‘Let them do PE!’ The ‘becoming’ of Swedish physical education in the age of COVID-19

Seguya Kamoga
Örebro University, Sweden

Valeria Varea
Örebro University, Sweden

Abstract
Sweden received worldwide attention for its approach to managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, throughout the pandemic, Sweden was one of the few countries that did not implement any lockdown measures. This meant that primary schools remained open and classes proceeded as usual, including the delivery of physical education (PE). This paper explores PE teachers’ perceptions of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Swedish PE. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven PE teachers. Results suggest that teaching PE during COVID-19 has led to disparate challenges and changes for teachers, including modifications in context, content, roles and responsibilities, as well as the handling of issues concerning physical contact and proximity among students and teachers. The conclusions of this study reveal that in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parameters of PE in Sweden are changing more rapidly now than ever before. Understanding how the pandemic has impacted the subject of PE and its delivery might create opportunities for further discussions, possible solutions and subsequent necessary adjustments in dealing with the ongoing COVID-19 situation.

Keywords
COVID-19, physical education, Sweden, ‘becoming’

Introduction
Sweden is recognised worldwide for its approach in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus far during COVID-19, life in Sweden has remained relatively unchanged, with some...
recommendations in place, such as maintaining social distance, limiting social gatherings and whenever possible, working from home. Throughout the pandemic, however, no lockdown regimes have been implemented. Furthermore, the Swedish Ministry of Health (Folkhälsomyndighet) made the decision to keep primary schools open during the pandemic. This meant that most school classes continued functioning almost uninterrupted throughout the pandemic, most notably those classes in school years 1–9 and day-care centres. Upper secondary schools and universities, on the other hand, shifted to predominantly online teaching.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching physical education (PE) has led to different challenges that have affected the delivery of the subject (Varea and González-Calvo, 2020). For example, avoiding physical contact and keeping distance between students has been recommended in schools. The emergence of COVID-19 reflected a need to examine the routines and changes in school PE. The exploration of the changes in PE has been done in some countries, such as Spain (Varea et al., 2020; Varea and González-Calvo, 2020) and Brazil (Godoi et al., 2020). In Sweden, this needs further investigation, particularly given the decision to keep schools open for years 1 to 9 at all times during the pandemic.

Historically, PE has undergone periodic modifications in its structural nature. From the early 19th century until today, the subject of PE in Sweden has experienced major changes. In the 19th century, there was a focus on good posture, strict self-discipline and moral development (Lundquist Wanneberg, 2018). Between 1950 and 1970, PE became increasingly more influenced by physiology (Annerstedt, 2005; Lundvall and Meckbach, 2004) given its attempts to be recognised as a scientific discipline, and by 1980, PE incorporated the influence of sports performance and social development (Lundvall and Meckbach, 2004). From 1980 onwards, health became the main focus in the PE field in Sweden (Annerstedt, 2005). While these changes in PE took place over a long period of time, Sweden is now witnessing a large number of changes unfolding rapidly in the field of PE within a much shorter timeframe given the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic unquestionably presents a challenging reality for PE teachers. The aim of this paper, thus, is to explore PE teachers’ perceptions of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on PE in Sweden.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden and PE

In dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak, Sweden adapted a less restrictive approach than other countries. The implementation of a lockdown may be considered unconstitutional for Sweden, and therefore, no such measure took place during the pandemic. Instead, individuals were provided with several recommendations in the hope of controlling the spread of the virus throughout the population (Lindström, 2020). Some of those recommendations included no gatherings of more than 50 people in public spaces, working from home (if possible) and keeping a distance between 1.5 and 2 m between people. The Swedish government expected that the spread of the virus would slow down enough so that the health care system would be able to cope with the situation (Lindström, 2020; Pierre, 2020).

Individuals with COVID-19 symptoms were advised to stay home, and online teaching was recommended for upper secondary schools and universities (Lindström, 2020; Pierre, 2020). Swedish authorities also hoped to deal with the spread of COVID-19 by means of herd immunity (Irwin, 2020; Lindström, 2020). Herd immunity is ‘a situation in which a disease cannot spread through a group of people because enough of them are immune’ (Herd immunity, n.d.). In Sweden’s case, this meant allowing members of the population to get infected with the
COVID-19 virus, and then recover from it to subsequently develop an immunity against it (Irwin, 2020). The aforementioned strategies that Sweden adapted were vastly different to the measures executed by neighbouring countries (e.g. Denmark, Finland and Norway) who implemented stricter lockdown measures during this period (Orlowski and Goldsmith, 2020).

