# In defence of white privilege: physical education teachers' understandings of their work in culturally diverse schools

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**ABSTRACT**

Research suggests that physical education (PE) in Western countries is not providing equitable experiences for non-white students. Responsibility for shortcomings has often been ascribed to white PE teachers. Scholars have claimed that teachers lack cultural competence and know little about how physical cultures or health are understood by the young people with whom they work. The objective of this investigation was to investigate this claim and generate an understanding of how white PE teachers in a culturally diverse high school make sense of their work with non-white students. Data with three Swedish teachers of varying experience were produced using semi-structured interviewing. A series of school visits provided a complementary line of data. Four themes emerged from the data. These related to: (1) differences between white and non-white values; (2) the knowledge and dispositions necessary for success in PE; (3) the broad purpose of PE, and; (4) the differences between boys' and girls' experiences of PE. Data were interpreted using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, with the notion of 'whiteness' providing a specific analytic concept. The general thesis developed in the second part of the paper is that problems result not from insensitivity or incompetence but from discourses of whiteness in which many teachers live and work. By building on critical research both in general education and physical education literature and by utilizing whiteness as an analytical concept, the investigation shows how three PE teachers draw extensively on the racial discourse of whiteness and how this disadvantages non-white students. The paper is concluded with a consideration of how racial disadvantage could be challenged or disrupted.

## Introduction

Schools are becoming more culturally diverse (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Physical education (PE) scholars have claimed that PE in Western countries is not providing equitable experiences for non-white students, citing lower rates of physical activity (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005), higher absenteeism (Benn, Dagkas, & Jawad, 2011), and student disengagement (Barker et al., 2014; Pang & Macdonald, 2015) as evidence. Much of the responsibility for shortcomings has been ascribed to PE teachers (Benn & Pfister, 2013; Lyter-Mickelberg, 1995). Scholars contend for example, that teachers' white, middle-class backgrounds prevent them from developing empathetic understanding of the students with whom they work (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). Some blame has been apportioned to tertiary educators. Physical education teacher education (PETE) programs have been criticized for not helping beginning teachers to reflect on race and ethnicity or work through whiteness (Flintoff, Dowling, & Fitzgerald, 2015). Despite serious criticism, PE teachers' own understandings of their work in culturally

diverse settings has received relatively little attention in recent years (see Columna, Foley, & Lytle, 2010; van Doodewaard & Knoppers, 2016, for important contributions in this area). Little is known about the ways that physical educators see their educational roles and goals in culturally heterogeneous classes or how they perceive students with different cultural backgrounds. The objective of this investigation is to generate an understanding of how PE teachers in a culturally diverse high school make sense of their work. Interview data with three Swedish teachers of varying experience were produced. These data were interpreted using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework (Omi & Winant, 1994), and form the basis for a consideration of how PE might be more equitable in the future.

## Physical educators and their (lack of) cultural competence

Concern for the consequences of increasing cultural diversity in PE contexts first emerged in the 1980s (Carrington & Williams, 1988). Since then, the issue has garnered increasing attention from PE scholars (see Barker & Lundvall, 2017, for an overview). A recurring claim has been that physical educators struggle to deal with increasing pluralism and often fail to provide equitable experiences for non-white students (Benn et al., 2011). Some scholars have suggested that this failure is a consequence of teachers' commitment to traditional Euro-American games and sports, the values of which are in conflict with some non-Western or non-Christian students and their families (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006). A more common argument is that white teachers lack cultural competence and know little about how physical cultures, physical activity or health are understood by the young people with whom they work (Benn & Pfister, 2013; Dagkas, 2007). Physical education teachers' insufficient competence has in turn been seen to have two sources: homogenous teacher recruitment patterns and ineffective teacher education.

