‘You do it in your own particular way.’ Physical education, gender and (dis)ability

Elisabet Apelmo

To cite this article: Elisabet Apelmo (2018): ‘You do it in your own particular way.’ Physical education, gender and (dis)ability, Sport, Education and Society, DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2018.1452198

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2018.1452198

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 21 Mar 2018.

Article views: 56

View related articles

View Crossmark data
ABSTRACT
The aim of this article was to explore, from a gender perspective, how young sporting women with physical impairments experience physical education (PE), and which strategies they use to manage situations that arise in the everyday interaction in connection with those lessons. Phenomenology provides a theoretical framework that includes the body. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with the women, aged 15–28. In addition, semi-structured interviews were held with three boys, aged between 10 and 15, and with one male coach. Those latter interviews are used in the article as material for comparison. The young women had a strong aspiration to appear normal. However, in relation to PE, the participants highlighted issues dealing with experiences of exclusion and special treatment. It appeared to be difficult for teachers to see these women as the sports-interested youths that they were. The young women used different strategies of resistance. Some of them did not participate in certain aspects of PE, or chose to quit the whole course. To receive a higher grade, another participant showed the teacher her medals from the Swedish national swimming championship, thus stressing her competence. When the women finally described the stigmatization that they had been subjected to, they avoided positioning themselves as victims, by downplaying the seriousness of a discriminatory situation or by using in the interview the word ‘we’ instead of ‘I’, thus describing the incident in collective terms. Previous research supports the suggestion that the students’ opportunities to show their capacities and strength during PE are dependent on the students’ gender. While one of the boys and a male coach gave examples of experiences of more inclusive PE, with a potential to challenge the able-bodied norm within the subject, the gender norm remained unquestioned.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 August 2017
Accepted 11 March 2018

KEYWORDS
Body; youth; gender; disability; disabled students; physical education; sport; phenomenology; de Beauvoir; the other

Introduction
The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes the right to education. It declares that States Parties should ensure that disabled persons ‘are not excluded’ and ‘can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live’ (UN, 2006). Similarly, in the Swedish Education Act (2010, p. 800), the basic principle is access to equivalent education for all. In Sweden, however, disabled students are over-represented among the students who run the risk of not passing in physical education (PE) in grade eight (Bråkenhielm, 2008), and when the Swedish Schools Inspectorate looked at PE in
grades seven to nine, it found that almost two per cent of the students were exempt from the subject (Skolinspektionen, 2010). The reasons that were given were chiefly sickness, disability or psychosocial problems (Larsson et al., 2010). However, not much has been written from the perspective of the disabled students themselves, and how they experience PE. The majority of research has rather focused on the teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion (Fitzgerald, 2005; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012; Smith & Thomas, 2006). Moreover, while it is well documented in studies from various countries that more girls than boys (without disabilities) dislike PE, and the underlying factors that cause this discomfort have been examined (Eriksson et al., 2003; Evans, 2006; Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009; Olafson, 2002; van Daalen, 2005; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011), research about disability and PE, just like mainstream disability studies (Bê, 2012), have seldom had a gender perspective. This is problematic for two reasons. As girls in general do not feel at home in PE, the question about how the gender order within PE influences disabled girls’ and young women’s experiences of the subject is of particular relevance. Secondly, by continuing to ignore the importance of other power relations in addition to (dis)ability, researchers risk contributing to the view of disabled people as defined solely by their diagnosis or impairment (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Hargreaves, 2000; Paterson & Hughes, 1999). Thus, the aim of this article is to explore, from a gender perspective, how young sporting women with physical impairments experience PE, and which strategies they use to manage situations that arise in the everyday interaction in connection with these lessons. I draw on disability studies as well as on research on PE, that is, studies concerning, on the one hand, disability and PE and, on the other hand, gender and PE.