In most countries, where strict lockdown measures were imposed, online teaching has been implemented at all school levels. In the case of PE, which is usually described as a ‘hands-on’ subject, working under the COVID-19 pandemic has been problematic for (pre-service) PE teachers (Varea and González-Calvo, 2020). As a result of the changes in PE classes due to the pandemic, PE teachers have expressed an overall sadness regarding both their new transformed roles and the recently developed parameters surrounding PE classes in general (Cervantes-Guevara et al., 2021; Varea and González-Calvo, 2020).

Varea et al. (2020) have explored how PE has changed in the age of COVID-19. They argued that the affects of the new assemblage of PE have changed the traditional delivery of the subject, relying more on digital technologies and individual activities. They also suggested that the activities, as well as the teacher’s role, might be altered in the future, including tasks that were not previously comprised in the job of a PE teacher. Individual activities might eventually surpass cooperative group activities, and there might be a continued limitation of physical contact and proximity as a consequence of the subsequent demand for increased personal space. PE teachers may also be required to espouse new tasks, such as disinfecting sports equipment. At the moment, there is a lack of research on how the delivery of PE has changed in Sweden because of the pandemic. While primary schools have remained open during the pandemic in Sweden, little is known regarding the manner in which PE teachers have dealt with the teaching of the subject.

The concept of ‘becoming’

The Deleuze–Guattarian concept of ‘becoming’ has been utilised by a number of educational researchers. For instance, Mikaeli (2019) used the concept of becoming in the context of outdoor education (in Swedish, friluftsliv) to explore both a learning area often taken for granted in the curriculum, and the opportunities that outdoor education can present for an environmentally sustainable future. Furthermore, Puchegger and Bruce (2020) used Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of becoming to analyse how teachers became teachers in the dynamic complexity of the teaching circumstances they encounter. The concept of becoming can be understood as the process of connection with assemblages and the conditions of possibility available for action (Fox and Ward, 2008). In other words, becoming is the process by which the conditions for further engagement and possibility are generated (Deleuze, 1992). Becoming is the outcome of the affective relations between bodies and things, suggesting that all things, bodies and matter continually connect.

The Deleuze–Guattarian concept of becoming is not restricted to specific contexts or phenomena. Accordingly, Stagoll (2010: 26) states that ‘Deleuze uses the term becoming (devenir) to describe the continual production (or return) of difference immanent within the constitution of events, whether physical or otherwise. Becoming is the pure movement evident in changes between particular events’. In this sense, Masny (2012: 116) also writes:

[b]ecoming is a product continuously producing… Becoming is the power (puissance) to affect and be affected; life’s power to form new affects and connections… Becoming is the effect of experiences that
The characteristics of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of becoming, as described by Stagoll (2010) and Masny (2012), show the relevance of this concept for teaching PE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Becoming is a continuing (never-ending) process of the construction of events in new directions. In other words, these events are unique and different, henceforth formed in their own ways of emerging. The concept of becoming offers alternative ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), often (open-ended) ideas and thoughts to re-create how teaching PE could ‘become’ as a result of the changes or adjustments brought about by the pandemic. Ultimately, the changes prompted by the pandemic may contribute towards many ways of becoming – a process of evolving changes in the identity and delivery of PE. To explore these changes, we present in the next section the details regarding the data generation process, participants and context.

Methods

The participants for this study included a group of seven PE teachers who, during the pandemic, were teaching years 1 to 9 (6–16 years of age) in various schools in and around a middle-sized city (about 156,000 inhabitants) in Sweden. One of the schools was located in the urban city, and two were located in smaller towns between 30 and 40 km away from the larger city. The majority of the students attending the schools were born in Sweden and were from middle socioeconomic backgrounds.

Three participants were women and four were men, and each had between 1.5 and 2 years of teaching experience. While more teachers with different years of experience were invited to participate in this study, only those with fewer years of experience agreed to participate. Participants were contacted through connections from the first author’s university, as most of the participants studied at the same university as him. They were contacted first by email, and further information was emailed to those who agreed to participate. The authors did not know the participants. All teachers had a Swedish background, except one teacher who also had a Moroccan background. Prior to the data generation, participants were sent detailed information about the study. The Swedish Research Council ethical guidelines were followed during the whole process, and participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout the paper to ensure anonymity.