In line with general education literature (Picower, 2009; Ukpokodu, 2011), scholars have pointed out that PE teachers tend to be recruited from a privileged white middle class (Benn & Dagkas, 2006; Mowling, Brock, & Hastie, 2011). They have suggested that this trend results in considerable 'cultural distance' between physical educators and students (Burden, Hodge, Bryant, & Harrison, 2004; Flory & McCaughtry, 2011) and ultimately leads to uninformed and exclusive classroom practices. Criticism has also been leveled at teacher educators for failing to provide future teachers with sufficient knowledge of how race and ethnicity work in education contexts (Dagkas & Benn, 2006). As early as 2004, Burden and colleagues suggested that teacher education programs tend to be ethnocentric, a thesis supported by Douglas and Halas (2013) comprehensive analysis of Canadian kinesiology faculties. In an introspective investigation of their own PETE practices, Flintoff et al. (2015) claimed frankly that 'by drawing on a "racialized other", deficit discourse in our pedagogy … we have failed to disrupt universalized discourses of "white-as-norm", or address our own privileged racialized positioning' (pp. 559–560). Benn and Dagkas (2006) expand on this 'ivory tower' argument, suggesting that higher education institutions in general have managed to remain blind to the multicultural realities of schools. Other scholars have pointed out that the narrow demographic profile of the PE teaching profession can just as readily be seen in academia (see for example, Hodge and Wiggens (2010) in a North American context and Lundvall and Meckbach (2012) in a European context).

Despite substantial blame being assigned to PE teachers, PE teachers' understandings of diversity has garnered only a modest degree of attention over the years (see Sparks, Butt, & Pahnos, 1996, for an early examination of this issue). Dagkas' (2007) cross-cultural comparative study suggested that PE teachers in Greece and England had limited knowledge of their students' cultures and religions and that although the teachers held positive attitudes towards equality, few could articulate explicit policies relating to cultural pluralism. Columna and colleagues (2010) reported that PE teachers in several states in the USA (California, Maryland, New York and Texas) had varying knowledge of cultural and religious requirements of minority groups, and at least some felt ill-prepared to work with heterogeneous groups (Columna et al., 2010). Similar to the teachers in Dagkas' investigation, many of the physical educators in Columna and colleague's (2010) research claimed that cultural diversity was valuable but indicated that they experience difficulties implementing culturally responsive

pedagogies. More recently, van Doodewaard and Knoppers (2016) illustrated how Dutch PE teachers' constructions of diversity are influenced by dominant political rhetoric. The teachers in van Doodewaard and Knoppers' investigation stressed a perceived need for non-Western immigrants to assimilate into Dutch society and take on 'white Dutch values such as hard work, punctuality, order, humility, cleanliness and Christian Dutch cultural supremacy' (p. 13). Reflecting the gendered nature of the discourses operating within the classrooms, the teachers focused much of their attention on 'macho' (p. 14) non-Western sporty boys and gave relatively little attention to other boys and girls in their classes. Noting the high expectations that PE teachers had for these 'immigrant boys' (p. 14), van Doodeward and Knoppers concluded that in contrast to other school subjects, these boys were included and privileged in PE.

In short, PE teachers have been charged with having insufficient knowledge to deal with the needs of culturally heterogeneous classes. Commentators have claimed that the situation has arisen because PETE cohorts are often white and because PETE programs have largely failed to provide beginning teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for working with non-white students. In line with educational research taking place outside of PE (Vaught & Castagno, 2008), a central assumption of this paper is that headway can be made through a greater understanding of existing teachers and the ways they make sense of their work. Before describing the methods used to generate data, I want to delineate the theoretical underpinnings of the investigation.

## Critical race theory and the idea of whiteness

Up to this point in the paper, the terms 'white' and 'non-white' have been employed without discussion or explanation. These terms will become increasingly important in the following sections and it is necessary to place them within a larger theoretical framework. Here, I am going to draw on Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a general theoretical perspective and the notion of 'whiteness' as a specific analytic concept.

Employing a CRT perspective involves an attempt to interrogate the racial politics of the everyday (Atwood & López, 2014). Briefly, CRT assumes that society is inherently racist and that since racism often constitutes the common sense of society, it is difficult to detect or challenge (Omi & Winant, 1994). While there are different ways of employing CRT, critical race theorists often critique liberalism; take claims of neutrality, objectivity and color blindness as camouflages for racism; and foreground the importance of context and history (Delgado, 2000; Gillborn, 2006, 2008; Howard & Navarro, 2016). Bonilla-Silva's (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2015; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000) theorizing supports the perspective adopted here. He contends that racism is grounded in social relations and shaped by group interests (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) proposes that current forms of racism are frequently based on perceived cultural rather than biological difference and that these forms use individualist discourse to rationalize racial inequality. Rationalizations of racism typically involve claiming to be for 'equality' and 'fairness' for everybody (Bonilla-Silva, 2000, pp. 189–190), an ethos which is incidentally, deeply engrained in sport (see Hylton, 2015).

