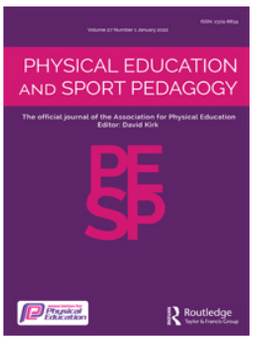
'The teacher makes us feel like we are a family': students from refugee backgrounds' perceptions of physical education in Swedish schools



Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpes20

‘The teacher makes us feel like we are a family’: students from refugee backgrounds’ perceptions of physical education in Swedish schools

Erica Cseplö, Stefan Wagnsson, Carla Luguetti & Ramón Spaaij

To cite this article: Erica Cseplö, Stefan Wagnsson, Carla Luguetti & Ramón Spaaij (2021): ‘The teacher makes us feel like we are a family’: students from refugee backgrounds’ perceptions of physical education in Swedish schools, Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, DOI: 10.1080/17408989.2021.1911980

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2021.1911980

PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT PEDAGOGY
https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2021.1911980

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'The teacher makes us feel like we are a family': students from refugee backgrounds' perceptions of physical education in Swedish schools

Erica Cseplö[a], Stefan Wagnsson[a], Carla Luguetti [b] and Ramón Spaaij [b,c]

[a]Sport Science at Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden; [b]Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia; [c]Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Background: Over the past five decades, the number of people from refugee backgrounds in developed countries has been on the constant rise. Although the field of refugee and forced migration studies in relation to education and sport has grown considerably in recent years, very little is known about refugee-background students' perceptions of Physical Education (PE).

Purpose: The aim of this study was to investigate refugee-background students' perceptions of PE in Swedish high schools, using a salutogenic approach.

Participants and settings: This qualitative study was conducted in two Swedish high schools and involved eleven students from refugee backgrounds aged 16–18 years (seven boys and four girls) who originated from a variety of countries including Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia and Albania.

Data collection/analysis: A total of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the interviews were systematically coded and analyzed using the sense of coherence (SOC) components as analytical tools.

Findings: Three themes were identified that captured the students' perceptions and experiences: (1) PE was perceived as more meaningful in Sweden than in their country of origin due to short-term benefits (e.g. social interaction with friends, and improving personal health and wellbeing) and long-term benefits (e.g. learning for the future); (2) understanding the rules and purpose of the activities helped students to better comprehend the experiences acquired in PE and communicate with others; and (3) constructive social relationships with teachers and classmates were an essential resource in order to make PE manageable.

Implications: We suggest that strengths-based approaches should be recognized and incorporated into PE in order to facilitate health promoting factors and wellbeing among students from refugee backgrounds.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 October 2020
Accepted 24 March 2021

KEYWORDS
Physical Education; refugees; asylum seekers; resettlement; ethic of care; sense of coherence

Introduction and theoretical perspectives

Over the past decades, systemic human rights abuses, conflict, war, and violence have resulted in unprecedented forced displacement. The number of humanitarian migrants in developed countries

CONTACT Stefan Wagnsson stefan.wagnsson@kau.se Sport Science at Karlstad University, Room 3C 426, Universitetsgatan 2, Karlstad 651 88, Sweden

has been on the constant rise for the past five decades. Refugees form a specific socially and legally constructed category (Malkki 1995), which is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2018) as people who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of nationality owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

Refugee experiences are typically traumatic and characterized by persecution, displacement, loss, grief, and forced separation from family, home and belongings (Olliff 2008). For children and young people, the refugee experience can be even more troubling (Whitley and Gould 2010; Whitley, Coble, and Jewell 2016). Olliff (2008) has demonstrated that young refugees have additional stressors when relocating to a new country: navigating the educational system, serving as an interpreter for their family, and handling family, peer, individual, and community expectations and interactions. Nevertheless, it is important to note that young people from refugee backgrounds often make remarkable progress and bring a wealth of resources and strengths to the country of destination (Olliff 2008). Their experiences can produce qualities such as resilience and resourcefulness, adaptability, a strong commitment to family and community, and a strong desire to achieve educationally (Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2015). Moreover, the 'refugee experience' is anything but unitary; it is a very diverse, mobile, unstable social phenomenon (Malkki 1995). The experiences of refugees cannot be attributed exclusively to their refugee status, but intersect with other axes of social identity and interaction, such as gender, level of education, and socioeconomic status (Bakewell 2008).

Sport, recreation and Physical Education (PE) have been used to cope with real-life issues and challenges, particularly as they relate to the dislocation and tensions inherent in the settlement process (Barker and Lundvall 2017; Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2015). They can provide spaces for young people to develop a range of life skills and explore their own strengths and personal development (Spaaij and Oxford 2018). Although there is a growing interest in studying how different forms of sport activities can contribute to positive youth development (Weiss 2019), the majority of the research in this area is characterised by a deficit model approach with a focus on maladjustment or limited opportunities in countries of resettlement, mental illness, and particularly Western views of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Borwick et al. 2013). Youth resettlement requires access to appropriate support services. One such method of support is found through participation in PE.

It is well known that PE can play a major role in developing a healthy lifestyle. Research that specifically addresses newly arrived students' perceptions, possibilities and obstacles has been called for, but remains scarce (Bunar 2010; Hertting and Karlefors 2013). A deeper understanding of how a new cultural context is experienced by newly arrived students may form the basis for the development of PE teachers' pedagogies. This may in turn lead to development of knowledge among the students, helping them to adopt a more active way of life, both now and in the future; and make sense of the availability of health resources (Quennerstedt 2008).

