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How pupils' playfulness creates possibilities for pleasure and learning in physical education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Physical education has been described as too instrumental and uncritical, where a focus on utility has limited the value of pleasure in movement. Decades of previous research has addressed the need for changes where embodied experiences and learning are emphasized [Kirk, David, and Richard Tinning. 1994. "Embodied Self-Identity, Healthy Lifestyles and School Physical Education." *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16 (5): 600–625; Kirk, David. 2010. *Physical Education Futures*. London: Routledge; Wrench, Alison, and Robyne Garrett. 2015. "PE: It's Just Me: Physically Active and Healthy Teacher Bodies." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)* 28 (1): 72–91; Wright, Jan. 2000. "Bodies, Meanings and Movement: A Comparison of the Language of a Physical Education Lesson and a Feldenkrais Movement Class." *Sport, Education & Society* 5 (1): 35–49]. Accordingly, we align with the ongoing call for a 'corporeal turn' [Smith, Stephen J. 2007. "The First Rush of Movement: A Phenomenological Preface to Movement Education." *Phenomenology & Practice* 1 (1): 47–75, 66] in physical education, towards a more holistic understanding of learning and experience as embodied and emplaced [Pink, Sarah. 2011. "From Embodiment to Emplacement: Re-Thinking Competing Bodies, Senses and Spatialities." *Sport, Education and Society* 16 (3):343–355.]. This turn may involve a curriculum where pleasurable and meaningful movement experiences are educational goals. Building on this, we ask whether a pedagogy that gives room for playfulness may be a starting point for physical education being perceived as more meaningful and pleasurable. Our theoretical framework builds upon Wellard's model of body-reflexive pleasure, Hyland's understanding of playfulness as a responsive openness and Gibson's theories of affordances.



Purpose: In this study we explore pupils' embodied experiences in physical education, using empirical findings from a sensory ethnography. The research questions asked are 'How do pupils' playfulness create possibilities for pleasure in physical education? And which opportunities for embodied learning are being offered through playful and pleasurable experiences?' Our aim is to inform and develop pedagogies of embodiment by including playfulness as a strategy for facilitating opportunities for pleasurable and meaningful experiences that enable embodied learning.

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Method: The empirical data is based on a sensory ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a 10th grade class (23 pupils, age 15–16 years) in Oslo, Norway. The first author conducted the fieldwork as a participant observer. This included joining all physical education lessons for one semester and conducting 17 interviews with pupils by the end of the semester. In the analysis and interpretation process we have combined ‘the ethnographic hunch’ [Pink, Sarah. 2021. “The Ethnographic Hunch.” *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis*: 30–40] with an abductive analysis approach [Tavory, Iddo, and Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press].

Results and discussion: The findings are represented in three episodes that show how pupils playfully changed the teacher-given tasks, and in doing so created possibilities for pleasurable experiences. The findings are discussed using [Wellard 2012. “Body-reflexive Pleasures: Exploring Bodily Experiences Within the Context of Sport and Physical Activity.” *Sport, Education and Society* 17 (1): 21–33] model of body-reflexive pleasures and phenomenological perspectives on playfulness [Hyland, D. 1977. ““And That Is The Best Part of Us:” Human Being and Play.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 4 (1):36–49], and affordances [Gibson, James J. 1986. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates]. Playfulness emerged as a criterium for perceiving activities as pleasurable. The pupils’ playful stance assisted them in their search for meaning and pleasurable activities because it enabled them to be open and responsive to the possibilities that emerged in the physical and social environment. This led to pleasurable experiences of physical thrill and psychological flow in social interaction when moving with others. We discuss how pleasurable experiences may have potential for the pupils’ embodied and emplaced learning, as participants in place-events. As illustrated in the three episodes, the playful and pleasurable activities offer opportunities for learning and practicing integrated competencies, e.g. physical, social, and creative competencies. Suggested implications for physical education teachers may involve giving pupils the freedom to be playful by being open to letting pupils’ innovative initiatives influence the teaching and contribute to create a safe space for movement exploration.

Introduction

The concept of embodiment has roots in phenomenological philosophy. As such, understanding the body as the *ground* of subjective experiences (Standal 2020) deconstructs the notion of a mind/body divide. Physical education, whilst claiming a focus on the body has been described as instrumental (Stolz and Kirk 2015), uncritical (Kirk 2010) and unimaginative (Lambert 2020) and thus in some sense at least as disembodied (Lambert et al. 2022). An instrumental focus on the body may emphasize the body as an object, and thus that physical education shall contribute to various outcomes, e.g. acquire bodily skills, sport techniques, and improve public health. This focus on utility has limited the value of pleasure in movement (Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2016; Lambert 2020; Pringle 2010) and for creating opportunities for meaningful learning in and through physical education (Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín 2017; Lambert et al. 2022). Decades of previous research has addressed the need for changes in physical education where embodied experiences and embodied learning are emphasized (Kirk 2010; Kirk and Tinning 1994; Wrench and Garrett 2015; Wright 2000). Accordingly, we align with previous calls for a ‘corporeal turn’ (Smith 2007, 66) and pedagogies of embodiment in physical education (Fisette 2011; Lambert 2018; 2020; Nyberg, Barker, and Larsson 2020; Oliver and Kirk 2015; Oliver and Lalik 2001).

Aartun et al.’s (2022) review of previous research on embodiment in physical education shows that characteristics of pedagogies of embodiment may be summed up in two main themes: (a)

enabling critical reflection to challenge understandings about the body that have been taken for granted (regarding e.g. gender, health, and body ideals) and (b) facilitate exploration of (new) movements, in order to develop increased body awareness and meaningfulness. This in turn involves a recognition that learning is more than something of the mind, but rather that coming to know is embodied and to some extent tacit (Pink 2011). A common focus of previous research on embodiment in physical education is the need for new practices that challenges the status quo of the subject. Student-centered approaches are often suggested as a starting point for facilitating enjoyable and meaningful experiences in physical education (Aartun et al. 2022).