Critical race theorists and 'whiteness studies' scholars have employed the concept of 'whiteness' to explore the workings of racism (Gillborn, 2005, 2008) and the concept has proven valuable in educational scholarship in the last two decades (Levine-Rasky, 2000; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Stressing the difference between 'whiteness' and 'white people', Leonardo (2002) describes whiteness as a *performance*. He claims that whiteness is 'a racial discourse, whereas the category "white people" represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin colour' (Leonardo, 2002, p. 31). Defining characteristics of whiteness according to Leonardo include: an unwillingness to name the contours of racism—inequity is explained by factors other than race; an avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group, and; the minimization of racist legacies where past injustices are relegated to the past (and therefore no longer have an effect on today).

Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick (2006) expand on the idea of whiteness.[1] They propose that whiteness is a set of learned characteristics and practices that includes a

sense of superiority and entitlement. Such characteristics are regularly reflected in a desire to educate people that do not demonstrate the same dispositions. The white habitus is according to Bonilla-Silva and colleagues (2006), used to advance the interests and positions of white people and maintain spatial and social segregation. This habitus becomes visible when white privilege is threatened, for example, when competition for employment increases (see Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006) or when affirmative action programs are mooted (see Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000).[2] For the most part though, whiteness is difficult to discern precisely because it constitutes what is normal or natural.

While Leonardo (2002) underscores the performative nature of whiteness, Gillborn (2005) points to the limits of the dramatic production metaphor. He argues that 'one of the most powerful and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many … white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction, let alone their role in sustaining and playing out the inequities at the heart of whiteness' (Gillborn, 2005, p. 490). For Gillborn, the naturalization of whiteness is decisive. Bonnett (1997) concurs, suggesting that,

> whiteness has developed … into a taken-for-granted experience structured upon a varying set of supremacist assumptions (sometimes cultural, sometimes biological, sometimes moral, sometimes all three). Non-white identities, by contrast, have been denied the privileges of normativity, and are marked within the West as marginal and inferior. (Bonnett, 1997, p. 188)

Before moving on to the next section, several brief comments are warranted. First, CRT developed as a response to specific social and historical conditions *in the United States*. Following Gillborn (2005), an underpinning assumption of this investigation is that CRT's general theoretical thrust can nonetheless be used to understand the workings of racism in a European context. As Du Bois (cited in Leonardo, 2002, p. 33) proposes, whiteness is a global phenomenon and there are few places unaffected by white power. Second and related, in popular discussions of cultural diversity in Sweden, the term 'ethnicity' is preferred over 'race', due to connotations attached to the latter by national socialists in the twentieth century. For analytic purposes, I am working from the assumption that ethnicity and race are constructed in remarkably similar ways (see Bonilla-Silva, 1997) and that understandings of ethnicity are rooted in discourses of whiteness (see Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Finally, while Swedish migration policy makes relatively sharp distinctions between the origins of immigrants (Nordic countries, European Union, or other—[see SMA, 2017]) and naturalization is a clearly defined process,[3] popular definitions of 'immigrants' in Sweden are more complex. Johansson and Olofsson (2011) offer an insightful examination of the ways that young people construct cultural Otherness. The authors note that a non-Swedish sounding family name, certain items of clothing such as veils, an inability to speak Swedish, dark skin color, and residence in certain geographical locations work as markers of ethnic difference or non-whiteness. These markers can be associated with low educational expectations, low status employment and sometimes criminality. At the same time, the young people in Johansson and Olofsson's investigation typically distinguished between 'good immigrants' who carried markers of difference and who were trying to adopt Swedish norms and values and bad immigrants who carried similar markers but did not embrace Swedish norms and values.

## Methods

The project was a single-site investigation conducted between December 2013 and December 2015. A description of context that provides general orientation for data interpretation, information about the project participants, and an outline of the data production and analysis procedures follow below.

### *Context*

Swedish education scholars have expressed concern regarding the current state of Swedish schooling. Beach and Sernhede (2011) point out that since the mid-1990s, white middle class students have been advantaged by new education policies that involve open enrollment, per capita funding and deregulated admission procedures. Immigrant groups are according to these scholars, being

'clearly marked out as potential obstacles and/or risks to schools and societies in their efforts to achieve high productivity' (Beach & Sernhede, 2011, p. 259). Dovemark (2013) suggests that even though Sweden has a multicultural policy for education, there is a silence around issues of ethnic inequality. This silence has resulted in an implicit 'us and them' understanding of ethnicity. Similarly, Lunneblad, Odenbring, and Hellman (2017) contend that in Sweden immigrant students are often associated with social disadvantage and low grades. The scholars point out that politicians and the public increasingly see Swedish schools in an instrumental light and as sites where ethnic minority youth will acquire the skills needed for functioning in Swedish society. Schools themselves continue to attempt to build a sense of belonging around notions of 'Swedishness' (including language and norms such as gender equality). In accordance with the findings of van Doodewaard and Knoppers (2016) discussed earlier, these attempts have led teachers to adopt assimilatory pedagogies.