(Dis)ability and PE

Previous studies about the situation for young disabled people at school or in physical activity in general (Asbjørnslett & Hemmingsson, 2008; Barron, 1996; Bredahl, 2013; Gaskin, Andersen, & Morris, 2012; Lauruschkhus, Hallström, & Nordmark, 2015; Taub & Greer, 2000) or in PE per se (Fitzgerald, 2005; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012; van Amsterdam, Knoppers, & Jongmans, 2015) have shown that disabled students often feel excluded, singled out and picked on during lessons in PE. The ‘visibility’ of bodies and abilities during the lessons and in the dressing and shower rooms, with the ensuing experience of vulnerability, is underlined (Barron, 1995; Bredahl, 2013; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012). PE teachers are reported as showing a lack of understanding, having a low opinion of disabled students and not recognizing them (Brittain, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2005; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012). They reinforce negative stereotypes of disabled people, which also influences the classmates’ perceptions of their disabled peers (Brittain, 2004). Disabled students tell about classmates who do not accept them, call them names, stare at them or make fun of their capacities during the physical activity. They have experiences of not being chosen when teams are formed, and of classmates that do not pass them the ball when playing team games (Brittain, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2005; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012; Lauruschkhus et al., 2015). These negative experiences may give rise to feelings of difference and inferiority (Gaskin et al., 2012), thus affecting other parts of the disabled students’ life, and can lead to avoidance of physical activity outside school and as an adult (Brittain, 2004; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012; Gaskin et al., 2012).

Only a few studies have a norm-critical perspective. Fitzgerald (2005) contends that a ‘paradigm of normativity’ prevails in PE: the muscular, athletic body, motoric competence and masculinity (expressed in activities that are characterized by competitiveness and aggressiveness) are highly valued. According to van Amsterdam, Knoppers, Claringbould, and Jongmans (2012), the PE teachers construct a male, able-bodied and slender norm that positions female, fat or disabled bodies as deviant. Health is regarded as lack of disease or impairment, which implicitly constructs sick or disabled students as unhealthy or incapable. However, it is taboo to label those students negatively, since they are considered as not responsible for their condition (van Amsterdam et al., 2012).
Gender and PE

A number of studies about gender and able-bodied students’ experiences have revealed that while boys are generally more positive to PE, girls may experience uneasiness and anxiety during these lessons (Eriksson et al., 2003; Evans, 2006; Larsson et al., 2009; Olafson, 2002; van Daalen, 2005; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011). It has been argued that the gender differences are (re)produced in PE, since the lessons are dominated by activities considered masculine, that is, various kinds of ball sports, while activities considered feminine, such as dance and gymnastics, are marginalized (Fagrell, Larsson, & Redelius, 2012; Larsson et al., 2009; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011). In addition, Larsson et al. (2009) claim, the teachers reward skills such as speed, strength and endurance, which are associated with hegemonic masculinity, when grading. This focus on performance has no support in the PE syllabus. Moreover, the teachers have developed a range of strategies aiming to manage rather than challenge the gender order within PE, and problematic aspects associated with this order. As regards the visibility of performances, which leads to the students being perceived as exposed, one strategy is to carry out some activities in gender-segregated groups. Another strategy is the teachers’ “benevolence as restraint”, which implies that the teacher lowers the expectations on the girls, to protect them from demands they are assumed to be unable to cope with. One consequence, however, is that it becomes difficult for the girls to perform ‘and still be seen as a “real girl”’ (Larsson et al., 2009, p. 13). In this way, the strategy leads to increased gender differences. Masculinity, on the other hand, is celebrated in activities in which the boys are permitted to show off. When doing activities in which the girls could have shown off, no corresponding celebration of femininity takes place (Larsson et al., 2009; see also With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011).

Theoretical perspective

I have turned to phenomenology as a theoretical framework, to understand the participants’ experiences of PE (Ahmed, 2006; de Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). It has been argued that both the medical model of disability, with its one-sided concern with the individual’s functional restrictions, and the social model’s focus on structural barriers (e.g. inaccessible physical environment, discrimination and negative attitudes), are inadequate when doing disability research, and that an embodied perspective is needed (Fitzgerald, 2005; Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Paterson & Hughes, 1999). Moreover, it has been suggested that phenomenology is of particular relevance for studies of adapted physical activity, because of the significance attached to ‘the living, moving, sensing body’ (Jespersen & McNamee, 2008). According to a number of scholars, the strength of phenomenology lies in its ability to overcome the body–mind dualism (Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Paterson & Hughes, 1999; Turner, 2001). The body is not an object that an individual has, but it is through the body the individual is in the world, experiencing and interacting with it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Furthermore, the body is situated in time and place. The situatedness is influenced by how the individual has lived and continues to live in the world, and how the world interacts with him/her. The individual’s body and physiological preconditions are central, as is the way those whom the individual meets – especially teachers and classmates in this particular case – react to his/her body, which is considered more or less able. All these experiences become embodied and constitute the individual’s situatedness (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Moi, 1999). In interaction with the environment the individual has a potential and a responsibility to become an acting subject. If the individual does not act, he or she will return to passivity and alienation. But the ability of the individual to act can be limited by other actors or structural power relations, and result in oppression and frustration. Thus, the ability to act needs to be seen in light of the magnitude of the limitations (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

