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'I'm nearly as active as the boys who play football'

*A multiple-case study of social identification among least active pupils*

Bentholm, Anette; Pawlowski, Charlotte; Agergaard, Sine

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# **‘I’m nearly as active as the boys who play football’: A multiple case study of social identification among least active pupils**

## **Introduction**

Recent decades have seen a global tendency towards decreased physical activity (PA) in children (Boreham and Riddoch, 2001; Guthold et al., 2019; Rowlands et al., 2000; Strong et al., 2005). Despite recommendations on children’s PA levels and various initiatives by local authorities and schools in Denmark, especially since the early 2000s, it has not been possible to reverse this tendency and decrease the numbers of inactive children in the country (Andersen et al., 2019; Aubert et al., 2018; Toftager and Brønd, 2019). At the same time, we have seen increased polarisation between the least and most active children (Andersen et al., 2010; Aubert et al., 2018; Wedderkopp et al., 2004), with the least active being particularly prone to early or later development of lifestyle diseases such as obesity and diabetes (Janssen and Leblanc, 2010; Pedersen et al., 2016; Strong et al., 2005).

In response to this, the 2014 Danish Education Act differed from previous school reforms in including an element that requires all pupils in compulsory schooling to be active for an average of 45 minutes per day of the school year (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014). This requirement includes physical education (PE) and in-class activities but not breaks. In addition to enhancing pupils’ learning and general well-being, the requirement aims to increase the PA levels and improve health, particularly among the least active (Danish Ministry of Education, 2013).

Few studies have specifically focused on least active children, and it is unclear who they are, how we identify them, and why they are less active than their peers (Holt, 2015). Some studies have shown that girls are particularly inactive (Guthold et al., 2019; Ridgers et al.,

2012; Toftager and Brønd, 2019), while others have indicated that least active pupils are also more often categorised as ‘vulnerable’ and have poorer well-being and mental health (S Andersen and Helweg-Larsen, 2008; Biddle and Asare, 2011). However, research has suggested that these pupils are not necessarily uninterested in being active, but rather that they are not invited to join groups of active children or are even excluded from such groups (Holt, 2015; Pawlowski et al., 2016). Furthermore, one study showed that pupils who are least active in school breaks have lower self-esteem due to dissatisfaction with their bodies, being overweight, feelings of fatigue, and feeling deviant in relation to their peers’ PA behaviour (Pawlowski et al., 2016).

Childhood is a crucial period for identity formation, and PA is a key identity maker among school children (Harris, 2009; Stevens et al., 2019). Identity is generated both within ourselves (internally) and through our social involvement with others (externally), while constantly evolving in an interrelationship between the two (Harris, 2009; Jenkins, 2014). Through PA, children can develop an understanding of an ‘I’ and be reflected in others’ understanding of the self (‘me’), as well as an understanding of the group to which they belong (‘we’), which also interacts with others’ understandings of the group (‘they’) (Stevens et al., 2017, 2018). From a social identity perspective, the groups to which children belong can be, and often are, incorporated into their sense of self and, consequently, are powerful determinants of PA-related behaviour with potentially positive effects on mental and physical health (Stevens et al., 2017).

This study aims to explore how least active pupils describe the purpose of PA at school and how active they describe themselves as being in relation to their classmates. Within a framework of social identity theory, and in light of the Danish school reform that has placed a stronger focus on PA at school, we examine the dialectics between how least active pupils

identify themselves and how they relate to the societal categorisation of active and inactive children.

### **Theoretical framework**

To explore these phenomena in more detail, we drew on Richard Jenkins' (2014) theoretical work on social identity. Jenkins' (2014) presentation of the way in which identity operates was primarily inspired by symbolic interactionism. In such a perspective, social identity is developed through social interactions: a person will reflect upon their own and others' actions, as well as the background and development of the interactions in which they are involved (Blumer, 1986). The social identity perspective describes how individuals or groups differ from other individuals or groups (Jenkins, 2014). According to Jenkins (2014), identity is not an independent entity that the individual can lay claim to, but rather consists of processes of self-identification that intersect with the categorisation of others; identity is, therefore, always created through social interactions. These identification processes are fundamental to social relations: as humans, we distinguish between ourselves and others through them and compare ourselves to others based on general notions of the similarities and differences between us.