Online semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author via the Zoom online platform because it was a more reasonable option given the pandemic situation. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min and they were mostly individual. However, one interview was in pairs, as this was more convenient for the teachers involved. This proved to be useful, as they complemented each other with comments and the data generated were richer than the other interviews, as this provided the opportunity for more discussion. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and transcribed verbatim before they were translated into English. The interviews were in-depth and organised with a standardised open-ended interview protocol (Macdonald and Kirk, 1996). In this way, the questions were used to guide the dialogue but the interviews were largely conversational in style. Some questions that were asked in the interviews included: ‘What does your lesson planning look like now during COVID-19 pandemic?’, ‘What has changed in your lesson planning (if anything)?’, ‘Do you follow any recommendations regarding the pandemic?’, and ‘Do you think something has been lost in your lessons because of COVID-19? If so, what?’.
Data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach inspired by Braun and Clarke (2014). In so doing, we asked ourselves what can thematic analysis offer health and wellbeing researchers during a pandemic? In the first round of analysis, the transcripts were read by the first author (Seguya). Extracts from the transcripts that were closely related to the questions asked were highlighted. Next, the second author (Valeria) read both the transcripts and the highlighted parts. A coding phase inspired by Saldaña (2015) was implemented by both authors separately. Open coding was conducted in the first instance and the amount of data coded ranged from a few words to full sentences. Open coding involves an exploration of the data and experimenting with codes, while breaking down and categorising the data (Ezzy, 2002). For example, ‘role’ and ‘responsibilities’ were coded in the open coding process. For the second cycle of coding, axial coding took place. Axial coding is ‘a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 96). This stage involves the exploration of codes and the relationships between them (Ezzy, 2002). During axial coding, we began to ask the question ‘what does this comment mean?’ For example, ‘added responsibilities as a teacher’ was coded during this second cycle.

Keywords inspired by the theoretical approach, such as ‘changes’, were used to identify the common trends. The two authors then discussed the final coding, looking for similarities and differences between the two analyses.

**Results**

The results were organised into two main themes constructed from the data. The themes illustrate some of the PE teachers’ perceptions of changes that occurred in the subject of PE in Sweden during the pandemic, and how these changes affected the teaching of PE. The themes presented in the following sections are (1) handling issues of physical contact, proximity and context, and (2) teacher’s role and responsibility.

**Handling issues of physical contact, proximity and context**

The situation regarding physical contact and proximity is far more complicated now than before the pandemic. In the PE space, while matters of physical contact have previously been associated with false accusations of sexual abuse (Miller et al., 2007), now during the COVID-19 pandemic the focus of physical contact has shifted towards fears of contracting the virus.

There has been a variety of attitudes from participants on the issue of physical contact during the pandemic. In gymnastics, for example, physical contact is common in Sweden. During a gymnastics lesson, for instance, teachers often need to guide or ‘spot’ a student while teaching specific exercises – to both facilitate the movement and prevent accidents. However, due to COVID-19, the way in which gymnastics is taught in PE lessons today has changed, as demonstrated below:

In gymnastics, spotting is now completely excluded when we have gymnastics. What I have done instead of standing and spotting when the students stand on their hands, is to give them two choices: either do a handstand against a wall if they are comfortable doing so, or stand on their hands and then fall down [backwards] against a thick mat. So, my role is minor, and now I probably stand more and watch, instead of me going in and spotting a student. But before COVID-19, I was more involved with spotting. (Jon, 26 years old, year group 2–6)
I have basically removed spotting completely. Year 6 students normally have had to spot one another at some point, but I have also removed that. This is to minimise as much contact as possible. It is possible to practice gymnastics in different ways and I have used exercises that do not require much physical contact and touch, but I have had gymnastics much less now compared to before the pandemic. (Lars, 27 years old, year group 1–6)

In gymnastics, spotting is the act of physically assisting another person during a specific exercise. According to the above comments (Jon and Lars), both teachers have now eliminated spotting, both between teacher and pupils and between the students themselves. The comments also make clear that prior to the pandemic, both teachers were more engaged with spotting activities in gymnastics. While giving gymnastics instruction, Lars now uses exercises that require less physical contact, while Jon now offers students more options in gymnastics lessons that enable students to take more responsibility for their safety, so that the teacher no longer has to spot them. These ongoing unfolding events are shifting the direction of PE into new and different realities. Physical pedagogical support, such as spotting students in gymnastics, is now on a decline as a consequence of the pandemic. Controlling the spread of the virus is now the number one priority for PE teachers.

Nonetheless, other PE teachers have chosen to continue to engage in physical contact in their lessons for pedagogical reasons, such as catering to a pupil’s safety to prevent an accident.

When we have gymnastics, I’m still there to spot students because I need to do it for the sake of their safety and, it is also so important [to perform] spotting so that the students do not injure themselves. I have not removed the situations where I have to be there and spot them. (Anna, 26 years old, year group 4–9)

Despite recommendations to limit close physical contact in schools during COVID-19 times, Anna still chooses to engage in physical contact while teaching gymnastics to avoid students getting injured. In so doing, Anna is weighing up and managing the risks (i.e. contracting the COVID-19 virus vs. students getting hurt), as not being at risk is just not an option.