Gender is the power relation in focus in de Beauvoir’s analysis. She argues that while men are regarded as subjects, women are socially constructed as the Other, the deviant: ‘she is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her’ (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 6). However, not only gender, but also other power relations such as (dis)ability are inscribed in
our bodies. Garland-Thomson points out the contradictory position of the cultural image of disabled women: ‘seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman, the figure of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman’ (1997, pp. 28–29). Disabled women have to manage this ambiguity in their everyday life. Different positions in intersecting power relations shape different ways of ‘doing’ gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and different types of masculinities and femininities. But on a simplified, global level, Connell (2014) maintains, men dominate women. Hegemonic masculinity is made up of those gender practices that currently dominate, in relation to other men and women. Connell terms the femininity that is normative at present as emphasized femininity. This femininity is characterized by compliance with the subordination of women by men, and adaptation to the requests of men. Other femininities are defined by non-compliance and resistance, or by different combinations of resistance, compliance and cooperation (Connell, 2014). Both hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are historically changeable and can be challenged.

Methods

A pilot study was carried out at a disability sports camp for young people with different kinds of impairments. The participants were recruited from both the sports camp and disability sports clubs. Ten qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with young women aged 15–28. In addition, interviews were conducted with a male coach and three boys aged from 10 to 15 years at the sports camp. The latter interviews are used in the article as a material for comparison. All interviewees went to mainstream schools. They had physical impairments and all but one young woman, one boy and their male coach used a wheelchair to some extent. The interviewees played sledge hockey, wheelchair basketball, table tennis, and rode on horseback. All of them were training extensively and most of them competed on a national or international level. The participants’ parents were white and working- or middle-class. When questioned whether they had a girl or boyfriend, the young women either said no or answered that they had a boyfriend. Because of their low age, the boys were not asked this question. Most of interviews took about an hour. I used an interview guide with thematically ordered questions about, for instance, previous and present physical activity (organized or non-organized physical activities in leisure time, during breaks in school and in PE) and about their body and physical ability. However, the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely. The question about PE distinguished itself particularly since six of the young women, that is, all except two of those with congenital impairments, and one of the boys talked about problems. All interviews were taped and then transcribed. Repetitions and some colloquial speech have been removed from the quotations to facilitate the reading (Kvale, 2007).

A hermeneutic approach was used in the analysis. Since a phenomenon acquires its meaning in a specific context, it can only be understood in this setting (Gadamer, 1986/2006). The interpretation implies a spiral movement between that which is to be interpreted, the context and the researcher’s pre-understanding, and between the whole and the details (Gilje & Grimen, 2007). The transcripts were read through several times, and recurrent themes were manually highlighted. To get a grasp of each interview as a whole, a summary of each interview was also written.

The analysis consists of three parts. First, to put the analysis in its context, the young women’s self-presentations are examined, which I regard as an expression of their situatedness. Second, their experiences during the lessons in PE are explored. In the third section, two examples of inclusive education from the interviews with a boy and a male coach at the sports camp are analysed.

Analysis

Being like everyone else

When at the beginning of the interview I ask Hanna (all names used are pseudonyms) to tell me about herself and her background, she states: ‘[I had] a completely ordinary childhood, like everyone else. I
had no contact with the disability movement at all. [...] My parents treated me just like they treated my siblings. I was supposed to help myself.' Hanna associates normality with capacity and independence: she should 'help herself'. To further emphasize her ordinariness, she dis-identifies with the disability movement. Dis-identification is used by the other interviewees as well: other young disabled people are for instance supposed to get too much help from their parents, use more assisting devices and not be able to walk as much. Hanna took part in football and ice hockey training with the boys, while other girls trained in the girls' team in the neighbouring village. She says:

I thought it was much more fun. [...] I don't know if that's the reason why I never got into trouble. [...] If you were great pals with the boys, you were sort of accepted, I'm afraid. I have never been exposed to any bullying. And I always took part in everything. I have been on the go and I have gone in for sports.