Consequently, we always seek to find out who these others 'are' and how we should behave towards them. We have some control over the signals we communicate to others; however, we cannot be sure of whether or how these signals are received and interpreted, that is, there is an interplay between our self-image and the public perception of us (Jenkins, 2014). In other words, we do not only identify ourselves but also identify others and, in turn, are identified by them. Jenkins' (2014) basic model refers to this as the internal-external dialectic of identification.

There are two different types of collective identification: groups and categories. In a group, the members internally identify with each other as they know who (and what) they are. In externally created categories, members may be unaware of their membership of this collective or even of the very existence of the specific category to which others think they belong (Jenkins, 2014). A key aspect of the processes through which people acquire their identities is the *ability of authoritatively applied identities* to effectively compose or penetrate the individual experience. Such categorisations by powerful others have consequences for internal identification, and it is often the ability to generate these consequences that matters (Jenkins, 2014). To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate least active pupils' understandings of the purpose of PA through the lens of Jenkins' theory of social identity; therefore, it can provide valuable insights into how pupils identify themselves and others in a period during which attention to PA in schools is increasing.

## **Method**

### **Study setting**

In Denmark, 77% of all children attend state schools, which are mandatory and free of charge for all children aged 6–16 (Danish Ministry of Education, n.d.). Schools are typically organised into three tiers: pre-preparatory classes (Years 0–3; age 6–9), intermediate classes (Years 4–6; age 10–12), and lower secondary classes (Years 7–9; age 13–16). Children attend school for 30–35 hours per week, of which almost two hours are allocated to PE (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014). In the present study, we focused on daily PA and, in particular, least active pupils' participation in PA, regardless of when it occurred in school time (apart from during breaks).

## Methodological design and school selection

This research is part of a broader study, named Move Motivator (MoMo), which aims to investigate the possibilities and constraints of promoting PA among least active pupils in Danish public schools and to devise recommendations for teaching staff. We adopted a multiple-case study design (Flyvbjerg, 2010; Yin, 2018) to examine a variety of ways in which pupils may stand out as inactive in their natural school setting. Based on a maximal variation strategy (Flyvbjerg, 2010; Yin, 2018), we selected three schools in the municipality of Aalborg, in the northern part of Denmark, each with a different size, location, focus on movement, and socioeconomic profile (Epinion, 2015). School 1 was an urban school with a low socioeconomic profile, School 2 was an urban school with a high socioeconomic profile, and School 3 was a rural school with a low/medium socioeconomic profile. We focused on six classes of Year 3 pupils aged 9–10 in each of the three schools. Based on the size of the schools, we followed two Year 3 classes at School 1, three Year 3 classes at School 2, and one Year 3 class at School 3 (Table 1). Examining the pupils' understandings of PA, particularly those who were least active, across the three schools provided us with a broader basis for an analytical generalisation of this phenomenon.

**Table 1.** Schools and participants

	<b>Socio-economic profile*</b>	<b>Total number of pupils (August 2018)</b>	<b>Number of pupils in each class</b>	<b>Number of least active pupils in research</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>School 1 (urban low-socioeconomic)</b> - 3A - 3B	21.6%	424	23 22	5 5	5 3	2	Range: 8–10 yrs, mean: 9.4 yrs
<b>School 2 (urban high-socioeconomic)</b> - 3A	3.4%	569	24	5	5		Range: 9–10 yrs,

- 3B			25	5	3	2	mean:
- 3C			27	5	4	1	9.3 yrs
<b>School 3 (rural)</b> - Year 3	17.2%	153	19	5	3	2	Range: 9–10 yrs, mean: 9.8 yrs
<b>Total</b>			140	30	23	7	Mean: 9.6 yrs

\* Indicates the percentage of vulnerable pupils in the school district (Epinion, 2015).

## Participant recruitment

Year 3 pupils were chosen because they were the first cohort following the 2014 school reform and had experienced increased PA since Year 0. The selection of the least active pupils in each class was based partly on participant observations during spring 2018 and partly on conversations with each school's PE teachers, who knew the children well. The pupils' activity behaviour was observed in school through the use of an observation guide that was developed for the purpose of this study and that focused on in-class activities (e.g. brain-breaks) and PE lessons to identify the least active children (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Observation guide for the selection of the least active participants

<b>Focus</b>
<p><b>In-class activities</b></p> <p>Signs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must be verbally motivated by the teacher to participate in teacher-led play or PA.</li> <li>• Sits down as often as possible during an activity.</li> <li>• When given the choice by the teacher to go out and play or stay in the classroom, generally chooses to sit indoors.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Physical Education</b></p> <p>Signs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes time to change for PE, forgets PE kit.</li> <li>• Sits on the floor or a bench as often as possible.</li> <li>• Staff need to verbally motivate the pupil to participate.</li> <li>• Very passive in activities, e.g. staying on the edge of a game, rarely runs without motivation, rarely gets the ball or tries to get it.</li> <li>• Stops moving when the teacher looks away.</li> </ul>

