

# International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies

Volume 9 Number 11 December 2017

ISSN 2141-6656



*Academic  
Journals*

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The International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies (ISSN 2141-6656) is published monthly (one volume per year) by Academic Journals.

**The International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies (IJEAPS)** is an open access journal that provides rapid publication (monthly) of articles in all areas of the subject such as Educational Governance, Policy and Administration, Educational Ethics, Law and Special Education, Computer Applications in Educational Administration and Policy Studies etc.

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Review

# Challenges of implementing the contributory pension scheme in public universities in Nigeria

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Received 6 July, 2017; Accepted 21 August, 2017

This study discussed the challenges of implementing the contributory pension scheme in public universities in Nigeria. The rationale, objectives, and features of the contributory pension reform act of 2014 (amended) were discussed. Secondary sources of data were used for the discussion and the views of other scholars as it concerns the implantation of the contributory pension scheme. The identified challenges includes: non-compliance by many state governments thus state owned universities; non remittance by government; inability of retired employees to access their pension benefits; unique engagement arrangements of Nigeria universities; inability of employees to open and own a retirement savings account (RSA); perception of employees to the scheme; contributing ratio by government and employees; different pension scheme and uncertainties of the old defined benefits scheme in some universities; inability of government to fund the guaranteed minimum pension (GMP); inadequate induction and orientation programme at the point of engagement. It was however recommended among others that state governments should appreciate the benefits of the contributing pension scheme and enact laws that will ensure its implementation in all state owned institutions including the universities.

**Key words:** Employees, public universities and contributory pension scheme.

## INTRODUCTION

Public universities in Nigeria are government own institutions established for the purpose of producing high level manpower. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria National policy on education (2013) revised editions, the goals of tertiary education (including the university) are:

1. To contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training.
2. Develop and inculcate proper values for survival of the

individual and society.

3. Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment.
4. Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable the individual to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
5. Promote and encourage scholarship and community services, forge and cement national unity.
6. Promote international understanding and interaction.

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The university is a community that houses both the teaching and non-teaching staff from diverse background, referred to in this paper as employees. Ogonor (2016) opines that the universities are known to have their own internal mechanism in relation to the law establishing them (university autonomy).

The employees of the public university system are employees of the government who show commitment in the discharge of their duties through teaching, research and social activities that will ensure the availability of high level manpower in the society (Emunemu, 2017). They expect some immediate rewards in terms of salaries and other benefits while in active service and thereafter, a measurable reward at retirement known as pension.

According to Onogholo (2015), there should be connection between efforts expended by an employee and the reward that he receives in the organization. He added that when an employee believes that equity may not prevail as regards his reward at retirement, he is bound to withhold a measure of his productivity. The idea behind pension payment to retired employees is that an individual having been used as regular payment in the form of salaries on a monthly basis will continue to get paid monthly so that the standard and mode of living is maintained (Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria, 2007a). Before the enactment of the Federal Republic of Nigeria pension reform act of 2004 which was clearly contributory in practice, there were many pension practices in the country which included the pension act of 1979 with the armed forces pension act No. 103 of 1979, Nigeria social insurance trust fund (NSITF) act of 1993 that provided social security scheme for both government and private sector employees.

The public sector pension scheme was 100% government funded. The government achieved this through budgetary allocation for payment of pension by the three tiers of governments (federal, state and local government) in each fiscal year. The private sectors pensions were organized by individual cooperate organizations according to capacity without adequate monitoring from government.

The inability of the government to effectively fund the defined pension scheme (pension reform of 1979), monitor and implement the provisions as evidenced in the non-payment of retirement benefits to retired civil servants, difficulty in accessing benefits with the observed corrupt, sharp, and unhealthy practices in the pension industries led to the establishment of the contributory pension scheme.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria pension reform act (2004) was signed into law on Friday, 25th June 2004. The act repeals the pension act of 1979 and established a new contribution scheme for employees both in the public and private sectors in Nigeria. This was

however amended by the national assembly in June 2014.

Hence, the Federal Republic of Nigeria pension reform acts of 2014. The contributory pension scheme involves the gradual retirement planning for every employee, it made provisions for the deduction of 8% of the employees' monthly emolument and the employer pays a minimum of 10% for the employee into the retirement savings account (RSA).

There have been observed hindrances in strict implementation to the contributory pension scheme which is a major concern among employees in the public university system. This paper therefore, discusses the challenges of implementing this contributory pension scheme in Nigeria universities by adopting secondary source of data, reviewing provisions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria pension reform act of 2014, visiting and discussions with pension desk officers of public universities in the southern Nigeria. The objectives, features, observed challenges of implementation in public universities and way forward are hereby discussed in this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The university is an establishment where a seat of higher learning is housed, including administration. It is the body of faculties and students, large and diverse institution of higher learning created to educate people, for profession and grant degrees (Omojola, 2017).

The universities which are the highest educational institutions in Nigeria should ideally be characterized by hard work as the quality of workers determine to a greater extent the achievement and reputation of the university as an educational institution (Ifedili, 2017). It is also a known fact that the quality of employees who are attracted and work in the university determines the level of achievement of set objectives. An employee is attracted to work in institutions where his future is guaranteed. The future of every Nigerian worker is his pension as inflation had made savings very difficult.

According to Ogonor (1999) cited in Ogonor (2017), the regular payment of salary, organizational administration and policy were some of the factors that motivate staff in Nigeria Universities. Compensation and pension are like salary that has a large impact on employee's attitudes and behavior. Pension also influences the kind of employees who are attracted to the university system and remain in anticipation of good package after retirement. It can be a powerful tool for aligning current employee's interest with those of the broader organization. To some employees, policies having to do with wages, salaries, and pensions that guarantee their future are the most important aspects of their job.

Pension can be defined as a regular monthly payment which is received by a retired person called a pensioner for the duration of his life. The payment should ideally commence from the date of retirement. In a formal employment, retirement is defined as giving up or being caused to give up one's employment on reaching pensionable age (Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria, 2007b).

Fajana (2002) opines that it is natural that after working for a long period of time, the law of diminishing return will set in and the employee's output will fall below expectation. He added that at this stage it becomes absolutely necessary for the employee to stop working. But the question being asked here is that, what becomes the fate of the retired employee who has spent most of his working life toiling for the university and the employer? Should retired employee be abandoned to die of hunger due to loss of income arising from his retirement? It is in the response to this question that the concept of pension emerges.

