reactions and judgement of the rest of the group might be. In the context of our study, the negative attitude of the most dominant and socially respected students in the class seemed to make some of the socially less respected students reluctant to share their positive experiences of participation in the period of the curriculum change. For instance, this reluctance became evident in the way some students resisted to elaborate on questions relating to their increased participation. As depicted in figure 1, Ethan was one of the few students placing himself in a position of non-participation prior to the curriculum change and in a position of participation in both of the two units of the curriculum change. This was also a development noted
by the observer. However, when Ethan was asked further questions about his changed position of participation, he did not provide an answer.

Interviewer: Why did you move inward Ethan?
Ethan: I don’t know?
Interviewer: Has PE changed?
Ethan: A lot
Interviewer: for better or worse?
Ethan: Mostly it is worse, so I don’t know why I participate more now
Interviewer: Does it have anything to do with something not related to PE then?
You have started boxing in your leisure time haven’t you?
Ethan: Yes
Interviewer: So maybe you are just happier about being physically active now?
Ethan: Yeah that might be the case

It is possible that Ethan simply did not know what to answer and that his answers were eventually guided by the rhetorical questioning of the interviewer. Another possibility is that we simply failed to make questions understandable to Ethan. However, Ethan’s reluctance might also have been prompted by a fear of being negatively judged by the other students. A fear of giving a ‘wrong’ answer, that is, an answer breaking the norm negotiated by the most dominant and socially respected students of the class, not to praise the curriculum change or to value the new PE approach above the traditional PE classes. A fear of what an answer might come to mean for his social reputation and position among classmates. To admit that he had enjoyed participating in PE would point to satisfaction with the curriculum change; a curriculum change that had become ‘blacklisted’ by the dominant and socially respected students in the class. In particular, Ethan’s fear becomes apparent in the way he immediately grasps the opportunity, offered by the interviewer, to explain away his increased participation in PE with something that has nothing to do with the curriculum change, but with circumstances outside school. Following from this, the
excerpt might as well be an example of the *wavering silences* first described by Spyrou (2016) within the field of childhood studies. According to Spyrou (2016) wavering silences are the partial, the uncertain and the undecided silences that waver back and forth from concealment to disclosure.

Another strategy used by the students in the interviews to circumvent the risk of losing their good standing among classmates, was to simply confirm the answers of other students. By only stating what others had already voiced, students could make sure not to break the established norms or at least not to be the only one breaking these. Alice, one of the socially accepted girls in the class, explicitly referred to this fear when explaining that not everyone did, for instance, find the teacher ‘that bad’. According to Alice, however, students refrained to voice such opinions, because they did not want to ‘be the only one to make this judgement’ and ‘to be turned against by everyone else in the class’. Alice, it turned out, was the only student who made this kind of comment, but earlier in the interview, also other students, and in particular the socially less dominant students, had admitted, that they gave in to certain pressures when talking about PE and in particular about the PE teacher in their peer groups. This social context of students’ voices also became evident when students made known that they had actually liked or appreciated one or more elements of the curriculum change. These students would often go on to mention that they knew of other students sharing this same perspective or having these same feelings. In the same way, the social significance of students’ voices became apparent in the way one statement of satisfaction could prompt a cascade of similar responses.

When looking at the data and interview material, we also became aware of several contradictions within the individual student’s responses. There often seemed to be contradictions between what was voiced by some students at the beginning of an
interview and the contemplations made by them later on, when they realized that there might be a fellowship of students bold enough to voice another truth than the truth advocated and propagandized by the highest-ranked students in the class. What, was voiced by these students in the beginning of the interview, was not necessarily less authentic or true than what, was voiced by them later on (Spyrou 2011). Rather what these contradictions reveal are the complexities inherent in children’s voices.

**The multidimensional nature of students’ voices**

On the surface, what children voiced was dissatisfaction with how the curriculum change had changed their PE classes. However, when the researchers scratched the surface, embracing students’ silences as an important feature of their voices, what they actually, or at least also, expressed was a need to fit in, to be socially accepted and to be part of the community gathered around the most dominant and socially respected students in the class. Crucially, this layer of meaning actually does reveal at least as much about the conditions of participating or not in PE, as does the surface meaning; conditions that might have more to do with the already established social hierarchies between students than with specific circumstances within PE.

In particular in the 7th grade class studied, the PE climate seemed to be greatly influenced by the already established social hierarchies between students, and this meant that the agenda of the curriculum change was simply outmatched by the agenda of the socially most respected students, who strived to uphold their social positioning within and outside PE. To this end we support the suggestion of Liz Todd (2012, 196) following her evaluation of ways of including young people with disabilities in a secondary school, that there might be ‘merits in moving away from seeing the purpose of seeking children’s views solely in terms of neglected perspectives’ and in looking ‘at what children’s views tell us about power structures and the causes of
social inclusion and exclusion.’ As this may be told in a more indirect way, however, these merits necessitate that we do acknowledge the complex and multidimensional nature of students’ voices and silences and that we do strive to go beyond their surface meanings in order to understand the multiple narratives contained within them.

How the desire to fit in, influences what is not talked about and not told by students, was also touched upon by Elke Grimminger in her study on how children handle situations of non-recognition (by other students and the teacher) in PE. Thus, Grimminger (2014) found that the less sporty children deny and stay silent about non-recognition experiences in PE even if these are obviously recorded by the videos.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we set out to explore silence as an integral part of student voice. Analyses of student silence were used as a strategy to elucidate how aspects of the hidden curriculum serve to reinforce students’ non-participation in PE. Whereas much attention in hidden curriculum research has been devoted to particular values and attitudes unintentionally transmitted by teachers in PE, in this article we examine how the everyday exchanges *between the students themselves* might also convey a hidden set of meanings, which impact on students’ actual experiences of the PE curriculum and thus mitigate the intended effects of students’ inclusion. In particular, we show how students’ peer group relations and interactions are highly significant to the position of participation or non-participation taken up by students in PE. What we also show, however, is that the tacit messages and hidden meanings that are conveyed through students’ peer group relations and interactions are not always obvious to the students themselves. Thus, it was mostly through silence, that such messages and meanings were ‘voiced’ by students.
In the case of our study, students’ silences were highly interwoven with and reflective of the positions of participation and non-participation taken up by students in PE. First, among the most dominant and socially respected students in the class, the will not to say was intentionally enacted as a way of showing their resistance towards participation in PE. Second, in the context of the interview, pressures toward social conformity were highly significant to students’ will to unsay. Likewise, these pressures were reflected in the position of non-participation intentionally taken up by some of the socially less respected students in PE. So, these students seemed highly aware that how they behaved in PE as well as what they disclosed in the interview, could have consequence not only for their peer group connections within PE but also for their social reputation among peers outside PE.

In addition to describing students’ intentional silences in PE, this study adds to existing typologies of silences by pointing to a category of non-privileged silences. Students’ non-privileged silences revealed that some students were not aware of or had not acknowledged their non-privileged position as non-participants in PE and so were unable to imagine that things could be different and to voice a desire for change. Apparent from our analysis is that these are critical aspects of students’ (non)-participation that are difficult to access if we do not listen to, hear and attempt to understand students’ silences. As such, students’ silences became a possibility for learning (Poland and Pederson 1998), a point of departure for the discovery of new aspects of students’ participation and non-participation in PE. Our hope is that this article may encourage other researchers to let students’ silences breathe and speak.

References


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