Forty-five pupils from the six classes were identified as 'least active' by the first author (corresponding to 6–8 pupils per class). Subsequently, the main teachers of the six classes were asked which pupils they found to be least active in general during school hours. There were 40 matches between the first author's observations and the pupils mentioned by the teachers. All 40 pupils were invited to an individual meeting with the first author to brief them about the study, and those who expressed interest were given a consent form to take home to their parents. In four cases, the pupils did not want to participate, and in four cases we did not receive written parental consent.

Two pupils were selected for pilot interviews, which left 30 of the pupils (23 girls and seven boys) identified both by the first author and the teachers to take part in the study (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

**Figure 1.** Flow diagram of pupil recruitment

### **Data collection procedure**

The data were collected from February to May 2018 using a combination of participant observation and individual semi-structured interviews. These methods were chosen to gain insight into the least active pupils' descriptions of their PA. The pilot interviews were used to confirm the clarity and appropriateness of the questions for the participants and were conducted with pupils who were identical to the group of participants in the later interviews.

The semi-structured interviews took place during school hours, lasted 30 to 50 minutes each, and were audio-recorded. Since pupils in the pilot interview found it difficult to explain their level of PA without a visual guideline, a continuum/line exercise was developed to accompany the interviews. During the interviews, the first author drew a line, and the pupil was asked to put the names of the least active children in their class on the left and of the



most active children on the right. The pupil was then asked to indicate where their own perceived level fell on the line. Although this exercise required confidentiality between the researcher and the individual pupil, the method proved valuable in capturing pupils' understanding of their own and others' identities in relation to PA. Moreover, the line encouraged the pupils to express their views more specifically. An interview guide was followed, which contained open-ended questions that were intended to give pupils ample opportunity to freely share their views, values, and beliefs (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). All topics in the interview guide were related to the school setting and directed pupils' attention to their descriptions of PA in school and their understandings of the purposes of participation in PA. Examples of questions asked were: 'Do you like to be active?' and, 'Why is it important to be active?'

The participant observations took place from 8 am to 2 pm on 15 days at each school. Field notes were taken during every in-class PA session and PE class during this period. The first author approached these sessions through focused observations (Spradley, 1980) of pupils' patterns of participation and non-participation in PA, their verbal and non-verbal communication, their body language, and their interactions with peers and teachers, following the observation guide shown in Table 2. These observations were mentioned in the individual interviews with pupils to encourage them to describe the observed behaviour in more detail and were essential for understanding the PA context. Observations were also crucial for understanding the PA context and the influence of external categorisation on the least active pupils.

### **Ethical considerations**

At each school, the principal and teachers were invited to an information meeting about the study during which their consent was requested and granted. An information letter was also

sent to all parents of Year 3 pupils from the participating schools explaining the details of the study and the intended role of their children. The parents and all pupils were informed that interview selection was random. This information was shared to avoid the potential stigmatisation of the group in focus. Written consent was obtained from the 30 pupils' parents and oral assent was obtained from each pupil prior to the interviews. The first author also spent up to two weeks talking to and observing the children before interviewing them to help them feel comfortable in the interview. All interviews were conducted as a confidential dialogue between researcher and pupil, and it was emphasised that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. If pupils introduced sensitive topics such as bullying, the author tried to maintain a neutral discussion and create an atmosphere that accommodated the pupils' feelings. Two pupils disclosed that they were at risk of harm, and the researcher reported this information to their teacher. According to National Research Guidance, studies with a qualitative research design do not require formal approval by the Danish Health Research Ethics Committee Northern Region; instead, the study was formally approved and registered by University College of Northern Denmark (UCN) via a data processing agreement (ID: FOU-UU-2017-005). All real names have been replaced with pseudonyms in this paper.

### **Data analysis**

The 30 audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. A guideline for the transcription was devised in collaboration with the first author, who provided guidance on how to transcribe breaks and emotions that may have easily been lost in the translation from audio file to paper. The first author read all the transcriptions and made any necessary corrections based on the audio files to ensure accuracy (Emerson et al.,

2011). All interviews and field notes from the observations were made according to guidelines for thick description (Spradley, 1980) and were analysed using NVivo 12.