PE as a setting for resettlement has historically received scant attention within the field of refugee and forced migration studies (Barker and Lundvall 2017; Spaaij et al. 2019). Published research is concentrated primarily in Western countries around the themes of health promotion, integration and social inclusion, and barriers and facilitators to participation in sport and physical activity (Spaaij et al. 2019). Previous research on refugee students' experiences of sport and PE in schools, at least from a student perspective, is scarce (Barker and Lundvall 2017; Harwoodet al. 2020). In one of a few studies in the area, Huitfeldt (2015) highlighted the difficulties students from refugee backgrounds experienced when encountering PE in a Swedish context, mainly because they are unfamiliar with the way the subject was taught. This was especially evident among girls, who also expressed that they felt that both the cultural expectations and their own cultural norms prevented them from participating in PE, as well as in sport activities. Although Huitfeldt (2015) notes refugee-background students' positive experiences of PE at several points (e.g. offering them opportunities to learn new physical activities, strengthening their health and improving their language), this study, as most other studies conducted in this area, mainly focuses on problems to be solved rather than factors that support human health and wellbeing. Building on this previous body of research,

the specific aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of how students from refugee background, regardless of their particular religious or ethnic background, make sense of PE. We draw on a salutogenic approach, and the concept of sense of coherence (SOC), to explore refugee-background students' perceptions of PE in Swedish schools. In the next section, we introduce the salutogenic approach including SOC as the theoretical framework of this paper.

Salutogenic approach

The salutogenic approach, as proposed by Antonovsky (1987), is framed around health promoting factors and wellbeing as opposed to illness and pathogenesis. Instead of asking why people become ill, Antonovsky (1979, 12) asked: what creates health? Antonovsky argued that the ability to comprehend one's situation in life and the capacity to use resources explained why people in stressful situations managed to stay well and, in some cases, could even improve their health (McCuaig, Quennerstedt, and Macdonald 2013; Thedin Jakobsson 2014).

Derived from the salutogenic approach, Antonovsky launched the concept of sense of coherence (SOC), which reflects a person's view of life and capacity to respond to stressful situations (Antonovsky 1996; Mittelmark et al. 2016). SOC consists of three elements: meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability. The first concept, meaningfulness, the motivational dimension in Antonovsky's (1987) salutogenic theory, expresses the extent to which situations in life are perceived as engaging and worthy of emotional commitment. Meaningfulness can be experienced differently by different students. For example, while someone can experience it as meaningful to participate in lessons in order to improve their skills in a specific sport, others find it meaningful to get as high a grade as possible. Meaningfulness is more likely to thrive when students experience self-authority and opportunities to exert influence on the content of the lessons (Thedin Jakobsson 2012; Quennerstedt 2006).

The second concept, comprehensibility, the cognitive dimension, can be defined as the extent to which occurrences are experienced as structured and consistent, that they make logical sense, rather than being random and inexplicable. Comprehensibility is formed through experiences that are perceived as coherent and structured (Antonovsky 1987). In a PE context, this can be exemplified by an understanding of rules and of the purpose of the activities that take place during a lesson.

Lastly, manageability, the instrumental or behavioural dimension, is characterized by the perception of being able to handle situations in life – an ability to meet the demands that different stimuli will pose. A sense of manageability occurs when there is a perceived balance between the resources that are available, and the demands or challenges set by a certain situation. These resources can be either physical or cognitive skills, social relations, or artefacts such as tools or equipment. Through experiences characterized by an equilibrium between resources and demands, a sense of manageability is formed (Antonovsky 1987).

Salutogenic theory and the SOC concept have been used in research on health, PE, recreation and sport (McCuaig, Quennerstedt, and Macdonald 2013; Super, Verkooijen, and Koelen 2018; Thedin Jakobsson 2014; Quennerstedt 2006). Thedin Jakobsson (2014) analysed youth sport participation within Swedish sports clubs using the sense of coherence (SOC) components as analytical tools. The author considered as a starting point the fact that, if young people consider their participation to be comprehensible (i.e. if they understand the logic of sports), manageable (i.e. if they manage what is required of them and accept the conditions and rules), and meaningful (i.e. if they want to be a part of it), it is more likely that they will participate longer. Borwick et al. (2013) used the salutogenic approach to explore themes of strength and wellbeing in the life stories of adult Burmese refugees living in Australia. Their results indicate the existence of sources of strength that may contribute to human responses in times of hardship (Borwick et al. 2013). According to Borwick et al. (2013), the salutogenic approach uncovered resources from which individuals have drawn strength during their experiences of forced migration and resettlement.

Salutogenesis offers a suitable theoretical framework for investigating refugee-background students' perceptions of PE. It provides a constructive approach to the promotion of wellbeing among young people by shifting the focus from the risks associated with adolescent years to perspectives in which adolescents' strengths and resources are considered (García-Moya and Morgan 2017). It emphasizes the assets and resources that youth have available to meet the demands of everyday life, rather than focusing on the risks or stressors in young people's lives (Super, Verkooijen, and Koelen 2018). Based on Antonovsky, we would argue that stressors in themselves are not negative; on the contrary, they can be salutary if people are able to deal with them effectively. We adopt a salutogenic approach in order to study whether and how PE creates the conditions within which refugee students are able to do so.

Methods

Setting and participants

This study used a qualitative research approach to empirically investigate refugee students' perceptions of PE in two Swedish high schools. PE is mandatory in Swedish elementary and secondary schools. In elementary school, PE is set to 600 hours of teaching time throughout all grades. In high schools, the subject is usually taught over one or two years (a total of about 80 hours teaching time). PE in Sweden has historically been dominated by activities that promote a high level of physical activity, fitness training, knowledge about physical training and good habits regarding physical activity and nutrition (Quennerstedt 2006, 2008, 2010). According to Quennerstedt (2006), a pathogenic health discourse is dominant within the subject content of Swedish PE. Furthermore, Londos (2010) found that PE teachers in Swedish schools have allowed the subject to be dominated by team sports and competition. This suggests that PE teachers communicate a view of PE as an 'arena' where students demonstrate already gained physical skills rather than developing these skills. Hence, not enough attention in Swedish PE has been directed to aspects of health (Londos 2010). However, the current syllabus (Skolverket 2011) puts forward different kinds of outdoor life and knowledge about basic cardiopulmonary resuscitation, safe and ergonomic work environments, and a resulting shift in teaching practices is starting to show (Lundvall and Sundblad 2017).