The ongoing work for more holistic understandings of learning and experience as embodied is rooted in a call for a physical education subject that is fair, inclusive, equitable, and empowering (Kirk 2020). A starting point for achieving these goals may be to facilitate experiences of pleasure and meaningfulness, because such experiences are significant for the individual's relationship to their own body and for their desire for further participation in physical activity (Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín 2017; Wellard 2012). Wellard (2013) argues that previous pleasurable experiences in physical activity create positive anticipations for future activity, where the goal is to establish a positive cycle of pleasurable experiences and embodied learning. This implicates a pedagogical approach where pleasurable and meaningful movement experiences are educational goals (Lambert 2020; Pringle 2010; Wellard 2012).

Siedentop considered playful activities as 'important forms of inherently meaningful human experience' (1972, 209). To play and to be immersed in activity are often associated with a feeling of 'being in the zone' and experiencing fun and enjoyment. Playfulness may therefore be considered as factor for creating possibilities for experiencing meaningfulness and pleasure. Building on this, we ask whether a pedagogy of embodiment that gives room for playfulness may be a starting point for physical education being perceived as more meaningful and pleasurable.

In this study we explore pupils' embodied experiences in physical education, using empirical findings from a sensory ethnography. The research questions guiding this study are 'How do pupils' playfulness create possibilities for pleasure in physical education? And which opportunities for embodied learning are being offered through playful and pleasurable experiences?' The aim of this study is to contribute to new knowledge about how pupils' playfulness plays a role in creating pleasurable experiences in physical education. Our goal is to inform and develop pedagogies of embodiment by including playfulness as a strategy for facilitating opportunities for pleasurable and meaningful experiences that enable embodied learning. In the following section, we describe our theoretical understanding of the concepts pleasure and playfulness as embodied experiences.

Theoretical perspectives

In this study, we use Wellard's (2012) model of body-reflexive pleasures to identify what the pupils experienced as pleasurable. Additionally, we draw upon phenomenological perspectives on playfulness (Hyland 1977) and affordances (Gibson 1986) to interpret *how* possibilities for pleasure are created. We further build on Pink (2011) when we discuss learning opportunities as embodied and emplaced.

Embodied and emplaced learning

Embodiment is based on an understanding that the body is not only connected to subjective experiences, but rather that the body is *the ground* of such experiences (Standal 2020). An important theoretical standpoint is that as embodied human beings we are both subjects and objects at the same time, we both *have* and *are* our bodies. The theory of emplaced learning involves considering embodied learning as always embedded in the world around us, which we always interact with. In this sense, place can be understood

as composed of entanglements of all components of an environment. This includes geological forms, the weather, human socialities, material objects, buildings, animals and more. Moreover, all of these (and other) elements should be understood as being in movement. (Pink 2011, 349)

Pink also describes place as an 'event' (2011, 349), where we experience the activities that takes place, and others that are present, from our subjective point of view. The term event enabled us to take into consideration the temporality of place: a place-event is constituted in time through 'the convergence of an intensity of things in process, emotions, sensations, persons and narratives' (Pink 2011, 350). In our study, the pupils got and created embodied learning experiences during physical education lessons in various places: indoors, outdoors, in the school yard, in parks, at pathways, in the woods, by the lake, and under different weather conditions and temperatures. They used various equipment and the tasks required various forms of collaboration. Each lesson, or even each activity, could be described as an event, where every person has its own emotions, sensations, experiences, and narratives, even though we all participated in the same lesson and did the same tasks.

Viewing learning as embodied and emplaced means that learning is a social activity, situated in the relationships between persons and with the environment around us (Lave 1988), and that learning has tacit dimensions (Polanyi 1983). This involves acknowledging that 'we can know more than we can tell' (Polanyi 2000, 16) and that there exists knowledge we take for granted within every context. Tacit dimensions of embodied and emplaced learning thus cannot easily be put into words. In our study, participant observation assisted us in understanding (some of) the pupils' learning and knowing. By studying the pupils' practices, we got a better understanding of what was valued, questioned, or taken for granted in the culture of this class.

A playful stance

Play is often associated with fun, enjoyment, and intrinsic activities, and can thus be connected to the concept of pleasure. However, experience is subjective, and what is perceived as play and pleasure for one person may not be the same for others. Dewey (1909) defined playfulness as an attitude of consciousness. Influenced by the pragmatist tradition of Dewey and phenomenology, Hyland (1977) proposes a phenomenological stance on playfulness. Understanding play as a stance is to say that it is a way of being in the world (Hyland 1977). The playful stance is operationalized as *responsive openness* (Hyland 1977). Openness involves being aware of, and open to, the possibilities that arise in your environment. Responsiveness is explained as the ability to act on the possibilities that emerge through the activity. The stance of *responsive openness* does not place activities in categories of playful or unplayful, rather they are placed on a continuum (Hyland 1977). It is therefore intentionality that influences whether an activity is being perceived as play or not.

Our ability to be open and responsive is based on our embodied knowledge of being mind-bodies in the world. Previous experiences in the physical and social environment contributes to develop practical knowledge, that are, to some extent, tacit. Understanding *responsive openness* as embodied knowledge and practical skills can assist us in understanding learning in physical education. Hyland (1977) argues that the ability to be open and responsive is foundational for all the other things we do whilst playing, e.g. trying to win or obeying the rules when playing a game. The *responsive openness* sometimes manifests as specific knowledge or technique in the activity we are doing, e.g. an expert is more aware of what is happening, and better able to make appropriate responses than a novice. Our capacity to improvise consists of *responsive openness* i.e. how open we are to the possibilities that emerge, and how responsive we can be to them.

In relation to responsive openness, the concept of affordances (Gibson 1986) is useful to explain our interactions with the environment (place-events). We can perceive the inherent meanings and values that the environment affords to our bodies, what we can do with, or in, the environment. Gibson (1986) first and foremost focuses on how characteristics of the physical environment

encourage action, but recognizes that objects and artifacts might also encourage action. Løndal (2013) who has studied child-managed bodily play argues that it appears to be ‘the combination of the physical characteristics of the place and the equipment that stand out as affordances’ (121). We do not argue that the concepts of responsive openness and affordances should be considered synonyms, but it is possible to see an overlap: Affordances are understood as the possibilities that emerge from our interaction with our environment, responsive openness can be described as the way in which we respond to such affordances.