The current investigation took place in an upper-secondary school in a high-rise housing area near one of Sweden's main cities. The area has been shaped by high levels of unemployment and like many parts of Sweden (Beach, Dovemark, Schwartz, & Öhrn, 2013), is experiencing population increases due to labour- and forced-migration. The area is frequently associated with social problems including poverty and crime and has what Wacquant (2008) terms 'territorial stigma' attached to it. All students from the school regardless of origin or heritage are affected by the stigma and are seen primarily as 'immigrants', which as noted, means non-Swedish and non-white. In line with schools in similar areas (Öhrn, 2011), educational performances are below the national average. Facilitated by a turn towards 'educational consumerism' (Beach & Sernhede, 2011, p. 258), students with higher grades often leave the school in search of better educational opportunities in the city (see Öhrn, 2012). As one teacher commented at the beginning of the investigation: 'We just have the leftover ones' (research diary notes, 10 December 2013—see below).

Co-educational PE takes place in the school sports hall at the back of the school property. It is a large space compared with other school halls in the region. The hall is well-equipped but somewhat dated. Advertising banners from local businesses adorn the walls although judging from the age of the banners, it is unlikely that many of these businesses are still operating. In the lessons observed, students busily play different kinds of ball games. Pockets of students sit quietly with laptops or mobile phones in the grandstands. Despite the presence of active and non-participating students, each of the participating teachers noted that absenteeism is a significant problem in PE. Forms of documentation supporting teaching and learning (for example, lesson or unit plans) are scarce.

## Participants

The school has four male teachers responsible for PE lessons. Three teachers agreed to participate in the project: Jacob, Tobias and Simon, all of whom identified as Swedish.[4] The fourth teacher declined, citing poor English language skills as an explanation. Jacob had been working in the suburb for approximately ten years. He had spent most of that time working with younger pupils and had recently transitioned to the upper secondary school. Jacob stated that he was still getting used to the school and was hoping to introduce some changes to routines that he thought would improve the organization and management of PE lessons. Tobias had worked at the high school for almost three decades. He described himself as a fair teacher. By his own admission he did not vary his teaching much and remarked that he is not familiar with 'modern activities like spinning and dance' that he believed students are interested in today. Simon had been teaching at the school for seven years. He had taken on more administration duties recently, which had reduced his involvement in the PE program and his contact with students.

## Data production procedures

Semi-structured interviews (Amis, 2005) were conducted with the three participants on school premises. Interviews lasted for between 60 and 90 min and focused on the participants' experiences of teaching

PE. After providing biographical and career-oriented information, participants were invited to discuss challenging aspects of delivering the Swedish upper secondary curriculum in their specific school. Importantly, the teachers were aware that the investigation concerned 'physical education in a culturally diverse school' and that cultural diversity has received negative media coverage in Sweden. This would almost certainly have affected the participants' responses, even if the nature of these effects were difficult to gauge. Much of the interviews were dedicated to participants explaining and elaborating on challenges they identified. The researcher used pencil and paper to keep track of challenges such as 'outdoor education' or 'absenteeism' as they arose and returned to each of these systematically during the interviews. Participant explanations frequently involved anecdotes that illustrated why something was experienced as challenging, comparisons with other areas or schools in the region, or general 'rules of thumb' that guided teaching. In two cases, short follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify points and/or gather additional data. All interviews took place in English, which was the researcher's first language but the teachers' second or third language. Swedish was occasionally used when an English word or phrase could not be found. Demonstrating the idea of interview as 'interactional encounter' (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 699), there were times when participants and researcher needed to query phrases to ensure that the interview could continue in meaningful ways. In saying this, my own whiteness, male-ness, age and 'educatorness' (performed through dress, the use of English, association with a university, and skin color for example) undoubtedly influenced the interviews. Even though it was clear that I have been in Sweden for a relatively short time, the teachers generally spoke with me as if I shared their values and knowledge of PE and treated me as a member of an imagined 'we'. When we discussed outdoor education or health or students' freedom to move between schools for example, the teachers provided little orienting information and assumed that I would know what they were talking about. I felt that the teachers expected certain reactions from me at different points in the interviews (surprise, sympathy, for example) and as far as I am aware, I reacted in ways that they found acceptable. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The analytic question guiding interpretation of the transcripts was: 'How, if at all, do the participants' statements reflect notions of 'whiteness'? In a practical sense, analysis involved: (1) multiple close readings of the participants' transcripts where specific words, phrases and ideas were highlighted and annotated; (2) collecting recurring features of the transcripts into themes which appeared to capture the nature of the broader frames of references that the teachers were using; (3) working each thematic file into a written interpretation with significant tracts of transcript remaining in the text (Richardson & Adams St Pierre, 2005, on writing as analysis). And; (4) considering relevant aspects of the existing literature to help place the interpretation in a broader context. Steps (3) and (4) form the basis of the Results section below. In the process of producing a manuscript for publication, the number of interview excerpts included in the Results was reduced.