Students from two different schools participated in this project. These two schools are located in different settings in Sweden: one in a middle-sized city and one in a smaller town. These areas can be described as socio-economically different from one another. The high school in the middle-sized city, with approximately 2000 students, offered mainly programs that prepared students for ongoing studies. The other school that was involved in this research had about 400 students. Most programs were vocational, preparing students for work within industries, construction and social care.

The study involved eleven students, seven boys and four girls between the ages of 16 and 18. The students were asked to participate in the study during a school visit after the researchers had initial contact with their principals and respective teachers. The students were selected in collaboration with their respective teachers, using a purposive sampling strategy (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). The selection criteria for interview invitation was for students to be considered 'newly arrived', that is, having spent less than four years in the Swedish schooling system at the time of interview (Skollagen 2010).[1] The selected students also had to be able to speak at least intermediate Swedish.

The first author conducted all the interviews. She was a 30-year-old teacher with Swedish nationality, with extensive experience teaching to newly arrived students in Swedish high schools. It is important to highlight that she never taught the students that were interviewed in this study, nor was she working at their respective schools. However, her experience in working with newly arrived students helped her to manage the power differentials (Block et al. 2013) between her and the interviewees. She recognized, for example, how rare it was in schools for teachers to sit

down with newly arrived students and listen attentively to their voices. Ethical approval for this study was received from the Swedish national ethical committee. The students gave assent to participate in the study by signing an informed consent form. Participants arrived from a variety of countries such as Afghanistan ($n = 6$), Syria ($n = 2$), Somalia ($n = 1$), Ethiopia ($n = 1$) and Albania ($n = 1$) (Table 1).

Data collection and data analysis

A total of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted. We used open-ended and follow-up questions in order to encourage participants to share their subjective experiences and to give them a degree of agency in shaping the direction of the interview (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was carried out in a private, quiet area of the school. All of the interviews were digitally recorded for verbatim transcription, producing a total of 58 transcribed pages.

The questions that were asked were: (a) What do you think the teacher wants you to do during PE lessons?; (b) Can you describe what you have done during the lessons?; (c) When you get to know what you are going to do during PE lessons (ball games, dancing, for example), what comes to mind?; (d) How does it feel in your body when you participate in these PE lessons?; (e) What is your experience, your thoughts, about PE lessons in (Swedish) school?; (f) Being able to participate in physical activities, is that important to you?

Data analysis involved three steps that embraced both inductive and deductive analysis. The analysis began using an inductive process (Lincoln and Guba 1985). First, three authors of this paper separately read all interview transcripts and engaged in the process of coding aimed at capturing the students' perceptions of PE in Swedish schools. Through this inductive analysis, statements and ideas were developed as data was read and re-read. Second, a deductive analysis guided by the three SOC components of the salutogenic theory (i.e. meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability) was conducted. With regard to meaningfulness, we searched for data that signalled students' perceptions as to how the content of PE mattered and meant something to them, and if they found it useful in some way. In terms of comprehensibility, we searched for statements which clarified what the teachers said and did that contributed to the students' understanding of what was expected of them and that the lesson content was perceived as clear and tangible. Finally, when using manageability as an analytic frame, we looked for statements that incorporated students' perceptions of the demands placed upon them in PE lessons and how they managed these demands. Moreover, we searched for data units that revealed which resources they felt were available to them during PE lessons (e.g. peer support in case of personal failure during physical activities).

Pseudonyms are used throughout to refer to the students. For the presentation of results, direct quotes have been translated into English.

Table 1. Description of the participants.

Name	Gender	Country born	Time in Sweden
Aamir	Male	Afghanistan	2 years
Abdul	Male	Afghanistan	2 years
Ehsan	Male	Afghanistan	2 years and 6 months
Farah	Male	Afghanistan	2 years and 6 months
Ismail	Male	Afghanistan	2 years and 1 month
Haamid	Male	Afghanistan	3 years
Levi	Male	Albania	2 years
Sarah	Female	Syria	1 year
Parveen	Female	Syria	1 year
Adia	Female	Ethiopia	3 years
Ayana	Female	Somalia	2 years

Trustworthiness

To address the research question of this study, we adopted different trustworthiness criteria such as investigator triangulation and regular debriefing sessions between the first author (interviewer) and her supervisor. Three authors of this paper separately read all interview transcripts and engaged in the process of independently coding data (Smith and McGannon 2018). We came together to compare codes and then reconcile through discussion whatever coding discrepancies we identified for each theme. The frequent debriefing sessions (i.e. 12 sessions) between the first author (interviewer) and her supervisor encouraged researcher reflexivity by challenging data interpretations, generating insights and checking for contradictions (Smith and McGannon 2018).

Findings

This study aimed to deepen the understanding how students from refugee backgrounds experience and make sense of PE in Swedish high schools. The results indicated that most students experienced PE as coherent and indicated that it was meaningful, comprehensible and manageable when participating in PE lessons. Three themes were identified that captured the students' perceptions and experiences. First, they viewed PE as more meaningful in Sweden than in their country of origin due to perceived short-term benefits. These included social interaction with friends, and increased personal health and wellbeing and long-term benefits (e.g. learning for the future). Second, understanding the rules and purpose of the activities helped students to better comprehend the experiences acquired in PE and communicate with others. Finally, the students described their constructive social relationships with teachers and classmates as an important resource that made PE manageable for them. Below we discuss each theme in depth.