Hanna's explanations for not being bullied during childhood are, firstly, that girls who were associated with boys were more easily accepted. Secondly, that she took part in the same (sporting) activities as others of her age.

Felicia relates what happened when she got her impairment as a small kid:

They came to adjust our home. There were a lot of wall-to-wall carpets at that time. 'We'll replace them with parquet flooring.' My father said: 'No, no, no, no! She must fight! She has to fight to make her way.' I got really strong arms. Until fifth or sixth grade I beat all the boys in my class, and in the class above, at arm wrestling. Proudly, Felicia tells about her arm muscles and how she won over the boys. What these young women's memories of their childhoods have in common is the joy experienced when doing physical activities as well as their (and, in Felicia's case, her father's) desire for normality and the demonstration of strength. That being skilful in sports gives status and has a normalizing effect has been recognized in previous research (Fitzgerald, 2005; Taub & Greer, 2000). The study by Taub and Greer (2000) showed that children with physical impairments experienced an increased similarity to peers, and that their identity as disabled was downplayed when they took part in physical activities. The association of sports with hegemonic masculinity is also well established (Connell, 2005; Dworkin & Messner, 2002). When the participants tell about how they play, train and compete with or against the boys, they further prove their physical competence.

Thus, Hanna, Felicia and the other interviewees distance themselves from the attitudes towards them that they meet in everyday life: as deviant, dependent and weak. These attitudes can take concrete expressions. The young women describe experiences of being stereotyped, as when people treat them with pity. They tell about positive discrimination, as when people are impressed that an interviewee 'despite' impairment can drive a non-adapted car. They also talk about strangers who stare and ask questions. Natalie explains why she prefers sporting together with other disabled people:

If there are lots of people that are able to walk, and then I come to the group, using a wheelchair. It gets so embarrassing. [...] When I go riding, for instance. Then someone has to put me up on the horse because I can't get up by myself. Then people may be staring. [...] It's really annoying!

When Nathalie is helped up on to the horse, it is the stares that hinder her, not her impairment as such (Garland-Thomson, 2009; Hughes, 1999). She becomes self-conscious and her agency is hindered (Young, 1980). ‘Instead of coinciding exactly with herself, here she is existing outside of her self', as de Beauvoir puts it (1949/2011, p. 349, italics in original). Thus, the stares constitute Nathalie as the Other. The striving for normality is also manifest in a wish to present themselves as 'normal' young women. Before the interview, Sara says to me 'I never understood those people', referring to lesbians. During the interview, she says that all but one of her boyfriends have been able-bodied. According to Julia, the impairment, which has resulted from a car accident, made her body less attractive. 'From being a 19-year-old chick to, you know …’ What this means she explains further on in the interview: ‘You get a different kind of attention when you sit in a wheelchair. [...] There are some people who have the approach that you are stupid.' When I ask her how she perceives her body, Julia returns to her appearance:
Well, it’s not the most good-looking in the world. Not if you compare with how it looked before [the accident]. So, it’s tough, it really is, of course. But now, at least, I have found my husband (big laughter). Who has a gorgeous body (big laughter)!

Julia’s femininity seems to be questioned due to her impairment. This is supported by previous research, which has shown that people with physical impairments are often regarded as non-gendered and asexual (Malmberg, 2012; Reinikainen, 2004; Sandahl, 2003; Shuttleworth, 2012). Garland-Thomson argues that the impairment reduces women’s cultural capital, and makes a distinction between the (male) gaze and the stare: ‘feminization prompts the gaze; disability prompts the stare’ (1997, p. 28). Julia describes this shift from the male gaze before the accident, to the stare. But Julia and the other interviewees offer resistance against the de-feminization by talking about their boyfriends and their bodies, hence portraying themselves as attractive and heterosexual young women.