Pension scheme is broadly divided into the defined contribution plan and the defined benefits plan. In defined contribution plan, a contribution rate is fixed (Odia and Okoye, 2012). The new universities (miscellaneous provisions) (amendment) act, 2012, limits the tenure of principal officers of universities to a single term of five years, while increasing the compulsory retirement age of staff in the professorial (academics) cadre and non-academic staff in Nigerian universities to 70 and 65 years respectively (Federal Republic of Nigeria Universities Miscellaneous Provisions Amendment Act, 2012). The Nigeria labour law and the act establishing many public universities in Nigeria equally provides for voluntary retirement which could be prompted by various factors such as desire by a university staff to look for greener pasture, unhealthy condition of employee, desire to set up one's own business.

However, there are compulsory retirement induced by the employer for whatever reason, pension of the employee who is no longer receiving salaries is very vital to his survival. The Federal Republic of Nigeria pension reform act of 2004 which is contributory was signed into law on Friday 25th June 2004 by the then president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. It was subsequently amended in 2014. The rationale behind the contributing pension scheme includes:

1. The weak and inefficient administration of the old pension schemes which was solely funded by government.
2. Unsustainability outstanding pension liabilities in many government owned institutions including the universities.
3. Unregulated pension scheme with highly diversified arrangements in various states of the federation and private organizations.

4. Ensuring that employees in Nigeria receives regular income as pension after many years of service (Ahmad, 2010).

### **Objectives of the pension reform act of 2014 (Contributory)**

The pension reform of 2004 was initiated as a result of the failure of the 1979 pension provisions. It was further amended in June 2014 by an act of Nigeria National Assembly known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria Pension Reform Act of 2014 for all employers and employees of both the government and private sector organizations. It has provisions for all organizations that have more than five persons as employees. The major objectives are highlighted below:

1. Establishment of a uniform set of rules, regulations and standard for the administration and payment of retirement benefits for the public service of the Federation, the public services of the Federal Capital territory, the public service of state governments, Public Services of the Local Government Council and the private sector.
2. Make provision for the smooth operations of the contributing pension scheme.
3. Ensure that every person who worked either in public service of the Federation, Federal capital territory, the public service of state government, public service of the local government council or the private sector receives his retirement benefits as and when due.
4. Assist improvident individuals by ensuring that they save in order to cater for their livelihood during old age (National Pension Commission, 2017).

### **Features of the contributing pension scheme**

The main features of the scheme are as follows:

1. It is contributive pension scheme which makes it mandatory for both the employer and the employee to contribute with a minimum of eight percent of total monthly remuneration from the employee and a minimum of ten percent from the employer.
2. The scheme applies to all employees, whether permanent, temporary, and casual or contract, in both the public and private sectors of the economy.
3. The scheme makes it compulsory for every person in employment in Nigeria to save towards catering for their livelihood during old age and after active years of service.
4. Provides for a uniform set of rules, regulations and standards for the administration and payment of retirement benefits for the public sector and private sectors. It also provides for the establishment of the



National Pension Commission (NPC), which is empowered to register and license corporate organizations that will act as pension Fund Administrators (PFA) and each PFA in turn, select a pension Fund Custodian (PFC) who manages the fund on its behalf.

5. The scheme stipulates 50 years as the age at which an employer is entitled to pension.
6. Mandates for a minimum of three time annual total emolument of the employee in terms of death benefit to next of kin as regards group life insurance for employees.
7. Allow for increase in the rate of monthly contributions, subject to agreement between the employer and the employee.
8. Ensures that every employee maintains Retirement Saving Account (RSA) in his name with any pension fund administrator (PFA) of his choice.
9. Make pension deductions transferable from one employer to another because accounts, once opened becomes personalized to the individual who can move it in and out of employment within the same sector or across other sectors of the economy (Federal Republic of Nigeria Pension Reform Act, 2014).

### Challenges of implementation in public universities

The Nigeria public universities are quite unique institutions considering the vital role they play in the country's development (Aina, 2010). Its employees are also employees of the government that established them. According to Komolafe and Ahiuma-Young (2010), the contributory pension scheme was initiated to put an end to abject poverty to which many pensioners experienced as a result of the failure of government to honour its pension obligations regularly as provided in the 1979 pension reform act.

According to Olayinka (2016) in Guardian newspaper of 19th January 2016 before the advent of the contributory pension scheme in 2004, it was a common sight seeing public officials shedding tears at public functions decrying the plights of pensioners of which the retirees of Nigeria universities were not left out. With the implementation of the pension reforms act 2004 by the federal government more than a decade ago, the road may have not been smooth even though it is indeed a radical departure from the past defined benefit system.

The vanguard newspaper of Thursday 23rd February, 2017 reported that the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) warned in Abuja that the sustainability of contributory pension scheme (CPS) (2017) was under threat, claiming the federal government's liability to the scheme was no less than N183billion (Victor, 2017). This came as pensioners under the Association of Contributory Pension Retirees (ACPR) lamented on some of the

challenges associated with the scheme. Speaking at the congress of the ACPR, NLC president, Mr. Ayuba Wabba, said the contributory pension scheme was being threatened by non-compliance by major stakeholders, especially employers. According to him, pensioners on the scheme have gone through a lot of problems to access their funds. He contended that if the issues and challenges were not addressed, the scheme might soon hit the rocks, adding that "issues of payment of benefit in Nigeria have become a nightmare. This, he said need to be addressed. NLC Logo President of the Nigerian Union of Pensioners (NUP), Dr Abel Afolayan, as reported in the same newspaper, insisted that the inability of the federal government to release funds as at when due had caused pensioners on CPS to suffer, as no retiree had been paid since October 2015. According to him, a large number of beneficiaries of deceased pensioners have not been able to access the entitlements of their relations, making life unbearable for them. He said, "non-release of accrued right by the federal government to national pension commission to pay the retirees who retired since October 2015 to date has created a lot of problems for pensioners."

Many organizations of government and other employers of labour have been defaulting on the regular remittances of contributions of workers to their pension fund administrators, which is affecting the philosophy of the scheme". He said the pension scheme had numerous challenges that must be addressed and tackled immediately to avoid the mistakes of the past. According to Afolayan (2017), the 2014 pension act had abolished the right of the pensioners under this scheme to earn gratuity, thus denying the employees the chance of getting the usual lump gratuity by the employer to his employee at the time of retirement.

The implementation of the contributory pension in public universities in Nigeria has not been without challenges highlighted earlier especially as it affects the university employees both academic and non-academic. Some of the issues as it concerns public universities are outlined below.