The analysis used systematic combining, an abductive approach to case study research that combines theoretical and empirical perspectives (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The main idea of systematic combining is that theory cannot be understood without empirical observation and vice versa; therefore, the final decision of which theoretical perspective to pursue was made during the analysis of the empirical material. In addition, Jenkins' (2014) theory of social identity was drawn on to analyse patterns in the data. The first author coded all interviews transcripts and field notes while considering the overall aim of the study. The first step focused on identifying units in how the least active pupils at each school described the purpose of PA. A more detailed analysis followed, which captured the meaning of the pupils' descriptions across the three schools. Finally, the meaning units were compared across all empirical material (both interviews and observations) to find similarities and differences. Regarding the study's focus on social identity, no significant differences appeared between pupils' descriptions and understandings in the three schools, and the empirical framework was, therefore, analysed as a whole.

## **Findings**

Below, the pupils' descriptions of the purpose of PA in school are represented first, followed by their identifications of themselves and others in relation to PA. The analysis is supported by descriptions from observations and participants' interview quotes, which have been translated into English.

## **Pupils' descriptions of the purpose of PA at school**

With regards to the least active pupils' descriptions of the purpose of PA in school, it was highly evident that the pupils were engaged in it '*because it's healthy*'. These descriptions were further examined to explore how this understanding related to the pupils' identification of themselves.

### **'Because it's healthy'**

The least active pupils mentioned different purposes of PA at school. Most of them enjoyed being active at school because it added variety to their school day and helped them to concentrate on their schoolwork, which was normally undertaken while sedentary.

In reply to the question about why they should be active at school, a few pupils also answered, 'I don't know' or 'Because it'll make us happy' (Diana, 3A, School 1). However, the vast majority of pupils cited physical health as the main reason: 'Because it's healthy for your body, and you get energy. That's all I know' (Carla, 3A, School 2). These replies showed that their understandings of the purpose of PA primarily centred on the health benefits that could result from participation. The pupils, thus, appeared to convey the health discourse that is prevalent in society, which also featured as an important motivator for the requirement that pupils should partake in 45 minutes of daily PA in school as part of the educational reform. Some statements also indicated that the pupils' understandings of the importance of PA had been influenced by family members: 'My mum says you get more tired if you aren't very active' (Ellen, 3B, School 2).

In Jenkins' view (2014: 45), the pupils were acquiring authoritatively applied identities, which, in the example of Ellen's mother, would penetrate Ellen's individual experience and have the power to define the meaning of why people should be active. For many pupils, the

response 'because it's healthy' appeared as a rhetorical answer that they had heard many times from parents and teachers, especially because many found it difficult to provide their own answer to 'What does healthy mean?' The pupils who could elaborate on this question mostly replied, 'So you don't get fat' (Mette, 3B, School 2).

In describing the purpose of PA as reducing the risk of becoming fat, the pupils again linked it to health promotion, with particular attention given to the negative consequences of not being active. Such statements from some of the least active pupils can be interpreted from Jenkins' perspective as contributions to a collective categorisation of overweight people; further, if this classification is expressed often enough, such categorisation of fat children can become a stigma (Jenkins, 2014). According to Goffman, stigma is a phenomenon created as a definition in social processes, which shifts the focus to the individual as a deviant (Goffman, 1963).

### **Pupils' identification of themselves and others in relation to PA**

When inquiring into the least active pupils' perceptions of their own and classmates' levels of PA, three findings were particularly noteworthy. Firstly, the pupils described themselves as 'not very active in school' but as being 'engaged in other interests or active elsewhere'. Secondly, there was a discrepancy between pupils' internal identification and the external categorisation of how active they were. Thirdly, our analysis highlighted how the pupils related to the categorisation of inactivity (described in more detail below).

#### **'Not very active in school but engaged in other interests or active elsewhere'**

A few participants acknowledged that they were not very active at school but emphasised that they would have been if they did their favourite activity more often or that they were active in their spare time, at home, and when walking or cycling to school.

Moreover, in the following dialogue, Amanda (3A, School 1) noted that the least active pupils may have been engaged in other interests, and being active in PA sessions had not motivated her because these sessions did not include the activity she liked:

I: Are you the kind of girl who is very active at school or the kind that is not very active?

Amanda: I am not very active.

I: Why is that, do you think?

Amanda: Because sometimes I play games on my computer or iPhone.