'One hundred percent important in Sweden': PE as more meaningful in Sweden

The results showed that the students from refugee backgrounds viewed PE as more meaningful in Sweden than in their country of origin. To start with, they identified greater importance afforded to PE in their Swedish schools. Some students described how PE was systematically cancelled in schools in their country of origin, if schooling and PE were offered at all. Cancellation occurred sometimes to create more time for subjects such as mathematics, whenever teachers felt it was appropriate to do so. Some of the students felt that teachers in Sweden took PE far more seriously:

> I think it's important to me. Sports [are] 100 percent important in Sweden. In Afghanistan, at the time we have PE they say you can do anything you want, and everyone goes home, disappear, in a second. I also go home. We did nothing, but when I come to Sweden, they say sport, okay, we'll do it okay, not home, no. (Abdul)

The students expressed that they encountered a shift in attitudes regarding sport and PE upon resettlement in Sweden. They attributed this shift primarily to PE teachers, who recurrently pointed out the usefulness of the subject, and who also showed a genuine interest in having the students participate in the PE lessons.

The students viewed PE teaching as more meaningful in Sweden than in their country of origin due to the perceived short-term benefits such as social interactions with friends and improved personal health and wellbeing. Several of the students described the benefit of learning different sports so that they could be included in other parts of their lives outside of school, for example to get acquainted with other young people in their assigned accommodation. In a wider context, they imagined themselves using these skills when travelling abroad or to make new friends:

> If I go with my friends somewhere, to Spain or another country, to the beach to play or to swim, then what should I do if I have not learned volleyball or football or any other sport? If I do not know about rules, I cannot play with them. (Abdul)

> If I went to a party and it is expected that we shall dance two and two, I can dance there, but I couldn't before. (Parveen)

The statements of some students, such as Parveen above, indicate the need to include different forms of physical activity and dance (e.g. the Swedish dance 'bugg') in PE lessons, and not only traditional team sports. This may help increase students' confidence to enter, and feel a sense of belonging in, different social contexts. Like Parveen, some students requested to learn other forms of dance, apart from those offered by their teacher, for example street dance and African dance. These findings indicate that both traditional team sports and dancing were activities that students appreciated and found useful in their social lives, and therefore were perceived to be meaningful to them.

In addition, the importance of PE in promoting health and wellbeing was a recurring statement among the students. The students generally asserted that PE and physical activity is good for health promotion, especially for physical health. Several students also expressed that PE helped their wellbeing, where PE could be used as an escape from the troublesome thoughts caused by difficulties with the resettlement process and previous traumatic experiences:

> Sometimes you must have some time to be happy and … to get yourself to feel free. Not thinking about anything else, as you do every day … Your brain must relax too … (Aamir)

> It's just when you play, instead of just sit, you feel happy. Because when you play [volleyball] you don't feel that you must win or lose, you just play because it's fun. (Sarah)

Most of the participants expressed how PE activities gave rise to pleasurable feelings such as happiness, joy, relaxation and a feeling of freedom. The statements made by Aamir and Sarah amplified the meaning PE can have with regard to aspects of health promotion and wellbeing, which is in line with the curriculum for the subject in Sweden (Skolverket 2011). As also seen in the Sarah's quote, it appeared that for some the importance of winning was downplayed in favour of the pleasure of participating in physical activities.

The students viewed PE teaching as more meaningful in Sweden due to the perceived long-term benefits, most notably the opportunity to learn new skills in PE that they could use in the future on both a personal and a professional level. For example, Abdul stated:

> I think it is important to be able to play elsewhere [outside PE class/later in life] and maybe in the future I will become a PE teacher. Then I will remember what he has told us … Then I can use it. And if I don't become a teacher … If I am going to get married in the future … You do not know if you marry and have children, if you play with them. (Abdul)

Abdul perceived PE as a meaningful activity he could use in the future as a PE teacher or to teach his future children. He also emphasized the meaning of PE to teach skills that would allow him to play outside PE and later in his life. As Abdul, other students saw themselves as future PE teachers or future parents, and thus considered the lessons as an opportunity to develop their professional and life skills. In other words, the content taught within the subject was believed to have a value of its own, and not merely as a space to build social relationships.

'We cannot speak perfect Swedish': understanding rules and overcoming communication challenges

Regarding refugee-background students' sense of *comprehensibility*, the results suggest that understanding the rules and being able to include, and be included by, their classmates assist the students to better comprehend the experiences acquired in PE. Moreover, it seemed to help students to overcome challenges in their communication with the teachers, and to some extent with their classmates. Language was central to their experience and sometimes posed challenges in understanding the content of PE lessons. The students felt that their teachers tried to explain the content to the best of their ability, but confessed that, in the multicultural classroom with many different languages spoken, this simultaneously created some difficulties:

> I think that … for me it is a little bit difficult because … I talk Dari and I understand for example Dari but it is harder for me, when the teacher explains to me in Swedish … Swedish, is a little bit difficult for me to understand. (Aamir)

Like Aamir, some students highlighted difficulties in understanding teachers' instructions, while others expressed a perceived loneliness and vulnerability, especially if they were the only person in the class who spoke a particular language. These students believed that it would be easier for them to understand the explicit and implicit rules of an activity if they had a better knowledge of the Swedish language.