In physical education, both the physical characteristics of the places where the lessons are held (e.g. gym hall, outdoor fields, nature) and the equipment or objects used will stand out as affordances. In addition, pupils’ previous movement experiences may influence how open and responsive they might be to what the environment affords.

Pleasure as an embodied and emplaced experience

Pleasure is often associated with adjectives like joy, fun, satisfaction, and delight. Based on the work of amongst others Wellard (2013), Gerdin and Pringle (2017), Lambert (2018), O’Connor (2018), Pringle (2010) and Smith (2007), we find it important to include meaning, affect, and senses in an attempt to understand what pleasure is all about. Pleasure understood as more than wellbeing makes it possible to explain why activities that involve pain, fear and uncertainty can still be experienced as pleasurable. Parts of the explanation may involve living up to prevailing societal norms and associated with status and power. Meaningfulness also often appears to be the driving force. Examples of such activities can be heavy contact sports as rugby or handball, where the physical fight and social interaction are core characteristics of the activity. Other examples can be mountain climbing or downhill skiing that involves physical strain and risk taking. These activities are pleasurable and meaningful despite, or even also because of, the sometimes painful or negative affective and sensory experiences they might include. In this study, we discuss pleasurable experiences based on understanding of pleasure as ‘a multitude of social, psychological and physiological components’ (Wellard 2013, 4).

Influenced by Connell’s (2005) concept of body-reflexive practices, Wellard (2013) has developed a model of body-reflexive pleasures. The model consists of three intertwined and overlapping dimensions that cannot be separated, and together they shape the experience of an activity. The three dimensions consist of the *social* practices co-constructed in relation to others, the *psychological* feelings of flow and ‘being in the zone’, and the *physical*, bodily-based thrill that individuals may experience in movement. The model of body-reflexive pleasures builds upon experience as embodied. Importantly, Wellard (2012) highlights that pleasure is a process rather than single events or moments, because ‘the pleasurable experience contributes to contemplation before and after the moment in the form of anticipation and reflection’ (27). Previous positive or negative experiences thus create anticipation for the experience in future activity. The (dis)pleasurable experiences the pupils gain in physical education may thus have lifelong and life wide impact on how physical activity are perceived.

Playfulness and pleasure as characteristics of embodied learning

In Lambert et al. (2022) theoretical concept analysis of embodiment, five common attributes of embodied experiences was identified. These attributes were intentionality, affectivity, meaning, sharing and unity (of body and mind). Further descriptions of two of the attributes, namely the learner’s experience of intentionality and affect, involved experiences of being present in-the-moment, developing a greater sense of the environment, and attending practically to a task using their whole body. These characteristics correspond with Hyland’s operationalization of the playful stance, where *responsive openness* (Hyland 1977) are explained as the ability to being open to the possibilities the environment offers, and to respond by action. Other descriptions of the attributes

intentionality and affect involved the learner's engagement with movement, experiencing moving together with others in the world, feeling pleasure, and paying attention to their own experiences, feelings, and affective states. These characteristics correspond with Wellard's model of body-reflexive pleasures (Wellard 2012), where physiological, psychological and social dimensions of pleasure intertwine.

Based on a phenomenological understanding of embodiment and emplacement presented earlier, and by applying Lambert et al.'s (2022) attributes as characteristics of embodied experiences, we argue that experiencing pleasure and playfulness may contribute to create possibilities for embodied learning. In the following, we will present the methodology and how the study was designed, in order to explore how pupils created possibilities for pleasure and embodied learning.

Researching lived experiences through sensory ethnography

The methodology used in this study is sensory ethnography, which is a way of doing ethnography 'that takes as its starting point the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice' (Pink 2015, xi). Drawing on phenomenological philosophy, Pink et al. (2013) state that meaning is being revealed through our actions and how we navigate through the world. A sensory approach is a rich source of knowledge, which offers possibilities to explore the multisensory relationships to materialities and environments of people's everyday lives, as well as their thoughts and feelings about them (Pink 2015). Embodied learning and knowing is multisensory (Fors, Bäckström, and Pink 2013), 'felt and sense based' (Lambert 2020, 157), and 'embedded in embodied practices' (lisahunter and emerald 2016, 31). Our aim was to explore the participants' embodied and emplaced experiences, how and what they learn in physical education. Because experiences are not (always) expressed in words, but also through bodily affect, body language, facial expressions, actions, and non-actions, the researcher needs to be especially aware of the participants' practices and sensory (re)actions. Sensory ethnography is not a study of the senses, rather a methodology that explores what we get access to through studying how and what the participants see, hear, smell, feel and taste. Using the senses as a starting point may enable the researcher getting close(r) to the participants' feelings and thoughts regarding their experiences.

Design

The study occurred in one 10th grade class, for a five-month semester in an urban school in Oslo, Norway. 23 pupils (15 female, 8 males; 14–16 years) consented to participate in the study. We utilized a purposeful sampling (Patton 1990) of a secondary school in an urban context. It was also a practical question of where we got access and consent to participate for a whole semester. The school was recruited through snowballing using Author 1's network. None of the authors had a previous relationship with the school or the physical education teacher of this class. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre of Research Data, and we followed their recommendations and national standards of privacy.

Author 1 participated in all physical education lessons during the semester (36 lessons, 54 h) and collected data via participant observation, fieldnotes (100 pages) and semi-structured interviews. The participants' experiences were approached by focusing on the multisensoriality of the place-events. By being an active participant, Author 1 experienced the activities together with the pupils. This provided unique opportunities to engage and observe the pupils' body language and reactions to sensory experiences, as well as their actions (and inaction) and varying engagement. Getting to know the pupils through mutual activity and conversations helped Author 1 understand more about e.g. what they liked and disliked, what was (un)important to them, and sometimes why. During the observations, Author 1 focused on asking descriptive questions inspired by Spradley's Grand Tour Questions (Spradley 1979). Examples of such questions are 'Could you show me around in the locker room?', 'Can you explain how a typical lesson look like?' or 'Tell me about

a good memory from physical education'. The purpose of such Grand Tour Questions is to develop rapport with the participants and encourage them to talk about their culture, in order for the researcher to understand what is important to them and discover relevant follow-up questions.