In addition to the interviews, six visits to the school were made to observe lessons. A research diary was used to record observations and entries were made before and directly after visits, usually while traveling on public transport to and from the research site. The nature of entries varied in focus extending from comments made by teachers in the staff room to the school's surroundings to specific incidents that occurred during PE. The diary was reflective as well as descriptive. Rather than a line of data that required analysis in its own right, entries were used to develop an appreciation of the context in which the teachers were working.

## Results

Four inter-related themes emerged from the teachers' commentaries that were significant in light of CRT and the notion of whiteness. These themes revolved around the ideas that: (1) cultural diversity involves antagonistic relations between white, Swedish values and non-white, non-Swedish values; (2) non-white students lack the requisites for success in PE and education in general; (3) education is necessary to show non-white students how they can and should live, and; (4) essential differences exist between non-white boys' and girls' experiences of PE.

## Cultural clash

The teachers in the investigation suggested that deep-seated differences between their students and the Swedish education system were responsible for negative educational patterns in their school. Activating whiteness early in the interviews (Bonilla-Silva, 2000), all three teachers indicated that the Swedish education system was correct, ordinary or even truthful and positioned themselves as transmitters of the knowledge and values in the curriculum. Simon accounted for tensions that arose during teaching, stating: 'that's why there's a problem when we say this stuff and they don't think it's true. Because they don't live in that way.' A general 'value discrepancy' argument was used to explain why non-white students received lower grades (they had different conceptions of healthy lifestyles or did not see PE as an important school subject in the first place), why behavioral problems arose (non-white students had different understandings of acceptable behavior), and why parents were unwilling to support the school when problems arose (non-white parents believed that teachers were responsible for disciplining their children at school, not parents). Importantly, the teachers did not say that non-white students were wrong, less healthy or immoral. As CRT scholars have emphasized (Atwood & López, 2014; Leonardo, 2002), when the whiteness discourse is deployed, there is little need to. Being white comes to mean being correct, moral, truthful, and in the case of PE, healthy. Being anything other than white diminishes one's claim to these characteristics and in the case of academic performance, justifies educational inferiority.

Certain aspects of curricular content proved to be 'whiter' than others and thus more likely to warrant negotiation during the interview. All three teachers referred to swimming as an essential skill, an assertion two of the teachers supported with reference to Sweden's extensive coastlines and lakes. Indeed, swimming was described either as a survival skill necessary for safe living or a fundamental skill akin to running and jumping. None of the teachers recognized cultural dimensions of swimming or described it as a socially- and historically-located practice, a somewhat surprising point given that the Swedish curriculum states that the 'cultural heritage of physical activities' should be recognized (SNAE, 2011, p. 1). In fact, Tobias was convinced that *all* students must learn how to swim. He insisted on inexperienced swimmers—mainly girls—attending lessons outside of school even though theoretically, it would be possible for the students to achieve a pass mark in upper secondary physical education without being able to swim.