**1. Non-remittance by government:** The default in pension remittances by government is impacting negatively on the implementation of the scheme in public universities in Nigeria. The federal government and many state governments have been defaulting and had not kept to its own obligation of ensuring regular remittance to the employees' retirement savings account (RSA). This contradicts the provisions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria pension reform act of 2014 which state in section 11 subsection 3(b) that "the employer shall not later than 7 working days from the day the employee is paid his salary remit an amount comprising the employee's contribution and the employers contribution to the RSA.

**2. Non-compliance by many state universities:** Over 13 years of existence of the contributing pension scheme (CPS), not all state governments had enacted their pension laws to establish CPS to ensure that state owned university employees are covered by the scheme.

**3. Inability of university retired employees to access retirement benefits:** This is a major issue with implementation of the contributory pension scheme in Nigeria public universities. Many staff who had retired in the universities where this scheme had been implemented cannot access their retirement benefits. The chairman of academic staff union of universities (ASUU) in Federal University Otuoke, Dr. Joseph Omoro had informed members of the union in an emergency congress held on 11th April 2017 at the chapter in Federal University Otuoke that one of the decisions of ASUU at its national congress was to push for the establishment of ASUU's own pension fund administrator. He said that this decision is in reaction to the fact that many retired professors and staff of the university system cannot access their pension. He made reference to the Nigeria police force and the Nigeria military who have their own pension fund arrangements. The inability of retired employees to access their pension benefits have been a major challenge of implantation of the contributory pension scheme in Nigeria universities.

**4. Perception of staff to the scheme:** Many employees of the public universities in Nigeria have the negative perception that the contributing pension scheme may not be sustainable. Many even ascribed the implantation as double deductions from their salaries. To many, it is not clear where the deductions are made. The government secular indicated that deductions would be made at source and that federal ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) should not deduct further from employees. The various universities still reflects the deductions in the pay details to staff. This is a major discouragement to staff on the scheme especially those in the universities that just commenced implementation.

**5. Inability of Many employees to open and own a retirement savings account (RSA):** Many employees of the university system do not have retirement savings account with any licensed pension fund administrator in Nigeria. Many at the point of entry do not have any account and have not been able to open one. The pension units in many universities do not have RSA details of staff and could not send to the national pension commission for remittance as expected or the state pension office.

**6. The unique engagement policies of Nigerian universities:** There is this healthy practice of transfer of labour, services and knowledge in many universities in Nigeria today through sabbatical arrangements, adjunct services, secondment and contract service arrangement that ensures availability of required human resources in the institutions. This practice in my view affects the

effective implementation of the contributing pension scheme. Many academic staff who takes up these appointments many at times do not have their RSA numbers readily available for remittance. The National Pension Commission requires government owned institution to submit their nominal roll quarterly. This will give opportunity for accumulation of the remittances to RSA of all employees in the university. Furthermore, deductions are not usually made on the salaries of employees on sabbatical, adjunct and contract services in Nigeria universities. This practice creates inconsistencies in reconciliation of the payroll with the National Pension Commission for remittance of pensions in accordance with the pension reform act. On the other hand, even when an academic staff picks up a secondment appointment in a state university where the contributing scheme is not yet in practice, such employee losses some part of his pension remittance for that period of engagement since he would not be entitled to full salary from his parent university.

**7. Pension contributing ratio:** The issue of pension contributing ratio between the Government and its employees (the university staff) is a major challenge hindering effective implementation of the contributory scheme. The Federal Republic of Nigeria pension reform act of 2014 stipulated that a minimum of 8% of total monthly remuneration from the employee and a minimum of 10% from the employer. It is however not encouraging to the employees of the Nigeria universities system that after three years of the contributing pension reform act was amended that government had not complied with the provisions of the act to contribute its own 10%. The old practice of deducting 7.5% from the employee and the government pays 7.5% as the employer is still been observed in the government own universities.

**8. Different pension scheme and uncertainties of the old defined benefits in the university system:** For instance the university decree No 11 of 1993 stipulates that a person who retires as professor of 15 years in Nigeria university or has been continuously in the service of a university in Nigeria up to the retiring age shall be entitled to 100% of his terminal annual emolument as pension. The different pension regimes operating in Nigeria Universities today as many state universities have not subscribed to the contributing scheme. Hence there is no link between the defined benefit (DB) and contributory pension (CPS) schemes. This pave way to the varying set of problems that limit the capacity of key stakeholders within the Nigerian university to determine actual retirement benefits and ensure effective implementation.

**9. Inability of government to fund the guaranteed minimum pension (GMP):** The inability of government to determine and fund the provision of the act for guaranteed minimum pension to employees in public

institutions. The GMP which will be specified from time to time by the national pension commission (PENCOM) is a provision for protecting all retirees who have not accumulated enough to have a decent standard of living in retirement (section 84(1) of PRA 2014). Thus, it is an income support from the government, which can be a safety net for pensioners. The government has not been able to fund this as expected.

**10. Inadequate induction and orientation programmes at the point of engagement:** Many employees of the public universities still have this orientation that all the universities are still operating the old defined benefit pension scheme. The universities too do not adequately inform these categories of employees to ensure registration with any pension fund administrator of their choice at the point of assumption of duty. This creates room for accumulated unremitted pension funds.

## Conclusion

The implantation of the contributory pension scheme in Nigeria federal and state owned universities had encountered many challenges; thereby hindering the objectives of the scheme which was a positive shift from the old unfunded scheme in many public institutions in Nigeria. The national pension commission should as a matter of urgency seek enabling laws that will ensure compliance by both the federal and state universities to ensure that the pension benefit of the university retired employees are paid as at when due.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the aforementioned, the following recommendations are made:

1. State governments should appreciate the benefits of the contributing pension scheme and enact laws that will ensure its implementation in all owned institutions, including the universities.
2. The federal government should see pension payment as part of the salaries of employees and ensure adequate remittance in line with the act as when due.
3. Government and university authorities who had implemented the contributory pension scheme should ensure proper orientation of all employees of the university system to enable them appreciate the benefits of the scheme and key into it.
4. The federal and state government should as a matter of urgency start the implementation of the minimum 8% deduction from the employees and minimum of 10% from the employers to guarantee good future for the university staff.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## Absentee rates in physical education in high schools: The importance of gender and study programmes

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Received 24 November, 2017, Accepted 2 November, 2017

Little is known about absenteeism in high school physical education (PE) in relation to study programme and gender. This study investigated the impact of gender and study programme on absentee rates in PE by analyzing data, using non-parametric statistical analyses, from the absentee registers for all 6928 students in Nordland Country. The results showed that the absentee rates in PE differed among four categorized studies; vocational subjects in general, and vocational subjects dominated by the girls had the highest absentee rates. Girls had a higher absentee rate in PE than boys. Girls attending vocational subjects dominated by boys had higher absentee rate in PE than boys, while there was no gender difference within the other three categories. The findings may help teachers in high school identify the study programmes in which absence is a major problem, especially among students in girls dominated vocational subjects, and girls in vocational subjects dominated by boys.