However, most of the students in this study found that the activities that were offered in PE were easy to understand and get involved in. They expressed the importance of learning the rules of different games, and how to execute certain movements; knowledge that is introduced by the PE teacher. When engaging in team sports, the students described how the usual procedure was that the teacher started by clarifying the rules and divided the group into teams. According to most of the students, the teacher did not give significant individual feedback regarding tactics or techniques as the games were being played:

> The teacher does not say much … she just says that you should pass the ball, that you should have good contact with others. The games I have played, I think it is easy. (Levi)

As described by Levi, the students generally understood how different sports activities in PE had to be executed. Knowing the rules when participating in different kinds of games was very important, not only for the individual students, but also in order to provide a safe environment for their classmates. Some students claimed that they received group-related feedback from the PE teacher throughout the lesson, which made them more motivated, and helped them improve their physical abilities. However, some students stated that they want more individual feedback from the teacher, in order to enable further development.

The importance of including their peers was highlighted by the students multiple times throughout the interviews, suggesting their perception that one must cooperate with classmates to be able to carry out certain activities at all:

> Working in groups is important. Like, in volleyball … that you pass to someone who passes to someone and they make a goal. You can't play volleyball alone. I couldn't pass to anyone to make a goal. Collaboration, you can say. (Parveen)

Interactions with others were a key element in order to learn activities such as team sports. Interviewees expressed that they understood that an important part of the purpose of the subject was related to learning to collaborate with others in a way that they did not get to practice in other school subjects to an equal extent.

'The teacher makes us feel like we are all like family': constructive social relationships with teachers and classmates as the main resource

The students described their constructive social relationships with teachers and classmates as an important resource that made PE *manageable* for them. They mentioned that having caring teachers and learning as a group were resources available to them in PE classes. The students often emphasized the importance of feeling safe and comfortable in class, which they attributed largely to the teacher who also served as a family member and a friend in the eyes of many of the students. Levi's and Sarah's comments below are indicative of this sentiment:

> I told you I was nervous because of the language, but it is important to feel safe. It is the teacher who must show you and make you safe as well … they should show caring, not just doing the lesson and going home. (Levi)

> Maybe because she makes us feel like we are all like family. There are no boundaries between us, we and she. She is not just a teacher, she is also a friend, you can say. (Sarah)

In most cases students felt safe and confident to ask questions, and for some the caring teacher was the main resource for the exclusion created by the language barrier. Levi stated how he was nervous because of the language, but his teachers' ability to create safe learning environments and establish good social relations helped him to learn in PE. The constructive social relationship with teachers were important resources that made PE manageable for them and might be considered of extra value to this group of students, who not seldom carried traumatic experiences related to displacement and migration.

The students also mentioned the constructive social relationships with classmates as an important resource that made PE manageable for them. The students expressed that PE differed from other subjects in school in terms of team building and the multifaceted opportunities to get to know each other in class. They also emphasized the importance of creating a motivational climate that was supportive and allowed them to make mistakes. PE thus appeared to be perceived as an environment characterized by belonging and sympathy:

> If sometimes we did wrong, we laugh … So, it's fun when we laugh together … if everyone around you is happy, you feel happy too. It feels like we stick together. We dance in a group and we are happy. For example, I'd be nervous to dance with a guy. I can't dance with a guy I don't know. But a guy I know well, yes, I can dance with him. (Parveen)

Parveen described how performing activities together with classmates provided opportunities to have physical contact, helped create a balance between the demands placed upon them in a certain situation and their perceived ability, and made the activities more manageable. For her, the constructive social relationships with classmates were perceived as the main resource to handle situations in PE. Finally, some students likened attending PE lessons to entering 'a free space', in which fewer demands were made of them compared to other subjects, which in turn led them to experience PE as more enjoyable. In the next section, we reflect on the implications of these findings for research and practice.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to deepen the understanding how students from refugee backgrounds experience and make sense of PE in Swedish high schools. This paper extends current knowledge by exploring how students perceived PE, as opposed to education or organized sport. In particular, we have sought to provide a corrective to deficit perspectives (Spaaij and Oxford 2018; Spaaij et al. 2019) by adopting a salutogenic approach that explores sources of strength. It enables a challenge both to cultural blindness among coaches in sport and among PE teachers in schools (Uptin, Wright, and Harwood 2013; Harwood et al. 2020) and to the often assimilationist tendencies of mainstream PE and sport culture (Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019). As such, the central argument we make in this paper is that incorporating strengths-based approaches such as salutogenesis into the PE curriculum can facilitate health promoting factors and wellbeing in students from refugee backgrounds.

The findings indicated that most students experienced a strong sense of coherence when participating in PE lessons. They perceived that the PE teachers were organizing the teaching in such a way that it was meaningful, manageable and comprehensive (Antonovsky 1996). More specifically, the results showed that the students viewed PE teaching as more *meaningful* in Sweden than in their country of origin. Similar to Huitfeldt's (2015) research, participants also seemed aware of how PE could contribute to promote health both in the short and in the long run. From a short-term perspective, they emphasized the importance of taking part in PE lessons just to have fun, relax and feel good about themselves, both physically and mentally. In the long term, they also valued the benefits of learning different activities in PE, in part perceiving learning activities such as dance as a way to be included in a wider social context, and as a way to negotiate and understand cultural differences.

Some of these results are consistent with findings from Beni, Fletcher, and Chróinín's (2017) review of literature, in which having fun and connecting the content of current PE experiences to aspects of daily life, were identified as central influences to young people's meaningful experiences in PE. All together these findings highlight the importance that PE teachers, with input from the students, organize activities that enable students to have fun, without losing focus on the learning process, which otherwise would risk to diminish the meaningfulness of the experience (Quennerstedt 2013). In order to make PE activities more meaningful for young people with both refugee and native backgrounds, we recommend that PE teachers take care to explain the aim of teaching elements in the PE context (see Redelius, Quennerstedt, and Öhman 2015). They are also encouraged to facilitate discussions with students about the benefits activities learnt in PE may have in non-school environments.