To sum up, the participants use different resistance strategies against the prejudices they encounter. One strategy is a negation of differences: the young women show that they are like anyone else (autonomous, capable, heterosexual), ‘despite’ the wheelchair or impairment. Sometimes they use dis-identification and othering as a part of this strategy, by showing that they are not like those who are overprotected, part of the disability movement or lesbian. On the one hand, when doing gender in everyday life, they approach what Connell (2014) calls an emphasized femininity, characterized by a compliance with the gender order in society. On the other hand, they put up resistance against this emphasized femininity, by accentuating their capacity and comparing their strength with that of boys. This could be understood as a way to ‘balance between signalling femininity and masculine sport competence’ (With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011), a strategy much discussed in research about able-bodied women and sport (Dworkin, 2001; Griffin, 2002). But I would rather interpret it as a resistance against the ascribed genderlessness, weakness and passivity as disabled women.

Experiences of PE

The young women seldom complained, which can be understood in light of their desire to appear normal. Hence, it was remarkable that six of the interviewees discussed problems to do with PE: experiences of exclusion, special treatment and being singled out.

During the interview, Ingela often answers curtly ‘I don’t know’, ‘it’s fine’ or ‘it’s really fun’. But when speaking about her experiences of PE, she becomes more talkative:

It has been like: ‘Well, you do your programme that you have got from the physiotherapist.’ But sometimes I have been able to participate in the Physical Ed, but that’s really, really, really, really seldom. […] I think it’s really bad, because I think we … I think we should also have a … chance to be included, like everybody else.

The classmates’ will and ability probably vary greatly, but Ingela, an engaged sportswoman in her leisure time, is the one who is sorted out. Ingela criticizes this and claims that ‘we’ ought to be given the same opportunity to participate. By ‘we’ she probably refers to the category of young disabled people, despite the fact that up to seventh class she was the only one in school with a visible physical impairment. In Barron’s (1995) study a young man, who otherwise did not identify with other disabled people, got into a conflict with his personal assistant. When describing the difficulties in even bringing up the possibility of changing assistants, he shifts from ‘I’ to ‘we’. Barron argues ‘when confronted with certain problematic situations […] disabled young people may identify with others, i.e. disabled peers, whom they envisage having similar experiences’ (1995, p. 82). Ingela may have friends in the disability sports association who have similar experiences of exclusion. But by using ‘we’ Ingela also avoids becoming a victim. She lifts the problem to being about disabled people in general and how they are treated in PE, thus describing the incident in collective terms.

Felicia explains that PE worked out well during compulsory school. But when she got a new teacher in upper secondary school, the problems commenced. Felicia exemplifies: ‘When they were playing football [the teacher told me]: “Well, you can watch a football match and make a
report to me”. The teacher’s solution was that Felicia, just like Ingela, should do something completely separate from her classmates. Thus, they are not included, but rather expected to ‘fit into’ the unchanged PE curriculum, and when they cannot fit in, they spend ‘part of the school day alongside non-disabled classmates’ (Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 444; see also Smith, 2004). Felicia’s physical capacity was disqualified by the assignment, and her possibilities to become an active subject were restricted (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011). Besides, as the PE teachers exclude Ingela and Felicia, they reinforce stereotyped ideas about disabled people as deviant (Brittain, 2004; Taub & Greer, 2000). But Felicia regained the initiative, quit the course and went swimming on her own instead.

**Being uncomprehending**
The special treatment during PE can also result in feelings of being pointed out. Maria criticizes the treatment she gets from people on a regular basis, and claims that ‘the worst thing you can do is to pity someone. […] If you pity someone you regard that person as being inferior.’ She goes on to tell about her experiences of PE:

> It wasn’t anything serious. But, there have been problems, like teachers who were unappreciative and quite insensitive. […] Maybe it was a bit wimpish. But I am standing at one end of the gym and the teacher is at the other end. And she has just given us the instruction for the class. Then she calls out to me: ‘You, you do your best’. Or no, no. She says: ‘You do it in your own particular way’, or something. […] I remember how everybody turned around, and they looked at me and like: ‘Oh, yes.’ It really wasn’t anything [the teacher] said to be mean. But, yes, it made an impression.