I: You mentioned *Just Dance* [a popular dancing video game] as an activity you like. Are you dancing a lot at school?

Amanda: No.

I: Do you want to do *Just Dance* more often at school?

Amanda: Yes.

Amanda suggested that her computer and iPhone were the reasons why she was less active than other pupils. However, she also mentioned that she only played electronic games 'sometimes'; thus, she appeared to be aware of the general societal understanding that such devices are associated with sedentary activity. At the same time, she wanted to play *Just Dance* more often at school, which could indicate that her inactivity was also dependent on the activities offered, with her favourite activities only rarely being available. This conceptualisation may imply a line of argumentation through which Amanda was pointing to external reasons for her inactivity, and that she regarded herself as active when not using her electronic devices or when playing *Just Dance*. According to the first author's observations,

Amanda was often sitting on a bench during PE, in line with her own assessment of her inactive behaviour. This appears to reflect an agreement between her external categorisation and internal identification. Other pupils, for example, Josefine (3B, School 1), found it difficult to assess their own level of PA at school and/or pointed out that they were active in other contexts:

I: What about you? Are you the kind of girl that is very active at school?

Josefine: Not really. Although I've sometimes done gymnastics, and skating, and trampoline, and so on, so I don't really know.

I: But are you very active at school?

Josefine: Yes, I am. I ride my bike fast to school.

I: Yes, but when you're actually at school are you very active then?

Josefine: Well, I am most active in the breaks.

Although Josefine presented herself as someone who was not very active at school, she still found it difficult to identify herself as a 'not very active girl', and, consequently, contradicted herself later in the dialogue. One interpretation could be that she did not want to disappoint the interviewer, whom she expected wanted her to be active in school. Another possible interpretation is that she preferred being active in leisure activities and when cycling to school, while being active in PA sessions in school did not seem to motivate her. She might have even held back information about how she felt excluded from PE classes. Nevertheless, her description incorporated a line of argumentation through which she managed to identify herself as somewhat active.

The presence of these multiple interpretations, as well as an apparent reluctance towards describing oneself as not active, was further apparent in the example below. Winnie (3B, School 1) also did not assess her own activity level solely based on school hours:

I: Are you very active or not very active at school?

Winnie: Well, I think, when I'm at home, I often dance, and then I start jumping about.

I: What about at school?

Winnie: Not always, because sometimes I'm a bit tired when we have to play baseball or football all the time, and it's too much bother, so that's just the way I am.

Like Josefine, Winnie identified herself as being active at home but less active at school. From that perspective, her distinction between 'jumping about' at home and being less active at school can be interpreted as her describing herself in accordance with others she identified with, which, per Jenkins, demonstrates an interface between her self-image in and outside of school. Winnie stated that baseball and football were common activities that 'we have to play'. This may indicate that her classmates had more power than her to influence what was played at school, and that there may have been possible stigmatisation if Winnie 'jumped about'.

### **Disagreement between pupils' internal identification and external categorisation**

The vast majority of the pupils found their own PA to be average to very high in comparison with that of their peers. They placed their level of PA on the line in similar positions to Sofie and David:



‘I put myself in the middle, 6 or 7. I am not that active, like I start sweating and [so on], but I’m not inactive either.’ (Sofie, 3A, School 2)

[Insert Figure 2 here]

**Figure 2.** Sofie, 3A, School 2

‘I put myself here. Right at the top.’ (David, Year 3, School 3)

[Insert Figure 3 here]

**Figure 3.** David, Year 3, School 3

Interestingly, almost all the children described themselves as moderately active at school, like Sofie, or very active, like David, when asked to compare themselves with their classmates, even though they had been selected as the least active in their classes. An observation with four of the pupils emphasised the disagreement between this internal identification and external categorisation:

*The class has maths, and the sun is shining outside. The teacher Marie gives them a brain-break: ‘Go outdoors for 10 minutes’. Most of the pupils go outdoors, but some of the girls (Sandra, Laila, Frida, and Ellen) remain seated indoors. Marie asks why they aren’t outdoors: ‘We don’t want to [go]’. The teacher accepts this and suggests they play Just Dance indoors instead, and all the girls answer, ‘yes’. They find a dance on their computer, and Sandra and Laila make some moves to the video. Ellen and Frida remain sitting on their chairs watching the dancing girls the whole break. (Observation, School 2, 4B)*

This incident can be interpreted as an expression of social relations: the girls tried to control the signals they were sending to others, although they could not be sure of whether or how

these signals were received and interpreted. Consequently, there was a discrepancy between their self-image and the public perception of them.