Using a semi-structured interview guide built upon the fieldwork, 17 pupils agreed to be interviewed about their experiences during the semester. Interviews averaged 23 min and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by Author 1 and a research assistant. All interviews started with an open question, 'What do you remember best from physical education this semester?' to explore what the participants found most memorable. This was followed by participant-specific questions that had emerged as important or interesting during the fieldwork. Through probing questions, we revisited situations from the current semester together, in order to hear how the pupils described these situations as they remembered them. Relevant questions could be e.g. 'Could you describe the feeling when you rolled down hills?', and Author 1 often asked follow-up questions like 'You said it was a fun feeling. Could you try to explain where in your body this feeling is located?' Such questions were intended to enable exploration and elaboration of the pupils' sensory experiences beyond what Author 1 had observed. From this, Author 1 got a better understanding of how the participants experienced the episodes, and thus what they found pleasurable (and why). The participants' own descriptions of their sensory experiences in these episodes were used as a guiding light when interpreting how their playfulness contributed to changing the tasks. How they described the situations gave us a lot of information about their experiences, e.g. if they were immersed in play or if they were affected by the external gaze. Including questions in the interview guide based on fieldwork observations involved an opportunity to confirm the observations and preliminary findings.

Context of the study

The selected school is located in an urban area outside the city center of Oslo, characterized by cultural- and socio-economic diversity. The pupils had various ethnic backgrounds, and approximately 80% of the pupils had either immigrated to Norway or were descendant of one or two immigrants. From the school there was easy access to bike trails, parks, an indoor swimming pool as well as a forest with small lakes and foot paths. The school had a gym hall, but due to the Covid-19 restrictions at the time of the study many of the physical education lessons were held outdoors. However, it is not unusual to spend a lot of time outdoors in Norwegian physical education, both summer and winter. Author 1's impression of the culture in the class was characterized by respect and care. Most pupils had strong friendly relationships within the group, some seemed to have many strong relationships across different constellations, others had a few friends and kept close to them. A couple of pupils did not seem to interact much with the other pupils in their class, but no signs of bullying or verbal harassment were observed. The physical education teacher had a natural authority. He communicated his expectations, but appeared flexible and did not enforce discipline. He therefore spent little time correcting pupils' behavior.

Author roles and reflexivity

Pink (2015) describes sensory ethnography as a reflexive project that '[...] invokes the inevitable question of how researchers themselves are entangled in, participate in the production of and are co-present in the ethnographic places they share with research participants, their materialities and power relations' (Pink 2015, 38). Author 1 was the researcher in the field and conducted all participant observations and interviews, and in the following paragraphs, we therefore chose to use the pronoun 'I' when reflecting upon Author 1's role(s) in the fieldwork. We also do this in the three episodes presented in the findings.

I chose to be an active participant observer and to take on the role of a pupil (as best as I could) as an attempt to be close to the pupils' embodied and emplaced experiences. To build trust and mutual

respect, I tried to blend in and join all activities on the same terms as the pupils. This involved following the rules and restrictions that applied to the pupils, taking a distance from the teacher(s), acting neither as an assistant teacher nor an expert. It also meant not having access to keys and avoid discussing the research project together with the teacher during school hours. The decision to join all activities implied being physically and emotionally involved and experiencing the same activities as the pupils. This resulted in both comfortable and uncomfortable experiences; sometimes I felt included and accepted by the pupils, sometimes I felt too visible and exposed, and other times I felt invisible, excluded, and vulnerable.

During the fieldwork, I experienced that my researcher role changed, as did my relationships with the participants. At first, some pupils viewed me as a detective or a spy, but as the weeks went by, I was treated more like a peer. I contributed to the culture of the class as a respectful and dutiful pupil that kept away from situations where boundaries were challenged. I restrained from taking social responsibility to e.g. urge pupils to include outsiders (like I would have done if taking on the role as a teacher), but I tried to be sociable and available for those who wanted contact.

To minimize the impact on the research, I tried to always let the pupils take the lead and be the initiators of activity, e.g. inviting me to be their partner in technical training exercises, joining their group at the swings at the playground, or chatting during breaks. When interacting with the pupils, I focused on asking open, descriptive questions. In this way, the pupils could decide what they wanted to share of their experiences, opinions, or feelings. Observing their relationships and communications patterns helped me to adjust and blend in without being in focus. Still, we acknowledge that my presence was felt and noticed, and that I could not in reality be a pupil. The fact that I joined the lessons as an outsider may have influenced the pupils, and thus the data generation. My presence may have contributed to some pupils feeling more comfortable, and maybe others felt more uncomfortable by having an outsider joining their class. My presence may have impacted what they chose to say or do, when and with whom. We argue that the long observation period, my focus on blending in and establishing trusting relationships reduced the negative effects of my presence and helped me getting to know them and the culture of the class.

Analytic approach

Traditionally, there have been perceptions that the analysis of ethnographic data has been inextricably linked to the researcher. Even though Author 2 and Author 3 did not engage in the ethnographic fieldwork as participants, their first-hand knowledge as former pupils, teachers and now teacher educators in the field of physical education enabled them to engage in the interpretative process of meaning-making, by asking relevant questions based on various theoretical approaches. We consider the collective approach to interpreting qualitative (ethnographic) data as a strength in our study, and in line with Eggebø (2020) and Pink (2015) we argue that a collective approach can be fruitful in terms of expanding our understandings of the empirical data and making the interpretative work more transparent.

In sensory ethnography, analysis and interpretation cannot be separated from fieldwork or writing, it is a continuous interpretation process (Pink 2015). In this study, we have followed what Pink (2021) calls *the ethnographic hunch*. She describes this as the moments in research when we encounter something ‘that deepens what I think I know, sparks an ethnographic-theoretical dialogue, turns around my thinking, and creates a stand of investigation through my research, analysis, or both’ (Pink 2021, 30). Such moments may occur at any time during the fieldwork, during/after a conversation or while reading something from the fieldwork, e.g. when revisiting memories and imaginations that enable us to ‘recounter the sensorial and emotional reality of research situations’ (Pink 2015, 143).

