Exploring the Relationship between Grading and Assessment for Learning in Norwegian Physical Education

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In educational research, documentation about the relationship between assessment and learning has grown considerably over the last 20 years, particularly related to the importance of formative assessment, or assessment for learning (AfL). Informed directly by this research, the 2006 school reform in Norway was followed by an official encouragement to change the assessment culture and practice in schools in the direction of AfL. At the same time the reform was underpinned by a new public management-thinking that favoured the accountability assessment perspective.

In this context the study aimed to explore the relationship between grading and AfL in physical education (PE). Previous research has demonstrated subject differences in teachers’ grading practices, with a particular focus of PE compared to more theoretical subjects. Further, research indicates that Norwegian PE teachers have been more occupied and concerned about assessment validity across schools than on how to implement AfL into their pedagogy. However, based on results from research on formative assessment, it is reasonable to expect that PE students who experience a higher level of AfL will strengthen their learning outcomes in the subject and hence achieve better results. Consequently, a positive influence of AfL on students’ grades in PE was hypothesised:

H1: There is a positive relationship between students’ report of higher level of AfL and the grades received.

The study employed a questionnaire of 1454 physical education students from six upper secondary schools in Norway (ages 15-19 years). As part of a larger research project, the six schools were recruited as a convenience sample. Based on AfL theory and factor analysis, a construct (including six questionnaire items) was identified to map the students’ level of AfL experience. A linear regression was used to analyse the relationship between this construct and grades received in PE.

The result revealed that AfL was negatively related to student grades, and H1 is rejected. While the main finding was statistically small, the study also discusses the influence of other variables, possible explanations for the results, and related implications. According to the theory of AfL and the hypothesised assumptions, the negative relationship found represents a serious challenge for education authorities promoting formative assessment, as well as physical education teachers and assessment researchers. In worst-case scenario, AfL, presented as a pedagogical tool with well-documented promises, can be concluded to have no effect in physical education.