In addition to physically assisting students in exercises, PE teachers also occasionally administer appropriate physical contact to develop a good relationship with students. Through their comments, the participants have demonstrated that, amid the pandemic, this is still occurring in PE. One particular teacher stated that younger students do not think in the same manner as adults, and they often demand physical interaction in their growth and development, as shown below:

In younger ages, it happens that if [a child] stumbles and becomes sad, I still try to be there and comfort [the child], and in such situations, there is physical contact. You cannot be cold as a human being and just say no. I must uphold my responsibility as an adult to give comfort. (Peter, 27 years old, year group 3–9)

Another teacher also stated the following:

It’s really a bit silly, but I don’t know if I’m a bit like the students [in innocently ignoring the potential dangers of physical contact during the pandemic]. You think you will not get the infection. But I also think that it is such an important part of building relationships that you use physical contact with the students. Like a 4th-grade student who came to me today and said, I want a hug, and it’d have been so weird if I had said no, I do not want a hug from you. (Anna, 26 years old, year group 4–9)
In the above comments, the participants (Peter and Anna) each found themselves in a position in which they felt that they could not withhold physical contact when comforting students, particularly the younger ones. While some teachers would have preferred to refuse a hug from a student because of the current pandemic situation, they often found themselves nonetheless engaging in physical contact with students. The teachers most likely felt that a good relationship with students involved some sort of physical contact, and this was more important for them than the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus.

That said, other teachers have chosen to keep their distance from students, even at the cost of not being able to develop a closer relationship with students:

What I miss now is physical contact – as it was before COVID-19. Because they [the students] are so small, they want to show love, they want to hug, they want to hold hands, they want to be close, and that is what I have tried to keep my distance from. So, one misses this sort of close relationship a bit with the students. (Susanna, 26 years old, year group 1–6)

Building a good relationship with students is an important part of a PE teacher’s work. The comments above show that previously, physical contact was used to achieve a good relationship. However, during the pandemic, physical contact has been condemned because of the fear linked with the transmission of the virus. As a consequence, this way of showing compassion and care is now under threat.

All the teachers who took part in the study expressed feelings of discomfort regarding the challenging situation of planning PE lessons during the pandemic. They noted significant changes in reference to the context of how PE classes are taught during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to normal times. As a result of the pandemic recommendations, teaching PE in primary and lower secondary school has been conducted mainly outdoors.

Since the autumn, it was very difficult to know how to plan, because I always complete the planning before I go on summer vacation. I usually do a rough schedule of lesson plans that covers the entire school year. But this year it was difficult because I arranged the plan according to a normal year – I didn’t yet know how much COVID-19 would affect [the situation]. I have now changed [the plan] according to the situation. For example, we always start [classes] outside in the autumn and then we usually move inside before the autumn holidays, but this year this hasn’t been the case. We had to stay outside and it was [only] after the autumn holidays [26 to 30 October] that we were able to go back inside. (Anna, 26 years old, year group 4–9)

We try to be outside as much as possible, as we have been instructed by the school principal. Luckily, the weather has been permissive, and even though it might be drizzling and raining a little, we are [still] outside. (Robert, 27 years old, year group 4–6)

Anna’s comment illustrates how planning lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic has become a challenge. Pre-prepared and ready-to-execute lesson plans normally give a teacher confidence, but due to the pandemic, unforeseen obstacles that have rendered planned material unusable have been quite frustrating for teachers. Due to the pandemic, things have changed in the context of the subject of PE, and in this case, PE lessons and practices have been conducted mainly outdoors.
Schools in Sweden have recommended that PE teachers give lessons outdoors as much as possible. Recommendations, and in some cases instructions, have been made to teachers to conduct PE lessons outdoors more often during the pandemic than in normal times. However, this idea of having PE lessons continuously outdoors was heavily criticised by Maria. Teaching in challenging climatic environments was one of the reasons why some teachers were against the idea of conducting PE lessons constantly outdoors:

We also have situations where, for example, you have basketball lessons with students outside. We only have the schoolyard to use, and when we have outdoor lessons and other classes have a break, we are in the same place. This can be very difficult for a teacher to conduct a lesson in such a situation and environment. (Maria, 29 years old, year group 4–9)

Maria commented on conducting PE classes in unfavourable conditions. In the schoolyard in general, there is often a lot of energetic activity during class breaks – students might be running around, playing with one another. This kind of environment is not optimal for conducting a PE lesson. Regulating a PE lesson in such a disruptive environment with non-ideal conditions could potentially lead to unsafe PE classes and teaching.