### **External categorisation by peers and teachers**

The least active pupils contributed to an external categorisation of their peers, who were similar to themselves, in identifying themselves as active, while they were also categorised by peers and teachers. When the pupils were asked to name the classmates who were very active and those who were not in the continuum exercise during the interviews, one of the boys answered, 'I'm not quite as active as the football boys, but I'm not as lazy as Ellen either' (Preben 3B, School 2). The 'football boys' were often described as the most active pupils, while the quiet girls and the 'computer boys' were portrayed as the least active. The 'football boys' were generally referred to as the ideal; Preben was one of the least active pupils, whose self-recognition revealed that he could not fully become part of the group since he did not play football. When the participants referred to the least active group, they often mentioned the study's other participants, as in Ellen's example. In comparison, Ellen described herself as average in terms of activity and pointed out two other participants as being inactive: 'Frida and Laila just want to stay indoors and draw horses and other things' (Ellen, 3B, School 2).

In this way, the participants identified their own participation in PA by also categorising others, just as they themselves were categorised. The pupils who identified themselves as active attached themselves to a collective group identity with PA as the norm, which was more appealing than the other group identity they belonged to.

The below observation reveals how Tom was subject to this type of external categorisation by Anne:

*The Year 3 classes are having PE in the gym: 68 pupils and four teachers. They have to do a fitness test, a beep test. They must try to run 20 metres across the gym before the next beep sounds. The time between the two beeps gets continuously shorter and shorter, so they have to run faster. They are divided into two groups of 34 pupils. One group runs while the other group sits on the bench; the latter group is assigned a 'running mate' who gives 'warnings'. Each pupil gets one warning, and the next time they can't run the 20 metres, they're out. I'm sitting on the bench next to Anne, who isn't doing PE today. She says spontaneously and rather puzzled, 'Tom is still in'. I ask her, 'What do you mean by that?' 'He can't usually run that much,' she replies. (Observation from PE, School 2)*

Tom was persevering; he managed the beep test and should, in this case, have been categorised as an active pupil. Instead, he was categorised by one of the other pupils as 'not normally active' and became a member of an externally categorised group of 'non-active pupils' without being aware of it.

At the end of the beep test when only two boys were left, Martin, one of the PE teachers, asked, 'Who's going to win?', and all the pupils were shouting and cheering them on. The beep test, which is meant to test pupils' physical fitness, became a competitive activity, supported by the PE teachers, which influenced the external categorisation of pupils with less endurance, such as Tom. Another observation shows how one teacher, Hanne, and a co-teacher, John, contributed to the categorisation of one of the least active pupils:

*Hanne tells 3A to go outside and run two laps around the sports field. Several pupils start running. Hanne walks quickly. Some pupils lag behind, such as Amanda and Diana. Hanne tries to motivate them: 'Come on now'. Diana*

*replies, 'I can't do it'. I can also hear John talking to Diana about exercise: 'It's important to be active every day because PE is only 1½ hours a week'. When we've almost completed one lap, Hanne realises that some pupils aren't going to manage two laps, and she turns to Diana and says, 'You need more practice in walking'. (Observation, maths lesson, School 1, 4B)*

A key aspect of the processes through which people acquire their identities is the ability of authoritatively applied identities to effectively compose or penetrate the individual experience (Jenkins, 2014). In the case of Diana, the teachers categorised her as someone who was not active, and their intention to motivate her to become more active could instead have had stigmatising consequences.

## **Discussion**

This study's findings reveal that the least active pupils' understandings of the purpose of PA in school were primarily linked to prevalent health discourses and influenced by their teachers, parents, and peers. They also show that most of the least active pupils identified with the group of active pupils (e.g. in being nearly as active as the football boys) and that this identification was linked to an external categorisation of other classmates as the least active in class. In light of these key findings, and in the wake of Denmark's national reform to increase PA in schools, the following discussion focusses on the unintended consequences that PA promotion may lead to.

### **Health as the purpose of PA in school**

Children's PA and health have been a primary concern in Western society for the past two decades (Guthold et al., 2019; Strong et al., 2005). In Denmark, a focus on health benefits has been included in official reports and legislation for PE at school since the mid-1990s

(Bentholm, 2017). However, the recent school reform particularly directed broad societal attention to the aim of increasing school PA in order to enhance pupils' health and learning conditions. It is, therefore, unsurprising that almost all pupils in this study said that the reason for being active at school was because it was healthy. However, it is notable that the youngsters responded almost identically that health was the main reason that they needed to be active. Indeed, their somewhat rhetorical response suggested that they had repeatedly heard this as an argument from teachers, parents, and the media.