**Key words:** Absenteeism, high school, study programme, gender.

### INTRODUCTION

Of all subjects, physical education (PE) is the one with the highest no-mark rate in high school in Norway (Rånes, 2011). There has been little research on absenteeism in PE, and understanding absenteeism in PE is limited (Jonkås, 2010).

To prevent high absentee rates in PE, it is important to obtain more knowledge about factors that predict absenteeism, and more research is needed to understand how absentee rates vary among different groups. This study investigated how absentee rates vary among gender and different study programmes in high school. Although more recent research has shown that

Norwegian women do exercise as much as men (Fasting and Sand, 2009), studies have also indicated that Norwegian girls seem to experience PE as more problematic and that they are less active than boys in PE (Anderssen, 1995; Hansen, 2005; Holstad, 2012; Ommundsen, 2011; Säfvenbom et al., 2014), although one study among high school students found that girls enjoyed PE as much as boys (Lagestad, 2017a).

It seems appropriate to suggest that girls may have higher absentee rates than boys in PE in high school as shown in a study by Lagestad et al. (2015). However, that study did not examine absentee rates among genders in

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connection to different study programmes and gender differences. Research has shown that students focusing on general studies generally have higher marks than students in vocational subjects (Støren et al., 2007), and that they respond more positively to physical activity (Rørvik, 2009).

However, we do not know how absentee rates vary among the two study programmes. Statistical data have revealed that a large gender difference exists between study programmes in high school, with some programmes consisting of more than 90% girls and others consisting of more than 90% boys (Markussen, 2003; Støren et al., 2007). As we will discuss later in the text, collective factors such as different acknowledgement of physical capital may vary among girls and boys. Identifying groups with high absentee rates makes it possible to implement actions towards the student groups that need it most. Schools represent the ideal arena for educating the youth to adopt and maintain a physically active lifestyle because attendance is mandatory, unlike sports settings.

The previous discussion points to the importance of not only exploring gender and study programme in relation to absenteeism, but also investigating collective factors associated with being in the programmes with mostly boys or mostly girls. The Department of Education in Nordland County, Norway (Utdanningsavdelingen, Nordland fylkeskommune) has a data register (TP system) where information about high school students is saved. This database made it possible to examine the student absentee rates for all students at the 17 high schools in Nordland County.

The aim of the study was to examine how absentee rates varied among female and male high school students, as well as how those rates varied between genders in different programmes.

## METHODOLOGY

### Procedures

The method of research was quantitative analyses, comparing differences in absentee rates (dependent variable) between several groups (independent variables: gender, study programme) in order to examine the effects of gender and study programme upon absentee rates in PE. In Norway, students can choose between two major programmes; *specialization in general studies* and *vocational subjects*. Vocational subjects with more than 80% female students were classified as vocational subjects dominated by girls, whereas vocational subjects with more than 80% male students were classified as vocational subjects dominated by boys (O'Donoghue, 2012). Hence, we classified our participants into four categories: Specialization in general studies, vocational subjects, vocational subjects dominated by girls, and vocational subjects dominated by boys.

### Participants

The entire database from the study programmes with mandatory PE

in the academic year 2010 to 2011 in Nordland County was 6928 students (age range 16 to 19 years old). The population of students was 9200, but not every programme offered PE. Data from all students in one of the 19 counties in Norway were available, and a large sample of students was preferable due to several group comparisons (eight groups). Approval to use the data was given by both the Department of Education in Nordland County and the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD). Specialization in general studies included 1325 boys and 1763 girls. 107 out of 3476 boys belonged to a vocational subject that was characterized as dominated by girls, while 180 out of 3452 girls attended a vocational subject characterized as dominated by boys (Table 1). The programmes dominated by boys included electricity and electronics (92% boys, SD 5), technical and industrial production (85% boys, SD 14), and building and construction (95% boys, SD 5). The programmes dominated by girls included health-care, childhood and youth development (89% girls, SD 6); design, arts and crafts (94% girls, SD 4); and design (88% girls, SD 6). Due to missing data on some of the variables, 80, 80 and 85 students were excluded in the analyses as seen in Figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

### Data analysis

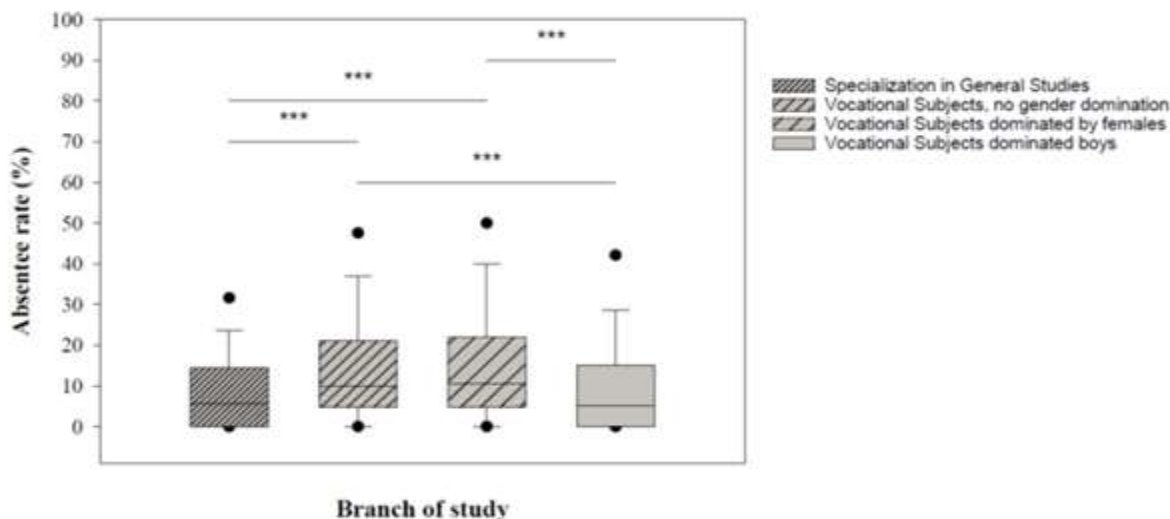
The distribution of absentee rates was marked leptokurtic and positively skewed, with a long tail of high values and, thus, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the assumption of normality was not met ( $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, several unusual observations with a combination of discrepancy and high leverage was found in the data. Based on the calculation of Cook's Distance and by examining relative discrepancies in plots of Cook's Distance versus cases, the discrepancy and high leverage influenced both the slope and the intercept strongly. Hence, the assumptions for general linear modelling were not met, and a non-parametric approach was chosen as opposed to a more preferred linear regression approach (O'Donoghue, 2012). Thus, the Kruskal-Wallis test checked for differences in absentee rates between the four categories of study. If this analysis of variance on ranks was significant, Dunn's test was used in pair-wise comparisons. The Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was performed to check for overall differences in absentee rate between genders and for differences between genders within the four categories of study. Absentee rates are illustrated in box and whiskers plots, showing the 5 and 95th percentiles. In addition, absentee rates are given as mean (SD) within the results section. The level for significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . Statistical analysis and illustrations was performed with Sigma Plot for Windows version 13.0 (Systat Software, Inc., San Jose, CA, USA).