The refugee-background students' perceptions aligned with the discourse of integration as a two-way process embracing diversity (Barker et al. 2013), allowing them to engage in aspects of the culture of the country of resettlement while at the same time feeling confident in their (hybrid) identity and in their rights and recognition within their new communities. This attitude contrasts with the more common discourse of seeing refugees as a group to be assimilated into the existing norms and values that are dominant in the 'host' culture (Jeanes, O'Connor, and Alfrey 2015; Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019). Moreover, it reiterates that refugees have agency and bring resources, aspirations and talents to their country of resettlement (Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017). For example, Dhillon, Centeio, and Dillon (2020) captured the experiences of young people from refugee backgrounds in a creative movement community program and found that embodiment unfolded between the old and the new emerging culture, implying a two-way process. The students' responses in the present study similarly suggested such cultural hybridity.

The results indicate that some of the students view PE not only as a way to become or stay healthy through physical activity, but also as a subject where they can develop health literacy that can increase prosperity and sustainable health (Quennerstedt 2008). This finding is in line with the educational agenda that is outlined in the current syllabus in Sweden (Skolverket 2011) and in other developed countries. Quennerstedt (2006, 2008) has argued for the importance of adopting an educational agenda in PE (e.g. a salutogenic approach). By focusing on students' well-being, participation, influence and engagement in play, movement activities, and social relations, and by adopting a critical approach, it is possible to 'enrich their lives, strengthen them as healthy citizens and contribute to a sustainable (health) development' (Quennerstedt 2008, 280), instead of just performing health promoting activities. Our findings suggest that this approach strongly resonates with students from refugee backgrounds in Swedish high schools.

Regarding refugee-background students' sense of *comprehensibility*, the results of this study suggest that knowing the basic rules and being able to interact and cooperate in appropriate ways with their classmates are fundamental sources of strength that help students to better comprehend the experiences acquired in PE and help them to overcome struggles to communicate with the teachers, and to some extent their classmates. PE teachers are perceived to play a significant role in supporting students from refugee backgrounds to learn the rules of the various activities to allow them to fully participate in the activities. However, PE teachers should be encouraged to take some extra time to provide individual feedback, so that students feel sufficiently confident to participate in activities that demand some kind of cooperation. Some studies have shown that PE teachers tend to be monolingual, have limited knowledge of minority groups, and experience communication difficulties when dealing with these groups (Barker and Lundvall 2017). From a salutogenic perspective (Quennerstedt 2008; Goudas 2010), it is equally important for PE teachers to take time to discuss how group processes work, when and how group cooperation is promoted or inhibited, and how these skills can be transferred into other areas of life (e.g. promoting life skills). Teachers might need to incorporate multiple languages as well as a creative body language in the classroom in order to clarify purpose, content and instructions when teaching.

This study further highlights the importance of creating constructive social relationships with teachers and classmates, in order to make PE *manageable* for students from refugee backgrounds. Having caring teachers and being able to laugh with classmates were shown to be prominent themes in this study. Wiker (2017) has previously highlighted the importance of the PE teachers' social competence and their ability to create a safe and caring climate in order to make students feel comfortable and help them to cope with adversities in PE classes. Moreover, positive associations have been observed between a caring climate initiated by the teacher (i.e. a context that is characterized by listening, accepting, support, empowerment and respect) and prosocial behaviours (i.e. sharing and helping others, inclusion and caring behaviours), and negative associations between a perceived caring climate and antisocial behaviours, such as bullying (Gano-Overway 2013).

From these findings, we formulate a number of questions and directions for future research on the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in PE. Firstly, to what extent is there room in PE lessons to allow students to demonstrate and share physical activities from their homeland and other cultures, such as particular forms of dance and movement? What resources, talents and knowledge are they bringing to the PE classroom? And how might a recognition of these strengths help to develop non-racially stereotyped student identities within the school setting (Uptin, Wright, and Harwood 2013)? This line of research can build on, among others, recent work on the physical activities that immigrants have introduced into the physical culture of their country of settlement (Nakamura and Peter 2017).

Secondly, gender-related questions need to be asked. The gendered nature of sport may create bicultural tensions among girls from refugee backgrounds that may prevent their participation in PE lessons. Those tensions may arise from the struggle to act in accordance with the cultural expectations of femininity (e.g. wearing a hijab, stay home and do the house work) while navigating a male-dominated landscape that can arise when PE lessons are structured following the logic of organized, extracurricular sport (Harwood et al. 2020). The aforementioned questions place learning and health development in a holistic perspective, as the availability of health resources is dependent on the historical and socio-cultural context in which the individual is located (McCuaig and Quennerstedt 2018).

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The strategy to only include students who spoke Swedish in the study may have amplified the voices of more privileged students from refugee backgrounds. In addition, we recognize that students' socialization is an ongoing process which takes place both inside and outside the school environment. This makes it difficult to determine where and when specific learning processes take place or have taken place. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent the students' perceptions of PE corresponded to a view that they already had, or to a view that they adopted because Swedish societal discourse sensitized them to it. For instance, could their perceptions be influenced by an underlying deficit discourse that refugees are unfit/unhealthy and need to manage their own health better? Obtaining a holistic understanding of socialization processes requires a more longitudinal approach whereby students are followed for a longer period of time across a variety of environments.

Finally, we acknowledge the power differentials when researching young people from refugee backgrounds (Block et al. 2013). They may interpret the Swedish researcher as representatives of the dominant group, and may therefore, feel compelled or obliged to answer questions politely. Although the first author (interviewer) was experienced in teaching newly-arrived young people, we recognize that the power relation might explain why it was easier for young people to articulate critical views on PE in their countries of origin relative to PE in the Swedish context. We suggest that future studies adopt ethnography and/or participatory research approaches, along with a salutogenic approach, in order to better understand the complexities of the lived experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in PE.