When Maria talks about a vulnerable situation, as a woman she risks, just like Ingela, being seen as a victim. Women’s resistance against being regarded as victims has been discussed by Loseke (2001), who notes that while the position of the victim leads to sympathy and support for the woman, at the same time she is regarded as weak, powerless and as being out of control of her life. A great deal has been written in previous research about the stereotyped view of disabled people as weak and tragic (Apelmo, 2012a, 2012b, 2016; Hargreaves, 2000; Oliver, 1996; Sandahl, 2003). Hence Maria’s disability reinforces the picture of her as passive and helpless; as someone to pity. So, when confronting me, an able-bodied interviewer, it seems of great importance to Maria to distance herself from the subordinate categories she risks being cast into. Maria manages this skilfully. When she tells about experiences of discrimination, she downplays the seriousness of the situations by using such phrases as, ‘It wasn’t anything serious. […] Maybe it was a bit wimpish. […] It really wasn’t anything [the teacher] said to be mean.’ In this way, she makes resistance against the position as a victim, and the moral stigmatization that often follows.

Stares play an important role in the quotation. Maria describes how the rest of her class turned around and looked at her. Hughes claims that the non-disabled gaze imagines itself to be ‘pure’ and neutral (1999, p. 164). When Maria’s classmates stare at her they probably believe that they are only registering the deviant, while it is their staring that constructs Maria as the deviant Other (Garland-Thomson, 2009; Hughes, 1999). I interpret the teacher’s belittling as a kind of patronizing pity, fuelled by the view of disabled people as tragic.

**The impossible and the grades**
According to Maria, her teacher also disregarded the fact that there were some parts of the PE that Maria could not possibly participate in. Maria recalls: ‘they didn’t take into consideration what I could do. When we had track and field sports, for instance. Like running 60 metres, running 100 metres. […] It was quite worthless.’ When it was time to get the final grade, Maria took the matter into her own hands. She showed the teacher her medals from the Swedish national swimming championship, thus proving her competence. As a result, she received a higher grade.

Hanna says that PE was really good during her first six years in school. Firstly, ‘it was more play’ during these years. The education wasn’t performance-based, one of the factors that correlates with the occurrence of students with impairments who do not pass in PE (Bråkenhielm, 2008).
Secondly, the teacher knew about Hanna’s huge interest in sports and ‘understood that I really wanted’, as Hanna puts it. But during the last years of compulsory school, Hanna had the feeling of being met with a lack of understanding:

He [the teacher] didn’t take notice of my impairment at all. When I couldn’t take part, I got bad grades. And it was things that I absolutely couldn’t do. […] Run in the woods, it has to be flat ground […] At that time I began to feel that I always got behind. […] I fought and fought, but I could never be as good as the rest.

Hanna had an eating disorder that she associates with the PE: ‘It was my way of trying to be good … at something, because I fought all the time to look and be like everybody else. And I can’t.’ The exposure and subsequent comparison of bodies and abilities in PE (Bredahl, 2013; Evans, 2006; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012; Olafson, 2002; van Daalen, 2005) are manifest in the quotation. Hanna remembers how she struggled to look and behave like her classmates, and to achieve the same results as they did. The teacher did not seem to consider Hanna’s given prerequisites – her impairment and her dedication for sport – neither when planning the lessons nor when grading. He lowered her grade at the same time as Hanna got acknowledgement as a table tennis player outside school. Hanna internalized the teacher’s view of her as less capable, and, unlike Maria, turned the disappointment inwards. According to the evaluation made by the Swedish National Agency for Education, PE can lead to reduced self-confidence among girls, especially those in the last year of compulsory school (Eriksson et al., 2003). This is confirmed by my study.

**Keeping a dialogue**

Both Sara and Hanna sometimes chose not to participate in PE. Sara got bullied, and used her impairment as an excuse to avoid exposing her body:

> My feet weren’t shaped like the other kids, and my legs, and so on. … I also had to wear incontinence diapers until I was nine, and you could see them a little through my shorts. It was embarrassing as hell!