In a similar way, comments concerning *friluftsliv*, or spending time in outdoor environments, highlighted the naturalization of white values. Without articulating any specific understanding of friluftsliv, Simon claimed that the outdoors had a *different* meaning for many of his students. He suggested that a number of students attended friluftsliv lessons with inadequate equipment and a misconception that an outdoors excursion was similar to a trip into the city. To demonstrate what he saw as students' radically different perspectives, Simon recalled a canoeing trip in which the majority of his students decided mid-way through the trip to abandon the canoes and walk back to the bus. Tobias related occasions during orienteering where his students questioned the point of finding markers hanging from trees and collecting stamps. Providing perhaps a glimpse of the influence of globalizing technology (see Leonardo, 2002, p. 33) both on young people and physical education, Tobias suggested that students had recently begun to find meaning since they were now required to take 'selfies', or self-portraits produced with mobile phones, at the designated stations.

## Framing students

In line with critical work on education both in Sweden (Beach & Sernhede, 2011; Lunneblad et al., 2017) and the United States (Picower, 2009), the teachers in the investigation employed deficit constructions of their students. For Jacob, the students with whom he worked generally lacked motivation. With classes of 20 students, he expected 15 students to turn up and only ten to take part in the lesson. Jacob stated that when he asked his students to participate in activities with which they were not accustomed, they were quick to give up. They also struggled to see a connection

between perseverance and improvement. Simon too noted that his students were only interested in a small range of activities and these were predominantly activities in which the students were already competent, typically variations of soccer. In both cases, Jacob and Simon focused on male students without explicitly saying that they were talking about boys, a point that illustrates quite effectively how deficit framing was gendered as well as racialized (c.f. van Doodewaard & Knoppers, 2016).

This type of motivational framing fits comfortably with the liberalist and individualist discourse that works to camouflage systemic disadvantage (Beach & Sernhede, 2011; Delgado, 2000). In Jacob and Simon's cases, constructing students as unmotivated meant that program characteristics that other PE scholars have identified as problematic (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Hastie et al., 2006) and the actions of the teachers themselves escaped consideration. However, lacking motivation was not the only descriptor that the teachers used for their students. Rather than frame the students' reluctance to engage in alternative activities as a lack of enthusiasm, Simon inverted the deficit model, underscoring the strength it took the students not to participate:

> They don't really care much about the grades, so they do what they like and if the teacher wants to do something else, they are more strong within themselves and say, 'No, I don't want to do that, I want to play soccer'. So they are kind of strong … " (Simon)

Picower (2009) notes that whiteness discourse often includes the dangerous notion that children and families that do not embody whiteness do not care about education. Simon's commentary makes use of this logic. Further though, his commentary shows how gender is again implicated in the racial logic of student engagement because it is only the boys who appear to be 'strong enough' to resist the education being provided. And again, institutionalized practices of physical education are taken for granted and responsibility for success or lack of success is personalized and shifted squarely on to the shoulders of the students.

Further rationalizing non-white students' lack of educational success were references to a general lack of ability. Jacob suggested that it was common for students to arrive in his classes without the knowledge or skills taught in earlier year levels. He claimed that the Swedish strategy of allowing immigrant students to 'make up for' nine years of compulsory schooling with a two-year intensive course—a State attempt to provide students with migration backgrounds with an opportunity to participate in upper secondary schooling—resulted in 'weak' cohorts of students (see Bonilla-Silva and Forman [2000]; Vaught and Castagno [2008] for examinations of how teachers use whiteness discourse to resist affirmative action programs). Tobias too, drew on deficit discourses referring to an absence of basic knowledge and skills. He identified shortcomings with respect to movement capabilities claiming that some of his students could not run backwards, for example. He also pointed to tactical knowledge and stated that some of his students lacked the capacity to play a simple game of tag. Indeed, Tobias took pains to emphasize that it was *basic* knowledge and skills that many of his students missed. During one observational visit, he took out a pile of written orienteering tests to show that only two students in the class had managed to pass what he claimed was a relatively simple test (research diary notes, 4 April 2014). He also suggested that some of the students had cheated even though they were some of the 'best' students at the school. Typical of race talk, especially when it could be construed as racist (Dovemark, 2013), Tobias was quick to mitigate. He noted that poor performance was not the students' fault and that it was just that the students had not had early experiences in Swedish schools that would prepare them for such a test.

### *Showing them the way*

Jacob, Tobias and Simon constructed teaching as a process of opening up previously closed aspects of physical culture and to some extent, introducing their own ways of engaging in physical cultures to uninitiated learners. For Simon, teaching meant,

> … starting them early, making them feel comfortable with the ability to do all these sports so that they can take the knowledge about the rules and culture of the different sports … that can open up their minds." (Simon)

Probably characteristic of physical educators' views in general, this comment needs to be read in the context of a conversation about cultural diversity and PE. Simon's point was that without PE, a number of non-white students would not encounter sport at all. In this sense, Simon was proposing that PE played an especially important role in non-white students' lives. This contention is somewhat supported by investigations of student experiences (Barker et al., 2014; Pang & Macdonald, 2015) that suggest that PE often lacks connections to the lives of students with migration backgrounds.