Our ethnographic hunch formed our starting point for the analytic process and worked as a guiding light throughout the process. In our data, the hunch occurred during the fieldwork,

where Author 1 became aware of the pupils' varying degrees of engagement in different situations. Their body language often left Author 1 with the impression of them fluctuating between being numb, indifferent, or disengaged, and joy, engagement, and positive body language. The hunch was that the varying degrees of engagement was related to their experience of the tasks and the physical and social environment in class. The ethnographic hunch triggered an urge to further investigate what characterized the moments where the pupils' numbness shifted into enjoyment.

Meaning making of our ethnographic hunch (Pink 2021) was done by using an abductive approach to data analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), where we alternated between inductive and deductive phases. During the inductive phase(s) we used a collective qualitative approach to analysis (Eggebo 2020). This approach consisted of presenting the data material to the group, mapping and sorting the data together before making a disposition for writing. During these phases, we started out by documenting where and when the shifts from disengagement to enjoyment happened. We continued by mapping what happened in these shifts, and by interpreting why these shifts appeared, we sorted the data in groups based on characteristics of the various ways they altered the activities. The deductive phase consisted of interpreting the data material through theoretical lenses. We applied concepts of playfulness, pleasure, and embodied learning in order to understand the pupils' experiences in physical education. During this phase, we kept going back to the inductive analyses of the fieldnotes and interview transcriptions and remained open for new understandings to evolve.

The abductive analysis materialized a pattern where the pupils seemed to be bored by many of the teacher-given tasks, and that they seemed to experience (more) pleasure in movement when they themselves actively changed the tasks towards more playful variants. Examples of the different ways the pupils' changed the activities will be presented in the following section.

Findings and discussion

Our findings are (re)presented as three episodes which took place in a physical education context. The parkour training, the bicycle trip and the swimming lessons were all a part of regular physical education lessons. Each episode consists of a brief description of the setting (place), excerpts from Author 1's fieldnotes and interview quotes where the pupils reflected upon their experiences in these episodes. Each episode is followed by a presentation of our interpretation of the pupils' experiences, based on Author 1's fieldnotes, interview transcriptions and memories as the episodes and interviews are revisited. We later discuss how possibilities for pleasure and embodied learning were created. (Table 1)

Episode 1 involves all pupils present in the lesson that actual day, since the warmup was a joint activity. In the beginning of episode 1, the pupils' experiences were characterized by discomfort, embarrassment and they found it pointless to walk uphill on hands and feet. They were aware of the physical pain and the external gaze, e.g. when Liban burst out to his friends: 'We look like idiots!'. The vibe changed distinctly when some pupils started rolling. I could tell that the engagement increased based on an increased tempo, smiling faces and the sound of joyful squealing. Some of the more hesitant pupils later told me that they were afraid of getting their clothes and hair dirty, and some were afraid of being injured if they hit hidden stones in the grass. Even though some pupils observed the others a few times before trying themselves, they eventually threw themselves into the playful rolling. They seemed to experience pleasure as a physical thrill and a psychological flow together in the social setting of peer friends as they were tumbling down the grassy hill. For a moment, they got carried away and seemed to forget worrying about how they might be perceived by others.

In this situation, the shift in activity was subtle, because the contrast between the teacher-given task and the rolling was small: walking uphill on hands and feet vs. rolling downhill. On one hand, the activity took place in the same landscape, involving the same group of pupils. On the other hand, the shift from teacher-given tasks to self-initiated activities appeared to be distinct because

Table 1. Episode 1.

Episode 1: The one where the pupils looked like idiots and got carried away when rolling down a hill.

Setting: A public park nearby school with parkour training facilities. Green, grass covered areas with various levels in the terrain. Warm weather, no wind, grey sky with chances of rain.

Objects: Parkour obstacles, small grass covered hill.

Participants: Whole class, 20 pupils

Initial activity: To practice parkour and try the different obstacles. As a warmup, we played a version of Tag, where two persons should try to fetch the rest of us. The teacher instructed us to walk on both hands and feet, to warm up muscles in shoulders and arms.

Observations:

It seemed like they lacked engagement for that task, and some were uncomfortable. Quite many pupils obstructed the game and took a lot of breaks.

On the teacher's request, Liban, Gustav and a few others bent down and started walking uphill on all four hands and feet. They walked in line, and Liban said out loud: 'Å løøø (local expression)! We look like idiots!'. They continued to walk towards the top of the hill while they talked about the boring and meaningless task and how stupid they felt and looked.

Many pupils gathered on the top of the grass-covered hill. Suddenly the activity changed.

Some pupils laid down at their back in grass, stretched out their arms above their heads, and started rolling downhill by spinning their upper bodies around and round. The speed increased as they reached the steepest part. In the blink of an eye, all I could see was rolling bodies: floating or stumbling downhill. Some covered their faces by keeping their arms in front of their face, while some crossed them across their chest. Some rolled individually and some in clusters, holding each other's hands and feet, creating a row. I heard laughing, shouting, and squealing of joy and/or fear.

The fetchers also started rolling downhill. The game element disappeared, but maybe it was now the play started? Where the hill flattened out and the momentum ceased, they sat up, brushing grass off their clothes. They seemed dizzy and happy.

Many pupils went back up to roll downhill several times.

Closing: After a few minutes, the teacher called for attention, and we went further into the park. The teacher instructed how to overcome the parkour obstacles. We practiced different jumping and landing techniques.

Interview quotes:

Axel: 'I understood the purpose of the game, but my body is so stiff that I can't reach down to touch my own toes, so it was just unbelievably challenging and painful to stand in that position.'

Divany: 'I mean ... What would people think when we walk like this? When I think about it, I get embarrassed. I picture how I would react if I saw 23 pupils crawling around on the grass and chase each other. I imagine I would have found this very strange.'

Esma: 'it turned out fun anyways, at least when we came to the top, it was funny to roll down.'

Mathuvanty: 'I remember it very well because we held each other's feet and rolled down together. It was very funny, but a lot of grass got stuck to our clothes.' [On the top she was a bit afraid because she worried that it could be stones hidden in the grass, and she was relieved when it turned out to be no problem] and luckily it turned out to be okay because I dared to try'.

Noora: 'I was wearing a hoodie that day, so I just put the hood over my head, and then I just started rolling. It was fun. I got dizzy afterwards, but it was fun'.

of the way the mood amongst the pupils changed from heavy to light, from resistance to participation to engagement. (Table 2)

In the beginning of episode 2, the group of six pupils were tired and thirsty from the bicycling. They were also bored from waiting for the rest of the group. The mood shifted significantly when

Table 2. Episode 2.