Note

1. According to the Swedish Education Act (2010, 800) a newly arrived student will no longer be considered newly arrived after four years of schooling in this country.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Carla Luguetti http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9442-1636
Ramón Spaaij http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1260-3111

References

Antonovsky, Aaron. 1979. *Health, Stress, and Coping*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Antonovsky, Aaron. 1987. *Unraveling the Mystery of Health: How People Manage Stress and Stay Well*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Antonovsky, Aaron. 1996. "The Salutogenic Model as a Theory to Guide Health Promotion." *Health Promotion International* 11 (1): 11–18.
Bakewell, Oliver. 2008. "Research Beyond the Categories: The Importance of Policy Irrelevant Research Into Forced Migration." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21: 432–453. doi:1093/jrs/fen042.
Barker, Dean, Natalie Barker-Ruchti, Markus Gerber, Erin Gerlach, Simone Sattler, Max Bergman, and Uwe Pühse. 2013. "Swiss Youths, Migration and Integrative Sport: A Critical-Constructive Reading of Popular Discourse." *European Journal of Sport Sociology* 10 (2): 143–160. doi:10.1080/16138171.2013.11687916.
Barker, Dean, and Susanne Lundvall. 2017. "Transformative Pedagogy in Physical Education and the Challenges of Young People with Migration Backgrounds." In *Routledge Handbook of Physical Education Pedagogies*, edited by C. D. Ennis, 356–367. London: Routledge.
Beni, Stephanie, Tim Fletcher, and DeidréNí Chróinín. 2017. "Meaningful Experiences in Physical Education and Youth Sport: A Review of the Literature." *Quest* 69 (3): 291–312. doi:10.1080/00336297.2016.1224192.
Block, Karen, Deborah Warr, Lisa Gibbs, and Elisha Riggs. 2013. "Addressing Ethical and Methodological Challenges in Research with Refugee-Background Young People: Reflections from the Field." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 26 (1): 69–87. doi:10.1093/jrs/fes002.
Borwick, Summer, Robert Schweitzer, Mark Brough, Lyn Vromans, and Jane Shakespeare-Finch. 2013. "Well-Being of Refugees from Burma: A Salutogenic Perspective." *International Migration* 51 (5): 91–105.
Bunar, Nihad. 2010. *Nyanlända och Lärande: en Forskningsöversikt om Nyanlända Elever i den Svenska Skolan. [Newly Arrived Pupils and Learning: A Research Overview on Newly Arrived Pupils in the Swedish School System]*. Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet.
Cohen, Louis, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison. 2018. *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.
Dhillon, K. K., E. E. Centeio, and S. Dillon. 2020. "Drumming and Dancing: Creative Movement for Convention Refugee Youth in a Physical Activity Space." *Sport, Education and Society* 25 (3): 318–331. doi:10.1080/13573322.2019.1589444.
Dukic, D., B. McDonald, and R. Spaaij. 2017. "Being Able to Play: Experiences of Social Inclusion and Exclusion Within a Football Team of People Seeking Asylum." *Social Inclusion* 5: 101–110.
Gano-Overway, Lori A. 2013. "Exploring the Connections Between Caring and Social Behaviors in Physical Education." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 84 (1): 104–114. doi:10.1080/02701367.2013.762322.
García-Moya, Irene, and A. Morgan. 2017. "The Utility of Salutogenesis for Guiding Health Promotion: The Case for Young People's Well-Being." *Health Promotion International* 32 (4): 723–733.
Goudas, Marios. 2010. "Prologue: A Review of Life Skills Teaching in Sport and Physical Education." *Hellenic Journal of Psychology* 7 (3): 241–258.
Harwood, Georgie, Marguerite C. Sendall, Kristiann C. Heesch, and Mark Brough. 2020. "A Bourdieusian Analysis Exploring the Meaning of Sport for Young Women from Refugee Backgrounds in an Australian State High School." *Sport, Education and Society*. doi:10.1080/13573322.2019.1710697.
Hertting, Krister, and Inger Karlefors. 2013. "Sport as a Context for Integration: Newly Arrived Immigrant Children in Sweden Drawing Sporting Experiences." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3: 18.
Huitfeldt, Åke. 2015. *Nyanlända ungdomars möte med idrottsundervisning [Where Do I Fit In? Newly Arrived Young People's Perceptions of Physical Education and Health]* (Licentiate diss.). Örebro University.