Despite the aforementioned downsides associated with continual outdoor PE, some teachers have seen this situation as a positive aspect for PE. For example, Jon stated:

Outdoor life has gained momentum everywhere and now people understand the importance of outdoor life. Even the idea of clothes [appropriate to] the weather has become even more important now. (Jon, 26 years old, year group 2–6)

According to Jon, conducting PE lessons outdoors has not been such a negative experience. In this case, the pandemic has presented an opportunity for Jon to conduct PE outdoors much more than usual, and with this opportunity, he had the possibility to teach students how to best choose clothes suitable for various weather conditions. Jon implied therefore that the future of PE could change towards becoming a subject where outdoor teaching activities are given more recognition. This could be considered a ‘positive impact’ brought about by the pandemic, particularly given the current Swedish PE syllabus, which emphasises outdoor life and nature (Skolverket, 2011).

Also related to the context of PE is the matter of teacher and student routines that have evolved over the last few years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some routines have been interrupted, such as the practice of using the school’s facilities to shower and change clothes before and after PE class. Although some schools continue to allow teachers and students to do so, most schools and municipalities have now recommended that PE teachers advise their students against showering and changing clothes at the school before and after PE. According to Jon, the rationale for this decision is to control the overcrowding of students in changing rooms.

At my school, there is no more changing and showering, to reduce the spread of infection in changing rooms. So there has been some adjustment based on that. In the beginning this autumn, the intensity of the PE activities was a little calmer, not so strenuous because students are not allowed to shower, but with time the planning has become more and more normal because you don’t want to limit the
content too much in PE lessons. Because some students are worried that they will not be allowed to shower, they do not want to get hot or sweaty. (Jon, 26 years old, year group 2–6)

Changing clothes before and after PE classes – a ‘PE tradition’ that has been in place in Sweden for many years – is now under threat. Also, the level of participation among students in PE has been adversely affected by the discouragement or disallowing of showering after PE lessons. In light of the comments made by Jon, the elimination of hygiene routines (showering) after PE lessons has led students to purposely engage less in PE activities. Some school principals made the decision to prohibit the changing of clothes and showering before and after PE classes, while in other schools, school administrations and municipalities made a recommendation to PE teachers to discourage such activity. The teachers in this study, however, have expressed divided opinions on the above decisions. For example, not all teachers have seen the removal of these routines, such as changing clothes, as a setback in PE. In fact, some teachers have seen it as a way of involving all students in activities – now students are not under the obligation to change from street clothes to training gear to take part in PE activities.

Students are not allowed to use the changing rooms and change their clothes now. I think that’s something positive, as we can now start directly with the activities. (Susanna, 26 years old, year group 1–6)

Susanna’s comment illustrates that the removal of routines, such as that of changing clothes, has led to a shift of focus away from the importance of the actual routines to a focus on the participation of every individual student. We will now turn to the second major theme, which is about the teacher’s role and responsibility.

**Teacher’s role and responsibility**

The participating PE teachers have faced many challenges in their lessons during the pandemic. The responsibility to ensure that students participate in school PE activities as well as to keep them safe through social distancing lies with the teacher. Teachers found it difficult to continually make sure that the students kept the appropriate distance during PE lessons.

I think it is very difficult to get them [the students] to keep their distance partly because they do not take it very seriously, but also because they hang out with each other during the breaks so it is difficult to get them to not do so in the lessons. But in the younger classes, we have specific assigned places before lessons, so it’s a little easier to make sure they keep some distance. But then we do not have such a large hall. (Robert, 27 years old, year group 4–6)

Younger students do not think about keeping distance, if I am to be honest. Because they are so small – around 10 years old – I do not think they understand the situation as we adults do. The students understand that the virus exists, but they do not think about it at all in regard to one another. (Lars, 27 years old, year group 1–6)

The above quotations illustrate that the role of a PE teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed. Particularly for Robert, extra roles have been included in the PE teachers’ chores, such as controlling students’ bodies in space through monitoring students and making sure they keep an appropriate distance during PE activities. The teachers not only carry the responsibility of ensuring
that students develop an interest in being physically active and living a healthy lifestyle through PE lessons, but now the PE teachers also need to make sure that students are not too close to one another to thereby reduce the chances of spreading the virus.