## RESULTS

The mean overall absentee rate in PE across gender and categories of study were 11.6% (SD = 13.8%). While no gender differences exist in specialization in general studies. There are large differences in the proportion of girls and boys attending different vocational subjects, and therefore this study programme was divided into vocational subjects dominated by girls and boys, respectively. Absentee rates in PE differed between the four categories of study ( $H_3 = 193$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and the pair-wise comparisons given in Figure 1 showed that specialization in general studies had significant lower

**Table 1.** Students with mandatory physical education in Nordland County in the academic year 2010 to 2011 divided into four study categories (N = 6928).

Study programme	Boys		Girls		Total	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Specialization in general studies	1325	19.1	1763	25.4	3088	44.6
Vocational subjects <sup>a</sup>	412	5.9	509	7.3	921	13.3
Vocational subjects dominated by girls <sup>b</sup>	107	1.5	1000	14.4	1107	16.0
Vocational subjects dominated by boys <sup>c</sup>	1632	23.6	180	2.6	1812	26.1
Total	3476	50.2	3452	49.8	6928	100



**Figure 1.** Box and whiskers plot for study programme and absentee rate with the 5 and 95th percentiles (N = 6850).  
 \*\*\* = Pairwise comparisons significantly different from each other at p < 0.001.

absentee rate as compared to vocational subjects ( $Z = -8.4, p < 0.001$ ) and vocational subjects dominated by girls ( $Z = -11.4, p < 0.001$ ). While there was no difference between specialization in general studies and vocational subjects dominated by boys ( $Z = -1.1, p = 0.28$ ).

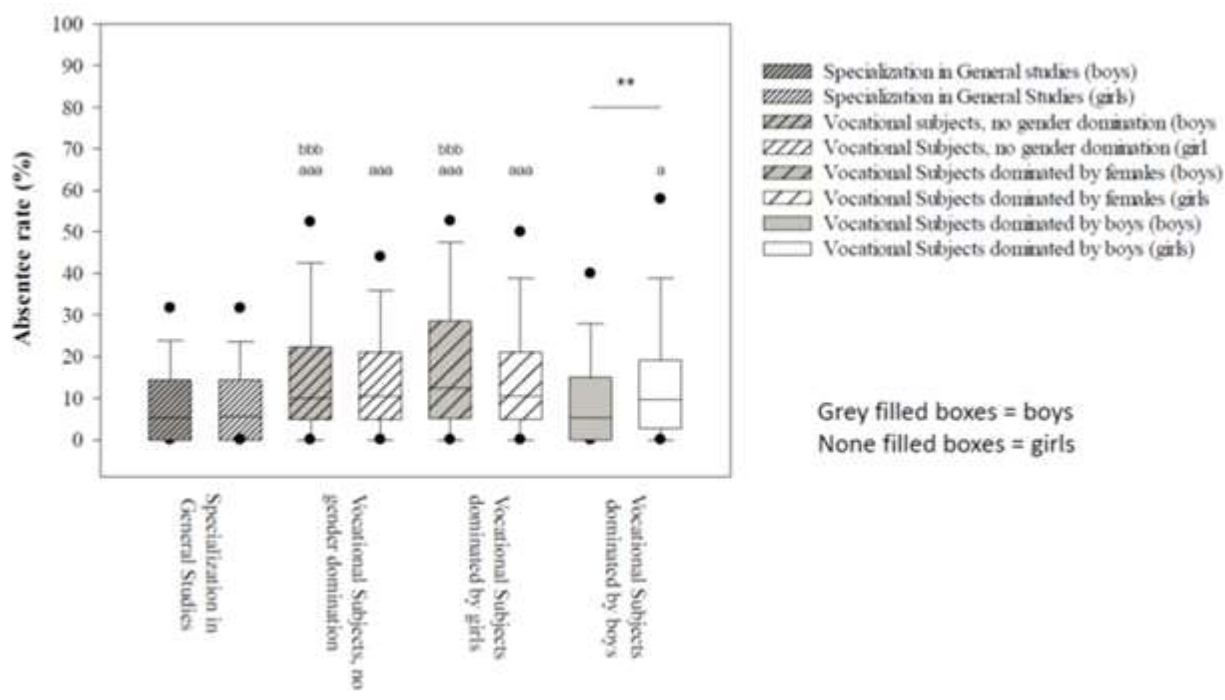
Moreover, vocational subjects dominated by girls had significant higher absentee rates as compared to vocational subjects dominated by boys ( $Z = -10.5, p < 0.001$ ), and vocational subjects dominated by boys had significant lower absentee rate compared to vocational subjects ( $Z = -8.0, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, there was no significant difference in absentee rate between vocational subjects and vocational subjects dominated by girls ( $Z = -1.8, p = 0.08$ ). Mean (SD) absentee rate for specialization in general studies, vocational subjects, vocational subjects dominated by females and vocational subjects dominated by boys, were 9.6 (10.9%), 14.9 (16.6%), 16.0 (16.4%) and 10.7% (14.2%), respectively.

The girls (12.3%, SD = 13.8%) had significantly higher absentee rates in PE than boys (10.9%, SD = 13.7%)

across all categories of study ( $Z = -6.1, p < 0.001$ ; Figure 2). Figure 3 shows gender and PE absentee rates for the four different categories of study. There was no significant gender difference in PE absentee rates in the programme of study named specialization in general studies ( $Z = -1.3, p = 0.18$ ). Girls had higher absentee rates than boys in vocational subjects dominated by boys ( $Z = -3.0, p = 0.003$ ). There was no significant difference in absentee rates between boys and girls in vocational subjects ( $Z = -0.7, p = 0.46$ ) and in vocational subjects dominated by females ( $Z = -1.5, p = 0.13$ ).