The increased focus on PA at school, with health as the dominant rationale, may be interpreted as an expression of a paternalistic steering of children towards the prevailing instructions for healthy living (Vallgård, 2014). These findings correspond to those of Burrows and Wright (2004): in their study, and in response to the question, 'What is a healthy person?', children aged 4–8 mainly described such an individual in relation to the body, as someone who was slim, in good shape, not lazy, and had self-control. In another study focusing on pupils' understanding of fitness lessons, the participants assumed that the lessons were associated with the avoidance of being overweight and that being fit was demonstrated by a 'correct' bodily appearance (Powell and Fitzpatrick, 2015). These understandings are problematic and can lead to stigmatisation. 'For example, the present study found by the above observation during PE at School 2, that if classmates and teachers unintentionally perceive that overweight and unfit pupils are unable to participate on equal terms with their peers, it can lead to exclusion, create a self-fulfilling prophecy, and induce decreased motivation for PA.' A study on the social implications of obesity and the impact of body size on 5- to 9-year-olds' social status/popularity at school found a negative association between body size and popularity (Kornilaki and Cheng, 2019). Such correlations indicate that pupils are not free to construct any identities they wish. Some authors (Burrows and Wright, 2004) have noted that certain identities are more powerful than others and that children appear to be

influenced by advertising industries and consumer culture, which are often represented by slim, very physically active, and beautiful young people. Pupils' perceptions of a 'healthy person' may also be influenced by PE teachers who, it has been argued, have a medicalised view of health (Burrows and Wright, 2004). In line with such findings, the children in our study who did not follow medically informed instructions for, for example, the significance of PA for physical health, may experience unintended stigmatisation from other pupils, parents, and teachers, who are advocates of the prevalent health discourse.

The predominant focus on physical health was also evident in the observations of the beep test in our findings, which revealed a further example of how a broader societal focus on competition and testing in schools is also present in PE in the measurement of pupils' physical fitness. Tests of pupils' aerobic fitness are common in most schools in Western societies; however, research has suggested that, rather than contributing to the promotion of PA among pupils and developing their knowledge about health, tests can categorise and stigmatise pupils who do not perform well (Cale et al., 2014). Indeed, Cale et al. (2014) pointed out that fitness testing can be counterproductive to PA, uncomfortable, and embarrassing, particularly for the least active pupils, which was corroborated by our study. It is also noteworthy that there is little evidence to support the notion that fitness tests actually promote PA (Cale and Harris, 2009; Cale et al., 2014).

A narrow focus on the health rationale, which is restricted to the medical model at the expense of recognising PA's social and emotional aspects (such as enjoyment), is arguably problematic because it may instrumentalise PA to such an extent that it changes from an activity that should be an end in itself to a means of achieving something else, such as health and learning. In this way, the intrinsic value of PE and sport may be lost, a value that can strengthen pupils' personal development and sustained desire and commitment to be

physically active. This view was supported by Kirk (2018), who advocated for physical educators to focus more on the ‘affective domain’ in PE, which is populated with matters of motivation, body image, enjoyment, interest, and coping as a part of a pedagogical strategy to minimize harm and optimize benefits to young people’s health and wellbeing.

### **Categorisation through PA at school**

With respect to identity in relation to PA in school, this study reveals a discrepancy between least active pupils’ internal identification of themselves as active and the external categorisation of them as less active. Interestingly, despite the different socio-economic backgrounds of the pupils in the three schools, they had quite similar views. Many pupils identified their level of PA by establishing it in relation to others. Such classifications took place through a combination of similarities (‘like me’, ‘like us’) and differences (‘not like me’, ‘not like them’) when they referred to others as very or not very active. These identification processes were about developing belonging and a group feeling and about identifying ‘us’ and ‘we’ (Harris, 2009; Jenkins, 2002; 2014).

Social identification processes may have a considerable impact on pupils’ PA levels, participation, and well-being (Everley and Macfadyen, 2017; Holt et al., 2019). Being seen, recognised, and accepted as a member of a peer group provides a positive self-image (Graham et al., 2016). Similar to our findings, a single case study in a Danish secondary school found that those pupils who were peripheral participants in PE were also often less socially respected and did not voice a desire for change towards more inclusive teaching of PE because popular (and physically skilled) students disapproved of such changes (Munk and Agergaard, 2018). The activities available and the inclusivity (or otherwise) of PA and the school setting might reveal something important about why some pupils in our study assessed themselves to be more active in contexts other than school.