In a similar vein and in accordance with the findings of van Doodewaard and Knoppers (2016), teaching had strong assimilatory connotations for Tobias. He proposed that while PE teachers could have expected students to hold Swedish values in the past, today teaching involved explaining 'fundamental' values such as competition and working in a team. Like Simon, introducing the students to previously unknown activities with an expectation that the students would develop a taste for these experiences and eventually participate with Swedes was central. Tobias stated that many of his students,

> are not so interested in sports because they have not trained in sports. If they don't know about something, they don't like it. It's the same as if you're eating a new dish, if you don't know it … not so good. But if you get used to it … Sometimes it takes years.

The meal metaphor subtly implies that students have a choice in this intended assimilation process. Physical education is however, compulsory in the first two years of upper secondary school and students cannot simply 'order something different'. It is also important to recognize that the teachers saw 'fitting in' as valuable and indicated that their own efforts to help students assimilate were justifiable, even laudable. This feature of the participants' interviews reflects most clearly the teachers' embodiment of a white habitus (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006) and its sense of superiority and desire to educate non-white students into white ways of doing things. There are similarities with the teachers in Picower's (2009) investigation who claimed that they 'just want[ed] to help' their students (p. 209) as a way of positioning themselves as charitable people, and van Doodewaard and Knoppers (2016) teachers who constructed care-giving positions in relation to their students. As Picower (2009) points out, these kinds of 'performative tools' (p. 209) serve to maintain hierarchies in which teachers are givers and non-white students are recipients and raises questions about convergences of a 'white habitus' with a 'teacher habitus'.

### *Differences between boys and girls*

Jacob, Tobias and Simon made sharp distinctions between female and male students. Boys were likely to: overestimate their physical ability; play aggressively; be unwilling to include girls, and; give up when things became difficult. Girls were more likely to abstain from PE for a variety of reasons such as: peer pressure, religious beliefs, pressure to do familial chores or to spend time working on other school subjects. Most of the teachers' descriptions of the boys and girls contained reference to actions and perceptions. Tobias claimed for example, that boys from other cultures saw themselves as superior to girls and if they did let girls play with them, they did not see it as a real contest. Simon picked up on the idea of boys' confidence though not in relation to girls. Simon claimed that the boys,

> … don't have this limit. They think they are all Zlatan Ibrahimovic [a well-known Swedish soccer player]. No matter what, no matter the sport. They think they are professionals in everything. That's why we take it very easy now in the classical gymnastics, vaults and everything like that. It's kind of dangerous. But on the other hand the girls, they would never do it.

The choice of football player may be important here: Ibrahimovic has a migration background and has often had his 'Swedishness' called into question (Ibrahimovic & Lagercrantz, 2013). On the other hand, he is widely recognized at the best Swedish footballer of recent times and many Swedish boys look up to him. The idea of arrogance though is certainly not an element of the

popularly-imagined Swedish identity (Lunneblad et al., 2017) and referring to the boys as over-confident is a very clear way to signal marginal positions.

The contrasting of boys' false self-assurance and girls' lack of confidence was a recurring feature of the interviews. For the most part, the teachers saw girls as 'losers' in situations where culturally-defined ways of being feminine were set against culturally-defined ways of participating in PE and sport. While PE takes place in mixed classes in Sweden, both Tobias and Simon had tried splitting classes to improve girls' experiences. Tobias commented that,

> I think sometimes the girls are more satisfied being by themselves, because they get the ball, they can play quiet, and they don't get stressed by the boys … (Tobias)

Simon in contrast proposed the girls felt like that they were under the boys' sexualized gaze:

> I think many of the girls, they think that when they are climbing on the material and doing these gymnastic movements, I think that's not ok for them. When they come from some culture where maybe that is sexual and boys will look at them in a certain way. So they won't do this stuff. They don't want to be on the floor, lying down, on the mat. They don't feel comfortable, I have the feeling that they don't think it's ok. So with all these feelings around, they will be happier being at the side. It's a shame I think.