During the pandemic, teachers have also taken the role of ‘school cleaner’. Prior to the pandemic, the frequent use of various sports equipment in PE was never a notable issue. However, the fear of spreading the virus has made the handling of tools and sports equipment a complicated situation. To minimise the spread of the virus, there are now recommendations for the continual need to clean sports equipment in PE lessons. The comments below represent this:

Sometimes I have wiped off some stuff in between lessons with disinfectant but [time] is tight between lessons and sometimes I have no time in between because one lesson can end and the other one starts immediately on the minute, and there is no opportunity to handle the equipment in any way. So there have been major shortcomings in that case. Of course [theoretically], I could have been able to clean the equipment much more, but there is no time for this. (Robert, 27 years old, year group 4–6)

We have disinfectants in each class and sometimes I wipe off some equipment, but I don’t do it every day. In reality I should do it basically every time I change classes, but I don’t have enough time, it is completely impossible. We are PE teachers and not doctors, and if I do not get any advice from specialists on how I should act in certain situations, I just go with common sense. (Lars, 27 years old, year group 1–6)

During the pandemic there has been a persistent need for cleaning sports equipment to mitigate the transmission of the virus in PE lessons. The comments from both Robert and Lars reveal that the workload of PE teachers has increased. As a consequence, Lars needs to constantly evaluate his decision about cleaning the equipment or not. While it can be argued that the cleaning of equipment should be a priority for PE teachers, the reality shows that teachers lack time to do this between the classes. Tasks that historically had no direct relation to the teaching of PE in Sweden are now included in PE teachers’ duties. What previously was sufficient time for teachers between classes has now become a problem of insufficient time between lessons to properly clean and disinfect sports equipment. The above comments also can be interpreted as if teachers, despite not having time on their side, are experiencing guilt for not being able to clean the sports equipment. Guilt is a self-conscious emotion produced when an individual perceives that they have provoked a possible negative outcome by acts of omission (Fontaine, 2009) – that is, by doing the ‘wrong’ thing or by failing to do the ‘right’ thing. In so doing, the COVID-19 situation has required teachers to perform in more stressful working conditions, thereby precipitating or augmenting feelings of guilt. For some PE teachers, despite a lack of instruction or recommendations to clean sports equipment, the sense of guilt was still present:

We actually don’t do anything, unfortunately. We have not received any recommendations from the principal either. And we have not received any disinfectant either. (Anna, 26 years old, year group 4–9)

The above comment shows that Anna has not adopted the role of school cleaner in the same way that Robert and Lars have. Anna instead faces the practical issue of a lack of cleaning supplies (e.g. disinfectant), while at the same time she explains that PE teachers in her school are yet to receive any recommendations from school authorities. While it can be argued that one of the reasons for the
school to lack disinfectant could be the socioeconomic background, this school is not from a lower socioeconomic status than the others.

There has also been a change in PE content as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Swedish PE, students have the opportunity to learn lifesaving procedural activities. Such significant practical activities are included in the subject of PE to help students deal with possible crucial moments in life. The current COVID-19 situation has led to the postponement of such activities, as described below:

We had planned to have lessons on CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] with year 8 students during the autumn, but now we chose to move the lessons to the spring of 2021, hoping that [the current pandemic] is a little better by then. If we see that COVID-19 remains in place until the spring, we will have to rethink and perform CPR in a different way, for example theoretically or on film. But to carry out the activity practically is something else other than just reading or talking about it. So that value is lost here. (Lars, 27 years old, year group 1–6)

Students also miss out on the part with CPR when it comes to breathing to save someone’s life… You are very close to one another when you check the breathing of someone else. It is very close when you put your face against their cheek… Firstly, we do not have so many CPR dolls because they cost a lot of money, so the students have to sit two or three per doll, but I haven’t thought exactly how I should continue. (Peter, 27 years old, year group 3–9)

The above comments are indicators of the challenges teachers face when teaching certain subject content in PE classes. To be able to save someone’s life by performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) is significant. However, this is indeed challenging if students do not receive enough opportunities to practice activities such as CPR. The pandemic is the main obstacle blocking the way for teachers to teach CPR activities, even though Peter mentioned economical barriers as a second issue that he faces at his school. Forced to temporarily postpone CPR tutorials, Lars and Peter hope to soon resume teaching these activities. Another teacher talked about a similar problem regarding swimming at the school where he works:

This autumn we were supposed to have swimming lessons with our students, but the swimming hall is closed. We can only hope that we can return to swimming lessons in the spring because this is an important and specific knowledge. Now we haven’t even had the time to think how we can solve this, except to hope that it opens again in the spring. (Jon, 26 years old, year group 2–6)

Swimming is an important part of PE in Sweden. From the first year of school, the curriculum emphasises this point in the core content of PE. In swimming classes, students learn how to balance and float, as well as learn basic swimming strokes, such as front crawl and backstroke (Skolverket, 2011). Students are also expected to be graded in swimming. However, to receive grades, students need to be given practical opportunities to work on different swimming techniques, as well as how to conduct themselves in water. Jon’s comments indicate that this cannot be done during COVID-19 due to the closure of swimming halls. Furthermore, grading students is almost impossible if they are not given opportunities to practice.