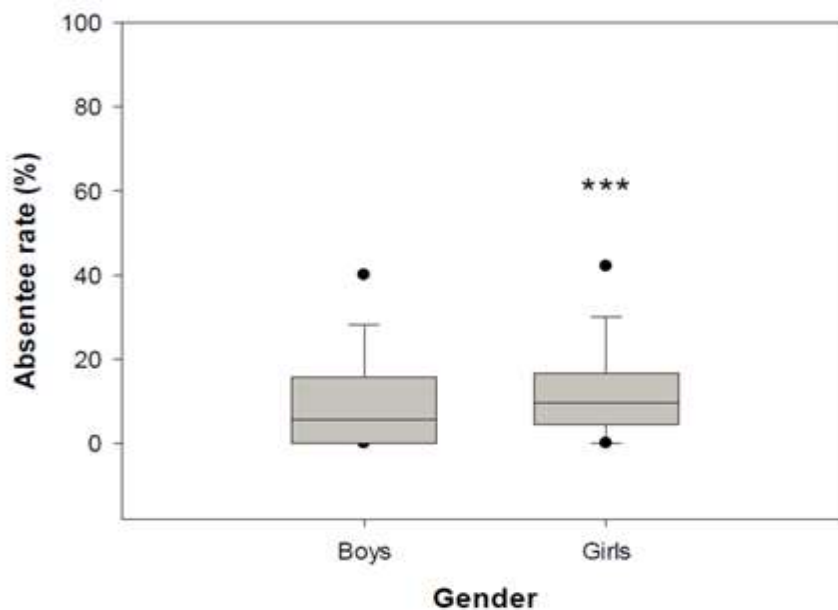
**DISCUSSION**

The results in Figure 1 show that there is a significant variance in absenteeism among the four categories of studies in high school. Students in specialization in general studies have the lowest absentee rates, students in vocational subjects have significant higher absentee



**Figure 2.** Box and whiskers plot for gender and absentee rate for different study programmes with the 5th and 95th percentiles (N = 6843).

\*\* Significantly higher absentee rate for girls as compared to boys at vocational subjects dominated by boys at  $p < 0.01$ ; a Significantly higher absentee rate within gender as compared to specialization in general studies at  $p < 0.05$ ; aaa Significantly higher absentee rate within gender as compared to specialization in general studies at  $p < 0.001$ ; bbb Significantly higher absentee rate within gender as compared to vocational subjects dominated by boys at  $p < 0.001$ .



**Figure 3.** Box and whiskers plot for gender and absentee rate with the 5th and the 95th percentiles (N = 6843).

\*\*\* = Significantly higher absentee rate for girls (n = 3405) as compared to boys (n = 3438) at  $p < 0.001$ .

rates, and students in vocational subjects dominated by girls have the highest absentee rates.

The absentee rate was in general over 8% for the nearly 7000 students in Nordland County who were enrolled in high school for the 2010 to 2011 school year. A previous study by Markussen (2003) reported an absentee rate of 5.8% in general for the students in seven other Norwegian counties, with no variance among the counties. The absentee rate in the present study is higher than that reported in the 2003 study by Markussen. These findings suggest that absentee rates that may have risen in the 10 years that have elapsed between the data collection for the study by Markussen (2003) and that for the present study. If so, this is problematic. One point to mention here is that the Norwegian Ministry of Education decided in 2016 that the absentee rate in all high school subjects should not be more than 10% (Directorate for Education and Training, 2016). This might influence future absentee rates in PE.

Considering the result, the findings indicate that it is especially important to implement strategies to reduce absence in PE among students in vocational subjects dominated by girls. Markussen et al. (2008) suggested that schools' close monitoring of students' progress is the key to students' attaining success in high school. In addition, Myrland (2008) and Træland (2012) pointed to the importance of how PE is organised. Træland (2012) found that students with high levels of absenteeism in high school reported that school officials had not bothered to follow up and determine why they were missing classes, and that their perspectives had not been taken into account in the organisation of PE.

Research has indicated that efforts should be made to deter absenteeism in general, and that these efforts should begin earlier than in high school. Træland (2012) found that Norwegian high school students with high absentee rates also had high absentee rates in lower secondary school. Myrland (2008) reported that Norwegian high school students encountered major challenges when they made the transition from junior secondary school to high school. Many students expressed that they did not realise what they were up against, and that they were unaware of their own interests and resources. Markussen et al. (2008) identified effort, conscientiousness and ambition as the most important predictors for students to stay in school. Teachers reported students' lack of motivation and possession of a poor skill set as major factors that contribute to high school dropout rates (Utdanningsforbundet, 2009).

The present study's findings on absenteeism in PE among high school students in Norway differ from those reported in other gender-related Norwegian school research. Previous studies have shown that girls seem to like school better and generally perform better in high school. Research has also revealed that more girls pass

their examinations and generally earn better marks than boys, and that fewer girls than boys drop out of high school in Norway (Hernes, 2010; Markussen et al., 2008; Støren et al., 2007; Træland, 2012). Hernes (2010) showed that 6 to 8% more boys than girls dropped out of high school.

Absenteeism in PE is a part of a very complex picture, and it is not possible to point to a single, common reason for absenteeism in the different groups that we have investigated. Both the median and the 75% percentile in Figure 2 show that boys belonging to vocational subjects dominated by girls have the highest absentee rates among the eight groups. There can be different reasons for this finding. One possible explanation is that more boys than girls have a negative attitude towards school, putting them in a higher risk-group for dropping out of school. The fact that more boys than girls have a marginalized relationship to school in general, may have an effect on the absenteeism rate in PE when they are put together with girls.

The results in Figure 3 show that the girls had a significantly higher absentee rate in PE than the boys. However, when analysing the gender related absentee rates among the four categories of study (Figure 2), only the vocational subjects dominated by boys showed significant differences in absentee rate (higher among girls). The findings partly support other research indicating that PE is still an arena that boys in general find more attractive than girls. Research suggests that PE seems to be modified to suit boys rather than the girls (Hansen, 2005; Holstad, 2012; Ligestad, 2017b). Although female Norwegians girls' involvement in physical activity outside school is growing (Fasting and Sand, 2009), research has indicated that Norwegian girls still seem to experience PE as more problematic and are less active than boys in PE (Anderssen, 1995; Hansen, 2005; Holstad, 2012; Ligestad, 2017b; Ommundsen, 2011; Rishovd, 2013).