Episode 2: The one where the pupils were nostalgic and swung down memory lane.

Setting: A small playground with swings, a seesaw, and a horse spring rider. Located in a neighborhood consisting of apartment buildings. There was a pathway along the playground. The weather was grey, but warm. It was quiet in the middle of the day; we were there alone.

Objects: Round net swing, sandy surface, bicycles left at the entry

Participants: 6 pupils, including the researcher

Initial activity: Bicycle trip. The pupils expressed that they were tired and thirsty. We stopped to wait for some pupils that had taken a wrong turn in a crossing. The teacher went off to find them.

Observations:

Some of the pupils spotted the playground. They instantly let go of their bikes. The sound of the bikes' metal frames hitting the ground and the spinning wheels drowned in the shouting of joy while the pupils ran as a pack towards the swing set. Momina looked back on me and nodded 'Shall we?' as she was heading towards the big swing.

Within seconds, the pupils laughed and squealed with joy, altering who was pushing who on the swing. The shape of the swing was a big, shallow bowl, and the pupils stretched out on their back instead of sitting while swinging.

After a little while they urged me to try. The butterflies in my stomach flapped their wings as I laid down and was pushed by two pupils, generating both joy and fear. I felt the world started spinning as the height and speed increased. The light breeze ruffled my hair. We started jumping off when the swing reached the tallest point. I had to gather myself to dare, and the butterflies went crazy as I let go of the swing and sailed through the air. The landings in the dry sand caused radiances of pain from my feet up through my calves.

We shared memories from similar experiences with swinging and competing in jumping off the swings in kindergarten and primary school. The pupils' voices sounded soft when we reminisced about our early years.

When the teacher arrived together with the rest of the class, some of the girls lingered and stayed on the swing. It seemed like they did not want to leave the playground. Angelique shouted 'Just one more jump' several times and was the last to return to the bicycles.

Interview quotes:

Divany: 'As we were heading towards the swings I felt huge excitement, a rush of joy. (...) We haven't been to a playground for a long time. It was so nice, just to get the chance to letting go of the bicycle for a few minutes. When we got the opportunity to relax, we took it and went to the swings'.

Momina: 'I like when people push me, and I like when the speed and range are high. I don't know why, but it makes me happy'.

Divany: 'We were occupied with something else than bicycling, like we did when we were children. In kindergarten I always jumped off the swing and tried to jump the longest'. Momina: 'We had a similar swing in the schoolyard at primary school, and we always played with it. This reminded me of primary school'.

Angelique: 'A break was nice, but just sitting still would have made me limp, and I would not have had the energy to continue bicycling. But this was an active break, being on a playground, getting fresh air, and relax at the same time was very fun, knowing that we later should continue bicycling a very steep hill'.

Closing: We continued our round trip, heading towards the school. As we hit a steep gravel hill, many of us dismounted our bikes and pushed it down. This was the last lesson of the day, so in every crossing, people said goodbye and headed home.

they spotted the playground and realized that we were having a not-planned break. Three girls were the initiators as they literally threw (or let go of) their bikes and ran towards the swing set, and the urge to play spread to the rest of the group (including me). A shared experience of physical thrill occurred when jumping off the swing. The fact that the teacher had to call them several times before they tore themselves away from the playground may show that they were experiencing a psychological flow together. Swinging at the playground thus appeared to be more pleasurable than the bicycle trip.

This episode represents a contrast from episode 1. In episode 1, they seemed to get carried away without really noticing themselves, yet episode 2 shows a more conscious, distinct shift in activity. When the pupils dropped their bikes and rushed towards the swings it showed an urge and enthusiasm for playfulness. This specific activity brought back childhood memories for both the pupils and Author 1. There were more situations like this during the fieldwork, e.g. an episode where the pupils chose rope skipping in the school yard using children's rhymes as instructions. (Table 3)

In the beginning of episode 3, the pupils carried out the task of swimming distances given by their teacher but seemed to be bored. Liban and Gustav had tried to make the swimming distances more exciting by racing each other and making up informal competitions. However, since the task was simple and 'straight-forward', and because their swimming skills made this an easy task for them to master, it seemed like it was difficult to create possibilities for pleasure, and they were bored. The playtime therefore seemed like a long-awaited change. When they were allowed to choose activities themselves, most pupils splashed around and plunged into the water. The activity level among the pupils increased significantly in relation to their body language which showed engagement, enjoyment, and pleasure. Gustav, Liban and Resul seemed to enjoy the physical thrill and psychological flow as they inspired each other and kept inventing new, creative ways to enter the water.

In this episode, the teacher initiated a shift in activity mode by introducing 'free activity'. However, it shows an example of how the group of three pupils' playfulness instantly enabled them to be open and responsive to the affordances the swimming pool offered, and they started to playfully choreograph a routine together, which included game-like elements. This was similar to what Author 1 observed the pupils doing in other informal settings, e.g. when they played basketball before lessons started. Here they practiced new skills, and sometimes filmed each other's tricks. In these situations, the activity changed into more pleasurable when they took the opportunity to be creative and invent new activities themselves.

There could be a number of reasons why other pupils did not participate in Gustav, Resul and Liban's games. Maybe some pupils wanted to, but were not included, did not dare to ask, or was afraid of failing or getting injured. Some pupils told me that they were uncomfortable with swimming and therefore did not feel safe in the deeper end of the pool. Some chose to do other activities that they probably found more attractive and fun (e.g. playing games with balls, trying various floating devices, swimming under water). However, it is worth noticing that none of the pupils continued with the original task of swimming distances.

In all three episodes, there were differences among the pupils regarding how caught up in the activity they were. Some of them got totally carried away and forgot time and place for a few minutes. For others, it was more rapid shifts between being immersed in the playfulness, being aware of dangers, and being self-conscious. Nevertheless, what we aimed to present through these three episodes, is how the activities shifted from the initial teacher-given tasks into playful variants that were considered more pleasurable. Common characteristics of these new variants of activities were pupil-initiated, playful, creative, social, non-competitive, and fun. Fitzpatrick's (2011) critical ethnographic study of physical education highlights how physical education held a special place in pupils' lives, partly because the subject offered a place for playfulness. In her ethnography, Fitzpatrick defines playfulness as 'intentional activity open to uncertainty and surprise' (Fitzpatrick 2011, 183), involving being less worried about their competence, open to being or looking foolish to others, and not holding standards and norms as sacred. We find that this description of

Table 3. Episode 3.