In both cases, girls are framed as potential victims of boys' behavior and the teachers have responded by acting in 'caring', 'protective' ways towards the girls. Consequently, parallels can be drawn between the teachers' comments and a number of gender analyses of physical education (Penney, 2002). As early research on ethnicity and PE suggested (Carrington & Williams, 1988) and later examinations have explored (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005), there are interesting intersections between racial and gender discourses that deserve more attention than they can receive here. In this case, I want to point out that in the context of Swedish educational prescription which lays significant emphasis on gender equality (SNAE, 2011; Lunneblad et al., 2017), the sharp distinctions that the teachers make between the girls and boys contribute to the constructions of the students as non-white.

## Concluding thoughts

Over 20 years ago, Lyter-Mickelberg (1995) published a paper in *Strategies* titled 'How can we stop stereotyping our students?'. Since that time, a number of scholars have echoed this sentiment: How can PE teachers set aside their aberrant views of students and approach teaching with more cultural competence? How can teachers become more culturally sensitive and more attuned to the diverse needs and abilities of the young people with whom they work? Physical education teacher educators for their part have been expected to furnish beginning teachers with this competence and sensitivity, a task with which they have continued to struggle.

Working from the assumption that progress can be made through greater understandings of existing teachers and the ways they make sense of their work, the thesis developed in this paper is that problems result not from insensitivity or incompetence but from discourses of whiteness in which teachers live and work. By building on critical research both in general education and physical education literature and by utilizing whiteness as an analytical concept, the investigation has shown how three PE teachers draw extensively on the racial discourse of whiteness. This discourse infiltrates the ways that teachers make sense of their professional and pedagogical experiences and leads teachers to construct their students as different and deficient. By doing this, the teachers naturalize negative educational trends such as lower grades and student disengagement that persist (or are in a state of deterioration) in Sweden and internationally. From this critical race vantage point, remedying the situation is not so much about educating teachers, which as Vaught and Castagno (2008) suggest, would constitute an 'awkward pairing of a structural problem with an individual solution' (p. 98). Much more it necessitates a 'systematic problematization of whiteness [as] *the* active participant in systems of domination' (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 272, emphasis added).

How 'systematic problematization' should take place is difficult to prescribe. While theorists accept the structural nature of racism, strategies typically offered still revolve around changing educational

practices. Some scholars suggest for example that teacher educators should implement pedagogies that challenge white privilege across programs (as opposed to providing one-off courses), diversify teacher education, both in terms of educators who teach in them and the teacher candidates who participate in them, and involve the larger community in the preparation of teachers (Picower, 2009; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Common across these strategies is an invitation to think in broader terms, to cross disciplinary and institutional boundaries, and to question traditional ways of doing things.

Such an invitation fits comfortably with at least some suggestions for change that have been made within the sub-discipline of physical education (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015). Further, crossing boundaries and imagining PE differently could provide a different set of questions to the ones that have been asked about race and ethnicity. Considering racism in broader terms and attempting to cross boundaries could mean considering how physical educators can work more closely with teacher educators in other school subjects within faculties and universities to challenge the domination of white practices. From a social scientific perspective, it could involve exploring student and teacher experiences across school subjects (horizontally) or across year levels (vertically) with a view to generating understandings of the workings of whiteness as part of the educational process. Alternatively, it could involve investigating the ways in which students and teachers identify with groups and organizations outside of physical education and how various experiences of whiteness shape the different discourses that are embodied within in PE lessons. In each case, change efforts would almost certainly require time, energy and an optimism that physical education could be done in more socially just ways. It would be simpler and easier to remain focused on 'our piece of the puzzle' and work with (mainly) like-minded colleagues. An important question for the still largely white physical education community is whether we can see whiteness as a challenge that deserves addressing.

## Notes

1. See Fitzpatrick and Santamaría (2015) for an example of an analysis of race in the context of PE using the concept of habitus.
2. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) noted that most of the college students who they surveyed feared the effects of affirmative action programs on their life chances, despite the fact that these students had middle-class backgrounds and were not in vulnerable positions.
3. In general, foreign born persons can become Swedish nationals if they have lived in Sweden for five years, have demonstrated 'good conduct', and can prove their identity (SMA, 2017).
4. The teachers' real names have been replaced with pseudonyms. The research adheres to the ethical guidelines set out by Swedish law as well as the Swedish Research Council. Details that could render teacher or students identifiable have been omitted from the descriptions below.

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