Another study by Stevens et al. (2019) indicated a positive association between individuals developing strong social identities in exercise settings and their participation in group-relevant PA. When individuals were part of a PA group, they were more likely to experience greater PA participation, PA-specific satisfaction, group cohesion, and life satisfaction. Further, the stronger an individual's sense of identification as a member of a group, the more motivated they are to engage in behaviours that were normative to in-group members (Stevens et al., 2019). Although many of the present study's participants considered themselves to be moderately or very active, they also acknowledged that they were not as active as the 'football boys'. Therefore, it is debatable whether they developed a strong social identity in a PA setting since they approached, but did not join, the football group. Consequently, the least active pupils' options for changing their involvement in daily PA were probably weaker than if they had had a strong connection to a very active group.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study investigated how least active pupils describe the purpose of PA at school and how they identify their level of PA in relation to their classmates. Almost all the least active pupils in this study indicated that they were active at school because it was healthy. Denmark's recent school reform, which includes a requirement for 45 minutes' daily PA at school and is based on health and learning discourses, appeared to be reflected in pupils' understandings of the purpose of integrating more PA into daily school activities. Further, the pupils' understandings of what 'healthy' meant were typically related to reducing the risks of obesity and illness, in line with medicalised perspectives on health. Moreover, we found that the vast majority of the pupils considered themselves to be active, linking themselves to the group of pupils who were average or very active, like the 'football boys', and they certainly did not identify themselves with pupils with low PA. Thus, pupils identified themselves by pointing



to similarities with and differences from their classmates, with the aim of finding relationships and belonging.

We recommend that teachers implementing PA at school focus more on its pleasures and social dimensions, rather than just the physical health benefits, in order to increase the motivation of least active pupils and limit the risk of stigmatisation. Teachers should provide pupils with a broader picture of what PA is and how it can contribute to their well-being and social interaction, thereby avoiding a narrow focus on physical health as its predominant purpose (see Burrows and Wright, 2004). If teachers want or need to include fitness testing as part of the learning objectives in PE, they could make the process individualised (e.g. allowing pupils to work independently) and focus on pupils' personal improvement over time. This would minimise the potential public and comparative nature of monitoring. Additionally, teachers should consider how to communicate and explain test results and help pupils to review, reflect on, and understand the limitations of the scores (see Cale et al., 2014).

These recommendations clearly demand teachers to have a good and holistic understanding of PA that goes beyond the physical to also recognise its mental and social dimensions. To achieve this, initial teacher training must devote sufficient time and attention to the area and to equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to effectively promote PA. With regard to future interventions, studies have shown that teachers are essential in motivating less interested pupils (Lander et al., 2017; Leff et al., 1999; Sarrazin et al., 2006), and the more motivated pupils are, the more their teachers can take a supportive role. Conversely, teachers with controlling attitudes towards less motivated pupils often have a less positive effect on PA, as suggested by the above observation during maths class at School 1. The combination of teacher support and more social and inclusive teaching methods (Munk and Agergaard,

2015) can also allow least active pupils to socialise and form new friendships with active pupils, which could potentially help them build stronger social relationships (Stevens et al., 2019). Finally, from a social identity perspective, it is suggested that before an individual joins a more active group, they must first understand this group, for example, its expectations, desires, and goals. Teacher support may, therefore, be necessary to support a pupil in entering such a group.

Future studies should include the investigation of teachers' perspectives of least active pupils and explore whether their views influence pupils' identification of themselves and others. It might also be interesting to examine not only the PA experiences of least active pupils but also those of all pupils and their identification of their own PA levels to determine whether children's tendency to identify themselves with very active pupils is common among pupils in general. Finally, and in order to provide a more complete picture, the influence of other social identity markers, such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, etc., within groups of pupils deserves more attention, as do young people's experiences and understandings of PA beyond school.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## **Author biographies**

**Anette Bentholm** is an associate lecturer in Sport Science and Physiotherapy at the Department of Physiotherapy, University College of Northern Denmark.

**Charlotte Pawlowski** is an associate professor in Sport Sciences at the Research Unit for Active Living, Department of Sports Sciences and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark.

**Sine Agergaard** is a professor in the Sport and Social Issues Group, Department of Health Science and Technology, Aalborg University, Denmark.