A contributing factor to the major variations in absentee rates among study programmes may be differences in the socioeconomic status between students. Boudon (1974) argues that if the parents have taken vocational subjects, their children will choose to follow their parents and take vocational subjects too. This statement is supported by research among Norwegian high school students. Støren et al. (2007) found that students taking specialisation in general studies have better socioeconomic status than students taking vocational subjects. This may explain why more students from vocational studies choose not to participate in physical activity in PE classes, because they come from families where physical activity is less acknowledged. This phenomenon can be better understood using Bourdieu (2000) theory about physical capital and habitus, where differences in the acknowledgement and recognition of physical activity and attending PE between different



programmes may somehow explain absentee rates.

### **Understanding the findings in relation to habitus and physical capital**

Bourdieu (2000) emphasised that society is filled with indications that tell people from certain groups what to do and not to do in many aspects of life, including PE. Habitus indicates which actions are possible and which are not possible, and what is likely or not likely for a boy or a girl to do, such as in relation to their level of attendance in PE. An important aspect of their choice of action is the degree of acknowledgement and recognition they receive from their significant others. In this way, Habitus expresses collective expectations, rules and principles to follow in PE that are recognised as typical for a girl or a boy, and as a member of the group.

Shilling (1993) put forth the argument that cognitive disposals, which are connected to habitus, can be described as a distribution of different forms of capital. These different forms of capital are used to achieve acknowledgement and recognition. Bourdieu (1978) used the term capital to show how certain people who receive recognition and approval as an indication of being superior and worthy of respect, earn acknowledgement, recognition, prestige and reputation (Bourdieu, 1978; 2000).

Everyone has an objective position that is calculated from different distributions of capital, such as social, symbolic, cultural and physical capital. Physical capital, or embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1978), is important for people's social status but is more important among some groups of people than others (Shilling, 1993). Attendance in PE may be a significant factor in this group, where participating in PE is important in order to be worthy of respect and to obtain acknowledgement and recognition from other members of the class.

A Norwegian study (Gjessing et al., 1988) on student performances supports such a starting point for the present study. Physical capital, or embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1978) is important for people's social status, but is more important among some groups of people than others (Shilling, 1993). Taking Bourdieu (2000) theory about physical capital and habitus into account, we hypothesise that group dynamic processes have an impact on absentee rates.

It could be hypothesized that girls in programmes in which girls constitute the majority of students, seem to be less motivated for PE, and that the collective mechanism in the class may be of vital importance. Support for such hypothesis comes from a study by Gjessing et al. (1988) on student performances, where collective factors were highlighted as being more important than gender itself. Analysis of regression showed that collective factors predicted the student performance. Each student-

performance depends on which class the students were attending, and the type of class was even more important than the individual ability of students. Students with poor academic abilities performed well in classes where learning was acknowledged and recognised. Such a starting point is closely related to Bourdieu (1978) and his concept of habitus and physical capital. Using Bourdieu (1978, 2000) and his concept of habitus and embodied capital (physical capital), gender may play a role on the collective expectations about what to do or not to do for girls and boys that are members of different programmes, and the acknowledgement of physical capital may vary among these groups. One may argue that physical capital is more acknowledged among girls, than boys.

The results in this study support the findings and the suggested existence of negative collective factors in PE classes with mostly girls. A study on student performances, where collective factors were more important than individual factors, supports such an argument (Gjessing et al., 1988). The results also support Azzarito and Solomon (2005) statement about schools and PE classrooms as not existing as vacuums in which teachers fill students with knowledge, but rather as sites of complex knowledge building and socialisation. From this standpoint and the previous discussion, learning is socially constructed during socialisation.

Based on Bourdieu (2000) theory about physical capital and habitus, it can be summarised that group dynamic processes prompt students taking vocational subjects to have a higher absentee rate than students taking specialisation in general studies. This is because physical capital obtained by attendance in PE may be less important and less valuable among students in vocational subjects, and especially students in girl dominated vocational subjects, in terms of the acknowledgement and recognition they receive from the other students compared with students taking specialisation in general studies.

Støren et al. (2007) found that students taking specialisation in general studies have better socioeconomic status than students taking vocational subjects, because their mothers have a higher education level and their fathers had a higher income than parents of students taking vocational subjects. Norwegians with low socioeconomic status are less physically active than Norwegians with high socioeconomic status (Breivik and Rafoss, 2012), and students that have parents with low socioeconomic status are less physically active than students with high socioeconomic status (Kolle et al., 2012). This may explain why more students taking vocational subjects choose not to participate in physical activity in PE classes. With such a view, physical capital may be less important and plays a minor role according to their habitus. In the following discussion, we shall point out some possible reasons for this, and the implications it might have on how PE is taught.

### **How girls feel about physical education when considering the goals of the subject**

Andrews and Johansen (2005) interviewed girls in lower secondary school that did not like PE, and found that many of these girls started to dislike the subject because it became less oriented toward play, and more oriented towards achievement and competition. Therefore, some of the reasons many girls feel marginalized in PE is connected to the focus on achievement and competition. Andrews and Johansen (2005) wrote:

“There was a characteristic understanding among the girls that it became more serious in PE when they entered lower secondary school. The seriousness was evident both with marks and by activities that were more serious and less playful. They experienced a greater fear of failure. (...) The girls who took part in the study disliked the pressure towards achievement that came into PE when they entered lower secondary school” (translated from Norwegian).

However, this may not be the case for all girls; the study findings show that girls in vocational studies have a higher rate of absenteeism than girls in general studies. Perhaps this is because the girls who had a bad relationship to PE in lower secondary school more often end up in girl-dominated studies instead of general studies in high school. This could be explained by socioeconomic status; girls with low physical capital or who struggle with fitting into a culture of achievement more often have parents with low socioeconomic status (Breivik and Rafoss, 2012). This leads us to assume some of the reasons why physical capital can play such a minor role in the lives of girls with low socioeconomic status which is found in the orientation against achievement and competition in sports and in PE.

Traditionally, sports have been seen as an arena belonging to boys and men, and women and girls participating at a more competitive level have been required to participate on boy's and men's terms. Sports for girls and women have been a field with less emphasis on achievement and competition (Fasting and Sand, 2009). Therefore, girls and women that have some of the traditional masculine characteristics that are important in each sport have had an advantage. We can then argue that they have managed androgyny; having both traditional feminine and masculine qualities (Azzarito, 2010; Skyrudsmoen, 2014). These androgynous ideals have grown in the age of equal opportunity, and have therefore been held up by the middle class, not only in the field of sport, but also in working life. For example, in the area of leadership, the ones with androgynous qualities are the one with the best chance of success (Blanchard and Sargent, 1984; Sargent and Stupak, 1989; Oplatka, 2004; Solberg, 2012).