Jeanes, Ruth, Justen O'Connor, and Laura Alfrey. 2015. "Sport and the Resettlement of Young People from Refugee Backgrounds in Australia." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 39 (6): 480–500. doi:10.1177%2F0193723514558929.
Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Londos, Mikael. 2010. *Spelet på Fältet. Relationen Mellan ämnet Idrott och Hälsa i Gymnasieskolan och Idrott på Fritid [The Game on the Field. The Relationship Between Physical Education in Secondary School and Recreational Sports]*. Malmö: Malmö University.
Lundvall, Susanne, and Gunilla Brun Sundblad. 2017. "Polarisering av ungas idrottande" [Polarization of Young People's Sports]." In *De Aktiva och de Inaktiva: om Ungas Rörelse i Skola och på Fritid [The Active and the Inactive – Youths' Movement in School and Leisure Time]*, edited by Christine Dartsch, Johan R Norberg, and Johan Pihlblad, 45–75. Stockholm: Centrum för idrottsforskning.
Malkki, Lisa H. 1995. "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 495–523.
McCuaig, Louise, and Mikael Quennerstedt. 2018. "Health by Stealth – Exploring the Sociocultural Dimensions of Salutogenesis for Sport, Health and Physical Education Research." *Sport, Education and Society* 23 (2): 111–122.
McCuaig, Louise, Mikael Quennerstedt, and Doune Macdonald. 2013. "A Salutogenic, Strengths-Based Approach as a Theory to Guide HPE Curriculum Change." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education* 4 (2): 109–125.
Mittelmark, Maurice B., Shifra Sagy, Monica Eriksson, Georg F. Bauer, Jürgen M. Pelikan, Bengt Lindström, and Geir Arild Espnes. 2016. *The Handbook of Salutogenesis*. New York: Springer.
Nakamura, Yuka, and Donnelly Peter. 2017. "Interculturalism and Physical Cultural Diversity in the Greater Toronto Area." *Social Inclusion* 5 (2): 111–119.
Olliff, Louise. 2008. "Playing for the Future: The Role of Sport and Recreation in Supporting Refugee Young People to 'Settle Well' in Australia." *Youth Studies Australia* 27 (1): 52–60.
Quennerstedt, Mikael. 2006. *Att lära sig hälsa [To learn health]*. (PhD diss., Örebro University).
Quennerstedt, Mikael. 2008. "Exploring the Relation Between Physical Activity and Health: A Salutogenic Approach to Physical Education." *Sport, Education and Society* 13 (3): 267–283. doi:10.1080/13573320802200594.
Quennerstedt, Mikael. 2010. "Physical Education in New Zealand and Sweden : Good or Bad for Students Health?" *Journal of Physical Education New Zealand* 43 (2): 7–11.
Quennerstedt, Mikael. 2013. "PE on YouTube – Investigating Participation in Physical Education Practice." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 18: 42–59. doi:10.1080/17408989.2011.631000.
Ramón, Spaaij, Jora Broerse, Sara Oxford, Carla Luguetti, Fiona McLachlan, Brent McDonald, Bojana Klepac, Lisa Lymbery, Jeffrey Bishara, and Aurélie Pankowiak. 2019. "Sport, Refugees, and Forced Migration: A Critical Review of the Literature." *Frontiers of Sports and Active Living* 1: 47. doi:10.3389/fspor.2019.00047.
Redelius, Karin, Mikael Quennerstedt, and Marie Öhman. 2015. "Communicating Aims and Learning Goals in Physical Education: Part of a Subject for Learning?" *Sport, Education and Society* 20: 641–655. doi:10.1080/13573322.2014.987745.
Skollagen [School of Act] 2010:800. 2010. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skollag-2010800_sfs-2010-800.
Skollagen, SFS 2010:800 [Education Act]. 2010. http://www.skolverket.se/regelverk/skollagen-och-andralagar.
Skolverket. 2011. *LäRoplan för Grundskolan, föRskoleklassen och Fritidshemmet 2011 [Curriculum for Pre-School and Mandatory School 2011]*. Stockholm: Skolverket [Department of Education].
Smith, Brett, and Kerry McGannon. 2018. "Developing Rigor in Qualitative Research: Problems and Opportunities Within Sport and Exercise Psychology." *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 11 (1): 101–121. doi:10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357.
Smith, Robyn, Ramón Spaaij, and Brent McDonald. 2019. "Migrant Integration and Cultural Capital in the Context of Sport and Physical Activity: A Systematic Review." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 20: 851–868.
Spaaij, Ramón. 2015. "Refugee Youth, Belonging and Community Sport." *Leisure Studies* 34 (3): 303–318. doi:10.1080/02614367.2014.893006.
Spaaij, Ramón, and Sara Oxford. 2018. "SDP and Forced Displacement." In *Routledge Handbook of Sport and Development and Peace*, edited by H. Collison, S. Darnell, R. Giulianotti, and P. D. Howe, 385–395. London: Routledge.
Super, Sabina, Kirsten Verkooijen, and Maria Koelen. 2018. The Role of Community Sports Coaches in Creating Optimal Social Conditions for Life Skill Development and Transferability – A Salutogenic Perspective." *Sport, Education and Society* 23 (2): 173–185. doi:10.1080/13573322.2016.1145109.
Thedin Jakobsson, Britta. 2012. "Att undervisa i hälsa. [To Teach in Health]." In *Idrottsdidaktiska Utmaningar*, edited by Håkan Larsson and Jane Meckbach, 176–192. Stockholm: Liber.
Thedin Jakobsson, Britta. 2014. "What Makes Teenagers Continue? A Salutogenic Approach to Understanding Youth Participation in Swedish Club Sports." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 19 (3): 239–252.
UNHCR. 2018. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017*. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Uptin, Jonnel, Jan Wright, and Valerie Harwood. 2013. "'It Felt Like I was a Black dot on White Paper': Examining Young Former Refugees' Experience of Entering Australian High Schools." *Australian. Educational Research* 40: 125–137.

Weiss, Maureen R. 2019. "Positive Youth Development Through Physical Activity: Progress, Puzzles, and Promise." In . *Advances in Sport and Exercise Psychology*, edited by T. S. Horn, and A. L. Smith, 483–502. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Whitley, Meredith A., Cassandra Coble, and Gem S. Jewell. 2016. "Evaluation of a Sport-Based Youth Development Programme for Refugees." *Leisure/Loisir* 40 (2): 175–199. doi:10.1080/14927713.2016.1219966.

Whitley, Meredith A., and Daniel Gould. 2010. "Psychosocial Development in Refugee Children and Youth Through the Personal-Social Responsibility Model." *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* 1 (3): 118–138. doi:10.1080/21520704.2010.534546.

Wiker, Madelene. 2017. *'Det är live liksom': Elevers perspektiv på villkor och utmaningar i Idrott och Hälsa [It's kinda live: Pupils' perspective on the conditions and challenges in Physical Education and Health]*. (PhD diss., Karlstads University).