Episode 3: The one where the pupils enjoyed being creative and developed playful challenges in the water.

Setting: A swimming pool within walking distance of the pupils' school. The pool was 25 m, with a shallow end and a deep end. It was an early, dark, and cold December morning. Inside it was bright, lit up of fluorescent tubes. The water smelled of chlorine and held 26 degrees Celsius.

Objects: Diving board (2 m), diving bricks (1 m), booklet containing swimming exercises and tests, ball, floating devices (foam boards, noodles)

Participants: 3 pupils

Initial activity: Practice swimming skills: floating, crawl, backstroke. The three pupils in this episode were in the intermediate group. The main part of the lesson was spent practicing to swim longer distances: 200–500 m, using various techniques. The pupils did what they were told but seemed disengaged. The last 15 minutes was free activities

Observations:

Liban and Gustav started diving. The teacher brought them a booklet with tests for achieving swimming awards. My impression was that this was to motivate them and keep them busy. At first, they were very eager to solve the tasks described in the booklet.

Liban was in charge of the booklet. He read the next level and said 'Hey, let's do this challenge now!'. Water dripped from his hair and left wet marks in the booklet. They worked together to understand how to perform the task.

They cheered and looked happy as they completed the tasks. They did not seek the teacher's or other pupils' response explicitly.

After completing a few tasks, the activity shifted. They started altering the tasks by adding personal variants and using noodles and foam boards as toys. Resul joined them. The activity developed into a jump-while-you-fetch-a-ball-in-the-air-before-hitting-the-water-competition. They made various routines and added personal style with poses, spins, and tricks. Soon, they seemed to have forgotten about the booklet, and collaborated in making more and more advanced challenges. They laughed, splashed around in the water, and commented on their own and each other's performances. There was a lot of excitement.

They did not want to hit the shower when time was up. The teacher had to call them out several times before they complied.

Closing: The cold air gave us goosebumps as we stepped out of the pool. I rushed towards the changing room and into the steamy showers.

Interview quotes:

Liban: 'So it's cool if they [teachers] try something new. Suddenly the pupils can be like 'Oh, this was so much fun!', and the activity would still meet the criteria for being physical education'.

Liban: '[When I experience mastery] I feel gassed. I get hyperactive, I get lots of energy, and I get the feeling of wanting to continue to see how far it can go. I get excited and I get an energy burst, I guess.'

Gustav: 'It is fun [when I succeed]. I feel the adrenalin. It makes me want to continue. And I don't have to worry anymore [because I mastered the task]'

Conversation between Gustav and me:

Me: Do you have any advice for the teachers' choice of activities in physical education?

Something you want more of?

Gustav: Something that is fun for everyone.

Something we like and enjoy doing.

Me: what could that be?

Gustav: Something everyone will be able to carry out. Not only activities where you must improve your skills.

Resul: 'The swimming was fun, we had it today. It is fun because we got to do whatever we wanted to do, be with], play.'

playfulness corresponds well with the characteristics in our data. When the pupils in our study invented non-competitive and social activities they seem to not worry about competence. Their playfulness and focus on fun implied that they did not take themselves too seriously. By showing creativity and initiating new variants of activities they showed that they did not take norms as sacred.

Wellard's (2012) model of body-reflexive pleasures can help us understand the pupils' embodied experience of pleasure, by highlighting the *social*, *physiological*, and *psychological* dimensions of the experience. The social dimension of pleasure is present and observable in all three episodes. All activities were experienced within the social context of their class, and the pupils actively engaged with each other throughout the activities. Author 1 perceived that the social interaction was an important factor of the activities being experienced as pleasurable. As described earlier, the culture and the social environment in this class appeared to be experienced as a safe space, and may thus have facilitated opportunities to be playful and enabled the pupils to fully immerse in the activities (Wellard 2012). The physiological dimensions of pleasure are shown through pupils' experience of physical thrill, e.g. when they experienced a 'kick' and described 'having butterflies in their stomachs' during their risk-taking in rolling, jumping, and diving. The psychological dimension of pleasure is experienced when the pupils were deeply involved in activity that continued until, and sometimes beyond, the teacher's instructions to stop. These experiences are characterized as an experience of flow and increased motivation, both examples of what Wellard (2012) describes as the psychological dimension of pleasure. In our data, we found many examples of how these dimensions intertwine. Even though some dimensions are more prominent than others in each episode, the pupils' experiences will always involve all three dimensions. It is impossible to separate cultural and social practices from their embodied experiences (Wellard 2012).

The represented episodes show that pleasurable experiences seem to occur. Next, we consider *how* such possibilities for pleasure were created. We do so by highlighting pupils' *responsive openness* (Hyland 1977) and the affordances (Gibson 1986) of the environment contributing to this process. The shifts towards more playful and pleasurable activities did not appear to be the result of the pupils' mental reflections, considerations, and discussions. Rather, pleasure seemed to emerge *because of* their openness and playful response to the affordances in the landscape (Hyland 1977). The pupils responded to the environments' calls by exploring new ways to move in on the ground, the air and in the water. In episode 1, they responded to the landscape as they explored the movement options when they reached the top of the grassy hill. They laid down and rolled instead of walking on hands and feet as they were instructed. In episode 2, the pupils took advantage of the unplanned break during the bicycle trip and were open to the possibilities that emerged in the children's playground. They re-visited childhood memories and responded by jumping off the swing, just like they remembered enjoying when they were children. In episode 3, the pupils were inspired by the tasks in the booklet, and they were open to the possibilities that emerged as they interacted with each other, the tasks in the booklet and the water in the pool. This shows that affordances can be both characteristics of the landscape and physical environment, as well as features that encourage play (Løndal 2013). We have a sense that these environments were calling the pupils to dare to do things that the ordinary school contexts (classrooms, gym hall, fields) do not.