### **Formal vs. experienced curriculum**

When some teenage girls feel marginalized in PE, it may be because of their perception towards the subject. There may be many reasons for this. The group dynamic in the class and how the teacher is organizing the activities are two factors that play a role in this complex picture. Teens are at a critical age when it comes to identity, and they define themselves by the activities they are doing as well as craving recognition for doing them (Bjerrum-Nielsen, 1988: 11). This is particularly the case with activities that are seen as typically gendered activities, and many of the activities in PE fall into that category. This is even more evident when the body is changing, and boys and girls are trying to find out who they are, so it then becomes extremely important for them to participate in activities that support their gendered identity.

When we read the formal Norwegian educational curriculum (the National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion 2006), we see that the purpose of physical education has to a high degree, have an emphasis on play and the joy of movement, and to a lower degree achievement and competition. However, the text in the formal curriculum is just one side of it. Another side of the curriculum is the one that is implemented by the teachers or experienced by the students (Goodlad, 1979). The fact may be that the interpretation of the PE we read about directly from the formal curriculum is only moderately reflected in the actual subject the students experience. In other words, there may be a conflict between the formal and practical interpretations of the curriculum (ibid.). The formal curriculum tells us that little emphasis is placed on achievement and competition, with most emphasis on play and the joy of movement. How the formal curriculum is implemented by individual teachers, and experienced by the students may be different.

In addition to Andrews and Johansen (2005), a 2011 study by Ronninghaug (2011) found that many students with poor physical skills lost their desire and motivation for PE because of the way in which PE was organised in school. The emphases on testing, competing and performing in PE seemed to demotivate students. Taking Ronninghaug (2011) study into account, absence from PE classes can be reduced by reorganizing the subject. Flintoff and Scraton (2001) found that the key criticism of PE expressed by girls was the choice of activities offered in PE programmes, with playing team sports being the most dominant choice offered. These activities were also seen as out of date, and insufficiently linked to the interests of young people today. The girls also reported that their PE teachers used sarcasm to describe their skill level, had low expectations for them or did not seem to care. A Norwegian study by Johansen (2002) on girls in the health-care, childhood and youth development study programmes supported these findings in relation to the organisation of PE based on boys' interests, not those of

girls.

The gap between the formal curriculum and the girls' experienced curriculum may in some cases be explained by a lack of consciousness among some PE teachers. Wright (1999) pointed out that the expression 'playing like a girl' used by some teachers reveals two assumptions about the construction of girlhood: girls' inferior athletic skills compared with those of boys, and the perceptions of girls as a problem in PE.

McKenzie et al. (2000) found that boys were, in general, more active in PE than girls were. Another study found that during skill drills, game play and free play in PE, boys engaged more in moderate and vigorous activity than girls (Merish and Fairclough, 2010). As Kirk (2002) noted, 'there are spaces for teachers and students to practice alternative forms of physical education that do not ascribe to the values and assumptions of stereotypically masculinized physical education'.

Later discussions around PE in Norway have been about students' efforts versus achievement, and how these elements should be considered in the assessment. Changes have been made, and now effort is also seen as a part of the assessment (Directorate for Education and Training, 2012). One of the reasons for this is to lessen the strong orientation towards achievement in PE (ibid.). However, effort as an assessment tool in PE is something some girls may have trouble identifying with, as it still may be considered to be something masculine and hard to separate from achievement. Some girls who don't identify with the androgynous ideal and the focus on achievement, may also not score high on effort, even if they connect with the idea of play and joy of movement.

### Implications for the teacher's role

As Hernes (2010) emphasised, there exists more than one solution to reducing absenteeism in high school. When there are a variety of explanations for the absentee rates for different students, there will also be a variety of different solutions. Students who are at risk of dropping out of school are not the same as students who have a negative relationship to PE as a subject. Regardless, it is important to arrange teaching in such a way as to create a better relationship between more students and PE (Lagestad, 2017b; Lyngstad et al., 2017). One possible way would be to narrow the gap between the formal and the experienced curriculum. We believe that if teachers manage to signal to the students that the main goals of PE are play and the developing of students' own joy of movement, then there is a greater chance of motivating students. In order for students to connect with PE, they need to feel motivated and connected to the subject (Woodson-Smith et al., 2015). This is discussed and not unfamiliar to many teachers, but may be co-determination in real life really means a

focus on the activities and not so much on purposes and values. The same activity may be approached in many different ways if the focus is on play rather than on competition. Maybe we should discuss co-operation at a more fundamental level than just activities, and find out more about how students could be more included in the goals and the direction PE should have for themselves, that is, how strong an emphasis do they want to have on play versus achievement? More openness and co-operation here may lead to more recognition of the meaning of PE among the students. It then becomes even more important that all PE teachers are aware of the many purposes of PE, so that the subject does not favor students that excel at sports and know the culture of competing before they enter a PE classroom.

### Conclusion

There are students with high absenteeism in all categories, both boys and girls, and in all study programmes in high school. Nevertheless, we see differences between programmes which are also connected to gender. We have emphasized that it is difficult to point at one, single reason for absenteeism, because there may be different reasons in different groups of students. However, we have argued that there might be some explanations connected to social background which can influence a student's relationship to PE, which might then lead to higher absenteeism among students in vocational studies, especially among girls.

The findings may help teachers in high school identify the study programmes in which absenteeism is a major problem. To prevent high absentee rates, it is important that PE teachers should find ways to motivate their students, and the findings indicate this is especially important for students in girl dominated vocational subjects, and for girls in vocational subjects dominated by boys. Taking Bourdieu (2000) theory about physical capital and habitus into account, we argue that in classes with mostly girls, physical capital obtained by attendance in PE may be less important and less valuable as a way in which to one may use to gain acknowledgement and recognition from the other girls.

The findings support other research indicating that PE in general is still a subject that more boys than girls find attractive, but the findings also indicate that there are some programmes and groups that are more problematic than others. Hopefully, this study may contribute to knowledge and awareness about which groups need to engage in physical activity to a greater extent, and what factors influence participation levels. The study indicates that it may be of vital importance to reorganise PE in classes with vocational subjects.

Based on the findings of the present study, further

research should focus on how to organise PE in such a way as to lower absentee rates among students in vocational subjects, and especially among students in girl dominated vocational subjects. Because of its objectives, PE is a subject where teaching should be, to a high degree, on the students' terms, and where the students must get the opportunity to define what physical activity should mean for them. Only in this way can we succeed in honouring the subjects' most important purpose, which is to promote the lifelong joy of movement by all students.


## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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