This way of making use of the impairment as an excuse has been found in previous research too, but rather to get an advantage instead of avoiding something negative: to jump the queue or to help a classmate from being fined for late arrival, for instance (van Amsterdam et al., 2015). Hanna never attended the swimming lessons: ‘I often had long-sleeved jumpers that went over my hand. There [in the swimming bath] I became totally exposed’. Studies about able-bodied girls’ experiences of PE show that many choose not to attend PE in order to avoid the evaluative gazes of their peers, in both mixed-sex and single-sex education (Evans, 2006; Olafson, 2002). Evans suggests that ‘the pressure girls feel [in single-sex PE], both from other girls and from themselves, is a continuation of a “male” gaze, only one which they made internal’ (2006). But it is not primarily the male gaze that disturbs Sara and Hanna, but the non-disabled gaze. They try to ‘pass’ as able-bodied (Goffman, 1963/1990; Sandahl, 2003). Passing, or wanting to be ‘as normal as possible’ if it is impossible to control or hide the impairment, is an often-used strategy (van Amsterdam et al., 2015, p. 161).

When swimming, the body is visible, as in the dressing rooms and showers. Several scholars argue that while women to a larger extent are judged by the appearance of their bodies, they are also at greater risk of being defined by their impairments (Reinikainen, 2004; Taub, McLorg, & Fanflk, 2004) and, consequently, being devalued. This may make it even more difficult for Sara and Hanna to participate. But Hanna concludes: ‘I learned how to swim in private, with my mum and dad’, thus again stressing her capability.

Sara and Hanna criticize the PE teachers’ lack of reactions: ‘one might think that a Physical Ed teacher could question and talk to the student and ask why she doesn’t participate, and … “Can we do something else instead?”’, Hanna adds. Sara and Hanna, like several of the interviewees, ask for a dialogue with the teacher, in which they can contribute by informing about their circumstances, and put forward suggestions. The idea resembles the positive examples of PE that some of the young women give. Maria, for instance, tells about her teacher in upper secondary school: ‘If anything seems uncertain, he asks me “How should we do this, how do you feel that you want to do it?” […] It’s more
of a dialogue.’ The importance of being listened to has been stressed in previous research (Asbjørnslett & Hemmingsson, 2008; Bredahl, 2013). In a study of teenagers with physical impairments and their experiences of school, the contact and cooperation with the teacher were decisive for the students’ feelings of participating or not. The students emphasized the significance of the teacher’s ability to listen and to make use of their experience and knowledge when planning the lessons. Just like Maria, they preferred short, informal encounters with the teacher, held when need arose (Asbjørnslett & Hemmingsson, 2008). Such a dialogue could also give these young women the reciprocal recognition that, according to de Beauvoir (1949/2011), is needed if the individual’s agency is not to be restrained.

**Challenging bodily hierarchies**

In the pilot study, a male coach and one of the boys told about PE activities that had included the whole class. The coach Oskar recalls: ‘I had a gym teacher that knew someone who was disabled who played table tennis. He came there and showed off in our gym lesson. That was how I ended up trying ping pong.’ The expression ‘showed off’ indicates a certain degree of skill in the invited player, which the whole class could learn from. This was the beginning of Oskar’s successful career as a table tennis player. The teacher in Lars’s class was even more inclusive. Lars always participates in the PE and says that the teacher ‘is quite good at thinking of things I can take part in.’ The teacher has on some occasions borrowed basketball wheelchairs for the PE. ‘It was really popular. We played wheelchair basketball. Everybody wanted to have this again next term.’ They have also tried wheelchair table tennis. A lot of Lars’s classmates want to borrow his wheelchair now, which Lars, for certain, finds quite troublesome. But the teacher’s willingness to make the PE inclusive may have contributed to a change in the view of Lars’s wheelchair, from a negative sign of difference (Brah, 2001) to an attractive device to make one’s way faster and do tricks; from ‘a symbol of weakness, of dependency, of neediness, [...] into a symbol of power, speed and muscularity’ (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 190; see also Apelmo, 2012c, 2016).

In Oskar’s example it is the invited table tennis player who may show off, but it is Lars himself who gets an opportunity to show off when playing wheelchair basketball. In this way, the dominant able-bodied group’s definition of the right way to move is questioned. However, the opportunities to show off are coupled with gender. Oskar and Lars, like the boys in the previously cited studies (Erikksson et al., 2003; Fagrell et al., 2012; Larsson et al., 2009; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011), are to a higher degree than the girls given the chance to show their capacities, strength and endurance. The disabled boys are included in the tribute to masculinity that is to be found in PE by giving boys, to a greater extent than girls, an opportunity to show off (Connell, 2005; Fagrell et al., 2012; Larsson et al., 2009). The disabled girls or young women may be experienced as an even greater threat against hegemonic masculinity if they are permitted to excel during the lessons.