In our data, the shifts between unplayful and playful activities, and thus unpleasurable and pleasurable activities, seemed quick and seamless. When the pupils changed the activities, we suggest they bent the rules by not doing as the teacher had asked them, and thus acted outside of the school's structures and expectations. We find it important to highlight that Author 1 did not get the impression that the pupils in these situations changed the tasks to defy the teacher or to be transgressive, nor did the teacher sanction them for misbehaving. However, because embodied experiences of pleasure may be linked to discourses and power (Gerdin and Pringle 2022), we acknowledge that pleasure may be derived from oppositional behavior (Hayward 2002). We therefore cannot exclude the possibility that for some pupils, the illicit nature of this behavior may be a part of the explanation of why these activities were experienced as pleasurable. It is nevertheless possible to surmise that the activities they created themselves to a certain extent were perceived as pleasurable *because* they were self-initiated. There might be a chance that the activities could have been perceived as work, and thus less pleasurable, if they were teacher-initiated (Holmes 1999). We also acknowledge that the changes may have negatively affected other pupils, e.g. they

were disturbed or disrupted in their learning activities, even though Author 1 observed that the changed tasks generated more engagement within the group.

Pringle (2010) encourages us to recognize the social significance of pleasure by taking pleasure seriously in education. We align with Pringle's reasoning that pursuing pleasurable and meaningful experiences can be a life goal. In addition, we found that the possibilities for pleasurable experiences that the pupils created implied opportunities for embodied learning experiences. Following Pink (2011), the three episodes represented in our material show different place-events, where the pupils are part of an environment in progress. These place-events are both being shaped by, and shape, the participants' actions (Pink 2011). Our findings show that the change from the initial teacher-given tasks led to playful activities and place-events where the pupils were more active. In Løndal's (2013) investigation of children's self-managed bodily play outdoors, the children's play appears as a relational process between the physical characteristics of the places, the available equipment and the children's abilities. In line with Løndal (2013), our findings indicate that the pupil-generated activities offered rich opportunities for practicing movement skills, for some even more opportunities as the teacher-given tasks. Locomotor skills were practiced when rolling, running, and jumping off the swings and the diving board. Turning and rotating in the air, as well as landing practice stability. Manipulative skills were practiced when the pupils threw, kicked, caught, and collected the ball in the swimming pool. Although learning movement skills is usually associated with early childhood, these are skills that need to be practiced in order to be maintained and to influence future physical activity engagement (e.g. Jaakkola et al. 2016). Such skills also form the basis of physical education curricula around the world.

Our findings also indicate that practicing movement skills together with others in a playful setting offered opportunities for pleasurable experiences as embodied learners. Positive experiences of physical thrill and psychological flow together with peers offered possibilities to explore (new) movements. The episodes offer opportunities for learning and practicing integrated competencies, e.g. physical competencies like rolling or jumping, social competencies like turn-taking and communication, and creative skills like choreographing, improvising, and designing. Corresponding findings are to be found in Lambert's (2018) sensory ethnography of girls participating in firefighting camps. By feeling, sensing and being 'in' movement together, conditions for embodied learning were created.

Implications for teaching in physical education

The fact that many pupils do not find that physical education contributes to 'gaining a love of movement' (Pringle 2010, 130) is a reason why further research about what pupils experience as pleasurable movement is needed. Experiencing movement activities in physical education as meaningful and pleasurable may contribute to the subject being perceived as relevant (Wellard 2013). Lambert (2020, 159) states that physical education teachers need to,

find out what makes their [the pupils'] bodies feel amazing 'in' movement moments, what that means to them [the pupils], and then what constitutes embodied learning for them? After all, that's what we do (right) – share the thrill or buzz of moving with others?

Findings in our study may have implications for teaching physical education and for triggering pleasure 'in' movement (Lambert 2020) as well as creating the desire to move (Wellard 2012). Lambert (2020) implores teachers to provide 'teaching and learning activities that bring jolts of movement pleasure, thrill, joy, buzz' (163) in order to make moving (more) pleasurable. In the three episodes shared, it is the pupils who answer Lambert's call via their regular improvisations that created possibilities to be playful, with pleasurable, emplaced learning experiences as the outcome.

Wellard emphasizes that including an element of 'fun' and opening the space to pleasurable experiences increases the possibility of broader engagement with the body, thus facilitating opportunities to develop creative approaches to the learning process (Wellard 2012). As such, we suggest

that offering open and broad tasks, that can be performed in various ways, with or without objects, can facilitate pupils' embodied learning through autonomy, creativity, playfulness, and pleasure. Such tasks may include offering a variety of environments and student-initiated activities where pupils can experience physiological thrill and flow together with peers as well as making space and time for reflection and contemplation such as childhood trips down memory lane. Re-visiting childhood memories of positive movement experiences may inspire the urge to (continue to) experience further (Wellard 2013).

The findings of our study contribute to nuance and add to the implications suggested by previous research on pedagogies of embodiment. It has been suggested elsewhere that for embodiment to happen in physical education, the teacher must have transformed the approach to learning, by e.g. understanding the learners' interests, needs and perspectives and reflect upon their own practices and ways of teaching (Aartun et al. 2022; Lambert et al. 2022). To concretize this advice, we suggest that consideration must also be given to the teacher's role in enabling pupils' exploration and playfulness to influence their teaching. We suggest that teachers should strive to be open and responsive to the pupils' playful movement explorations and to the educative affordances in various environments. This include student-centered approaches and for teachers to be open to setting aside planned activities if, and when, pupils' self-initiated play has educative value. Supporting and encouraging pupils' playful movement exploration also involves teachers being reflexive about what is experienced as pleasurable, when and for whom, like we have done when discussing the three episodes.

Concluding remarks

In this study, we have shown how pupils' playfulness created possibilities for pleasurable experiences and embodied learning. The pupils' playful stance assisted them in their search for meaning and pleasurable activities because it enabled them to be open and responsive to the possibilities that emerged in the physical and social environment. This led to experiences of physical thrill and psychological flow in social interaction when moving with others. Based on the findings in this study, we argue that pedagogies of embodiment should include playfulness as a way of facilitating embodied learning and pleasurable, meaningful movement moments. In this way, physical education may facilitate embodied experiences that pupils desire to do again (and again).

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