Participants often referred to the elimination of group activities and games where students touch one another. PE teachers emphasised how infrequently they have taken on board such practices in their classes during the pandemic. Although group activities have not necessarily changed
dramatically, it is the circumstances in which students have close contact, such as touching one another, that have been replaced by activities with limited proximity.

We now have a lot of obstacle courses, station exercises and games where the students do not really have to touch one another and if it does happen, it’s only on a few occasions. (Susanna, 26 years old, year group 1–6)

I have not actively chosen exercises that make the students keep their distance. It is more that I have tried to remove the exercises where the students are very close to one another, like hugging or giving high fives. (Peter, 27 years old, year group 3–9)

The above quotes show that PE teachers had to introduce some small changes regarding how to conduct activities in their classes. Even the ‘celebration times’ after winning a game have been cancelled now because of the possibility of students having physical contact.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were obliged to take up a new practice of actively considering and thoughtfully planning a PE lesson, evaluating it for the amount of physical contact that might occur between students during activities. In particular, PE dance classes have been affected by the current COVID-19 situation. Before the pandemic, dancing was performed in many different ways – students danced in groups, in pairs and, sometimes, individually. Teachers in this study stated that in their lessons, as a result of the pandemic, they have now completely removed partner dances.

In the spring, we always have a dance night in our municipality, where we gather at a school and have a dance together with most students who attend the 9th grade, but we have canceled that [the dance night] this year. Because this is usually what most of the dance content is for year 9 students, they had to dance individually. Usually, it is individual [dance] until year 9, after which students dance more in pairs. (Maria, 29 years old, year group 4–9)

Dancing activities have become a bit monotonous, for example couple dances are no longer part of the lessons. Now I use a YouTube program called ‘Just Dance’ that I show to the students and they each dance on their own. I also look through the video before, so that there are no situations in which there are two people dancing together or holding each other in ’Just Dance’. (Robert, 27 years old, year group 4–6)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend of individual dancing has taken the place of couple and group dancing, which represents a change in the nature of the activities. Individual dancing has become a dominant element in dance classes in PE. Teachers have moved away from partner dancing because it involves students making close contact and holding hands with one another. The above results show that there are some modifications in the nature of activities in PE. Consequently, the new assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of PE now produces different affects (Varea et al., 2020), which according to the teachers above, include the fear of touching one another. In so doing, ‘becoming’ has the ‘power to form new affects’ (Masny, 2012: 116). By modifying those activities in which students have physical contact with one another, such as partner dancing, PE could potentially become a subject where students’ physical interaction is less common.
Concluding discussion

The aim of this paper was to explore PE teachers’ perceptions of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Swedish PE. Results demonstrate that teaching PE during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge for the teachers who participated in this study. There have been significant changes in the context and content of PE as a result of COVID-19. Important activities, such as CPR and swimming classes, have been postponed. Hygiene routines, such as changing clothes and showering before and after PE, have been removed in most schools. Furthermore, both the role and responsibility of PE teachers today have expanded to now include tasks such as cleaning sports equipment and making sure students maintain a safe distance between one another in lessons.

Some PE teachers have greatly reduced physical contact in their lessons, such as spotting in gymnastics, while others still engage in physical contact when necessary to prevent injuries. Much has changed in the delivery and planning of PE in Sweden. In so doing, the ‘becoming’ of PE is in a constant ‘fluid condition’, which is continuously changing according to recommendations from schools, principals and the Swedish Ministry of Health. Teachers, who in the past may have dealt with various other issues, now face unprecedented challenges, such as the uncertainty of how to proceed with their classes. PE teachers also expressed a sense of uncertainty regarding what might happen in the near future, including the possibility of things not going according to plan and thus necessitating that a teacher be flexible and able to adapt to the evolving situation. The novelty and unpredictability of the COVID-19 situation cause PE teachers to feel uncertain about the planning and execution of PE lessons.