**Conclusion**

There is a discrepancy between those well-trained, persistent and committed young women’s successes within disability sports, and the unappreciativeness and lack of curiosity that the PE teachers manifest. The evaluation made by the Swedish National Agency for Education states that it is ‘unusual that students feel out of it’ (Erikksson et al., 2003, p. 27, author’s translation). However, the young women in my study belong to this rare group. They are made the Other, as they are excluded and pointed out. It appears to be difficult for teachers to see these young women as the sports-interested youths that they are. One explanation may be that they cannot compete with others in some of the aspects of PE. Insufficient muscular strength or paralysed muscles make it impossible for them to perform all of the different aspects that are included in PE in the same manner as their classmates. Furthermore, the teachers’ attitudes towards students with impairments play an important role (Britain, 2004; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012). The view of disabled persons as weak and incapable is widely
recognized in previous research (Apelmo, 2012a, 2012b, 2016; Reinikainen, 2004; Sandahl, 2003). PE teachers’ wish to protect girls in general from the aspects that are seen to be too demanding or difficult for them to perform (Larsson et al., 2009) could be strengthened by this view. This would also explain why the teacher does not question Sara and Hanna when they do not participate, and why Felicia is asked to write a football report instead of being physically active. The ‘benevolence as restraint’, from which it follows that girls’ girlishness is threatened if they manifest their strength too much at the PE (Larsson et al., 2009, p. 12), should otherwise not be a problem for those interviewees who are used to exerting themselves to the utmost in a competition or who play tough ball sports in a men’s team. Finally, it has been pointed out that many PE teachers ‘have heavy investments in the “cult of the body”’ (Tinning & Glasby, 2002, p. 110). This is part of their lived experience, and orients them towards some objects and people (male and those considered healthy) while others (female and disabled) are inevitably relegated to the background (Ahmed, 2006; Fagrell et al., 2012; van Amsterdam et al., 2012; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011). If the teacher is unconscious of this orientation, it will affect the teachers’ ability to include all students.

The young women use different strategies of resistance. One is to avoid participation in some of the aspects of PE, or to quit the whole course. The study by Larsson, Fagrell, and Redelius (2005) shows that boys and girls are given different possibilities to offer resistance. Whereas girls often protest by not being physically active, boys put up resistance by being active in the wrong way. The teachers regard the girls’ resistance as more problematic and as a sign of lack of interest, while the boys’ activity is rewarded (Larsson et al., 2005). An important difference, though, is that my interviewees love to sport and are highly active in their leisure time. Maria’s resistance may have greater potential to change the view of disabled students, as she stresses her competence by showing her medals. Finally, when they tell about the othering and stigmatization they have been exposed to, they avoid becoming victims. This is accomplished by shifting from ‘I’ to ‘we’ in the interview, and in this manner describing the incident in collective terms, or by minimizing the seriousness of the situation. The young women’s suggestion for how to improve PE is to maintain a dialogue with the teacher in which the disabled student’s experiences and knowledge about his/her body and about wheelchair sports are used as resources. Hence the student would become an active subject with capacity to take on responsibility (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

Previous research findings support the suggestion that the opportunities to experience an inclusive education are dependent on the gender of the student (Larsson et al., 2005, 2009; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011). The coach and the boy from the sports camp benefit from the dominant position as men (Connell, 2014). They reflect upon experiences of PE teachers and activities with a potential to challenge at least one part of the ‘paradigm of normality’ within the subject (Fitzgerald, 2005; see also van Amsterdam et al., 2012), the able-bodiedness, while the gender norm in PE seems to be unquestioned.

Note
1. The analysis in this article is part of the author’s dissertation, which deals with young women’s lived experience of the body, which, on one hand, is viewed as deviant – the disabled body – and, on the other hand, is viewed as accomplished – the sporting body. In the study, qualitative, semistructured interviews were combined with participant observations and video diaries made by the participants. For an English version, see Apelmo, 2016.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding
This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Sport Science [grant number P2017-0140].
References