The added roles that PE teachers now have inadvertently incorporated into their jobs (e.g. acting as school cleaners to disinfect equipment or police officers to surveil distance kept between students) could potentially increase PE teachers’ stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion. These factors could thus eventually contribute to PE teachers’ burnout as a result of job stress caused by the new restrictions and rules implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, previous research has profiled teaching as a stressful profession and one that is susceptible to burnout (Brouwers et al., 2011; Richards et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers are now faced with (un)ethical and moral decisions regarding the cleaning of equipment and physical contact with children. On the one hand, recommendations have been put in place by the government to minimise the risk of infection by cleaning equipment and avoiding physical contact. On the other hand, some teachers do not have cleaning products available or the time to clean the equipment, and some consider physical contact necessary to avoid students getting injured.

On a positive note, the act of moving PE activities outdoors, based on current COVID-19 recommendations, presents itself as an opportunity to further incorporate the outdoors as a learning area within the field of PE. In so doing, the becoming of PE has shifted towards more outdoor education. In the past, performing PE activities outdoors was at times taken for granted, or sometimes ‘reduced to merely a backdrop for people-centred practices’ (Mikaela, 2019: 87). According to Skolverket (2011), during a person’s formative years, outdoor life is of considerable value, as it can instil a lifelong desire to incorporate physical activity into one’s life. Svenning (2001) also asserts that outdoor life is of great importance for a person’s health, and there are strong cultural reasons for creating an interest in outdoor life among students in Sweden, including a time-honoured Swedish relationship with nature. As a consequence, the ‘becoming’ of PE now emphasises outdoor content, which is also in line with what Skolverket...
(2011) describes as friluftsliv. The future outcomes of the becoming of PE in this particular context could potentially give students further opportunities to learn more about friluftsliv. However, moving PE lessons outdoors has also resulted in the necessity for some teachers to work in somewhat hazardous conditions. For example, when PE teachers are forced to hold basketball classes in a shared noisy schoolyard, teachers and students are potentially subjected to a higher risk of noise pollution and injuries. Teaching in such environments can contribute to job stress for teachers. The participants in this study were advised to conduct all lessons outdoors, regardless of the weather, thus contributing to a potentially more hazardous teaching environment, particularly during adverse weather conditions.

Prior to the pandemic, games and activities that involved students touching one another were sometimes included in PE lessons. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, such activities are now no longer accepted. These activities have been replaced with activities where students rarely touch or hug one another. In this sense, the ‘becoming’ of PE now includes more individual activities situated in nature, in which physical contact is no longer included. The fear and panic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have accordingly resulted in similar consequences in Spain (Varea and González-Calvo, 2020). Dance in particular has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Skolverket (2011), traditional and modern dances, as well as movement, are all mentioned as part of the core content for year 9 students in Sweden. This also means that students are normally graded in the aforementioned dances. A portion of these dance classes includes partner dances, as well as group and individual dances. Partner dances, however, have now been entirely removed from the PE lessons and are now replaced with individual dances. In so doing, students now forego the opportunity to learn other important skills through partner dance, such as coordination, respect for the partner and body language – an ability in dance that allows the ‘follower’ to heed the subtle moves of the ‘leader’. Also, in terms of PE content, Skolverket (2011) states that activities such as first aid, CPR and the handling of emergencies in and near water with alternative aids should be included in PE for year 9 students. This is very important content to be taught in PE as it could facilitate a student’s capability to save another person’s life. However, given the current pandemic, PE teachers are not able to give proper hands-on instruction in this area.

Change has been a common theme throughout this study for the teachers involved. However, this is not new. Changes have often occurred in Swedish PE. Nevertheless, results in this study have revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in PE are now happening at a rapid and uncontrollable rate. In so doing, the concept of ‘becoming’ has been useful in investigating the ‘pure movement evident in changes between particular events’, as well as the continual production of difference (Stagoll, 2010: 26). These changes have occurred mainly in regard to content, context, as well as behaviours, tasks and responsibilities of teachers. The teaching of PE may now take new lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) into the ‘becoming’ of a subject where there is little or no physical contact, more individual activities, and added tasks and responsibilities for teachers. In other words, the above changes that have and are still occurring in PE due to the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to many of the activities in PE becoming quite different.

The current study has contributed to an increased understanding of the conceptualisations of PE teachers regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and how their views have affected their jobs and teaching of the subject. This study is the first of its kind investigating this topic in Sweden. The results generated from this study are highly relevant for people working in the field of PE, both at
school and university levels. Understanding how the pandemic has impacted the subject of PE and its delivery could create opportunities for more discussions and possible solutions for dealing with PE in regard to the COVID-19 situation, and thus help facilitate necessary adjustments in the subject.

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ORCID iD
Valeria Varea https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3572-4976

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Author biographies

Seguya Kamoga is a student at Örebro University and works as a physical education teacher at Skogsborg school.

Valeria Varea is an associate professor in Sport Sciences at Örebro University, Sweden.