Articles

Högre utbildning
Vol. 11 | Nr. 2 | 2021 | 70–83

Exploring reasons to attend formal teaching sessions among students: A self-determination theory perspective

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Among students in higher education, attending formal teaching sessions might be important not only for academic achievement but also to foster human values. Despite this, the low and declining attendance rate is a growing concern in higher education. This study aimed to explore what students believe teachers could do to facilitate attendance at formal teaching sessions in the physical education part of the teacher education program in Sweden. Three focus group interviews were conducted among students aged 20 to 35 who attended the teacher education programme. The self-determination theory was used as a theoretical framework, and data were analysed and categorised using qualitative content analysis. The analysis of the interviews formed an overarching theme that intersected with four categories. The results show that teachers might facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions by providing opportunities for students to interact with each other; match challenges with skills; be engaged, enthusiastic, and caring; and outline the value and rationale. The study's implications for teachers are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: attendance, higher education, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Students in higher education generally have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether to attend formal teaching sessions, such as timetabled lectures, seminars, and workshops organised and delivered by one or several teachers. It might be hypothesised that those students who attend are curious, proactive, and engaged in their studies and the teaching activities taking place in the classroom, whereas the opposite might be true for those who do not attend. Although attendance does not necessarily ensure active participation or learning, students who do not attend miss the opportunity to acquire information that is not included in the course literature. Also, they might lose out on peer support and opportunities to mutually reflect upon and discuss theoretical frameworks and concepts.

Most previous studies seem to focus on reasons why students *do not* attend formal teaching sessions. These studies propose a multitude of factors with both intrinsic and extrinsic factors intertwined. As part of their study, Sloan, Manns, Mellor, and Jeffries (2020) reviewed the literature and found that students might choose not to attend lectures that lack a direct connection to course assignments. They also found that several factors related to pedagogy have been proposed as reasons why students choose not to attend. Among these, students might perceive that the course literature provides more information compared to what they can obtain during, for example, lectures (O'Sullivan et al., 2014; Sloan et al., 2020). Moreover, coursework assignments set for submission might affect the decision to attend or not (e.g., Paisey & Paisey, 2004;

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Artiklar och reflektioner är kollegialt granskade. Övriga bidragstyper granskas av redaktionen. Se https://hogreutbildning.se ISSN 2000-7558

Citation: Fröberg, A. & Jonsson, L. (2021). «Exploring reasons to attend formal teaching sessions among students: A self-determination theory perspective», Högre utbildning, 11(2), 70–83. https://doi.org/10.23865/hu.v11.2561

Woodfield, Jessop & McMillan, 2006). Studies also suggested that students' perceived sense of belonging to higher education might be related to attendance (Oldfield, Rodwell, Curry & Marks, 2019). Other factors such as illness and tiredness, poor time management, and alternative priorities, such as part-time work or socialising with classmates, have been shown to be reasons for not attending (e.g., Gump, 2004; Paisey & Paisey, 2004; Sloan et al. 2020; Woodfield et al., 2006).

In addition to these causes for non-attendance, it has been found that students are more likely to attend interactive and immersive teaching approaches, such as laboratory, seminar, and tutorials (Sloan et al., 2020). Moreover, previous research shows that high student motivation and interest might positively influence attendance during formal teaching sessions (Gump, 2004; Moore, Armstrong & Pearson, 2008; Sloan et al., 2020). Sloan et al. (2020) even stated that "motivation and interest levels seem particularly important factors and are likely to mediate a whole host of other variables" (p. 12).

Knowledge about why students choose to attend formal teaching session is important since research suggests a connection between attendance and academic achievement. A previous review and meta-analysis revealed that attendance rate had a strong and positive relationship with academic achievement (Credé, Roch & Kieszczynka, 2010). In a recent systematic review of 38 meta-analyses, attendance was ranked number six out of 105 effect sizes with respect to the strength of their association with academic achievement (Schneider & Preckel, 2017). This indicates that students with a relatively higher attendance rate might have better academic achievement compared to their classmates.

However, it should be acknowledged that many studies have assessed students' attendance rate during formal teaching sessions by self-report methods such as questionnaires that might be subject to both recall bias and social desirability. Recently, however, one study used Bluetooth data collected from smartphone sensors to identify class locations among nearly 1000 undergraduate students at the Technical University of Denmark in Kongens Lyngby (Kassarnig, Bjerre-Nielsen, Mones, Lehmann & Lassen, 2017). Consistent with previous studies, the results showed an association between attendance rate and academic achievement. Importantly, however, students with a low attendance rate had a broad distribution of final grades, suggesting that academic performance not only is related to attendance but also depends on other factors.

In addition to better academic achievement, attendance during formal teaching sessions might also be considered as an integral component of students' overall learning experience. Students with a high attendance rate might develop skills and acquire knowledge that are not necessarily assessed through course assignments. For example, one study found a positive relationship between attendance rate and creativity, respect for others, respect for the environment, caring for others, and loyalty (Cheruvalath, 2017).

Attending formal teaching sessions might thus be important not only for academic achievement but also to foster human values. Despite this, low and decreasing attendance rates are a growing concern in higher education, and some universities have implemented attendance-monitoring systems (Macfarlane, 2013). Teachers are also worried that their students do not understand the implications of non-attendance, and they seem frustrated when students do not realise their part of the academic contract (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011).

Given that students with high levels of motivation seem to report higher levels of attendance during formal teaching sessions (e.g., Sloan et al., 2020), the present study uses the self-determination theory (SDT) as the theoretical framework to understand students' motivation

towards attending formal teaching sessions. SDT is a broad framework of human motivation and personality that is among the most extensively used frameworks to comprehend relations involving autonomous and controlled forms of motivations in educational settings (Slemp, Field & Cho, 2020).

Self-determination theory

SDT posits that student motivation can be understood as a continuum ranging from amotivation and extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation (see e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2017). Students who are amotivated completely lack motivation, whereas those who are extrinsically motivated engage in teaching activities to obtain an outcome separable from the task itself, such as to pass a course. Students who are intrinsically motivated find studying and learning inherently enjoyable and interesting and, therefore, engage in the teaching activities for their own sake, and they generally find learning meaningful and relevant to themselves.

SDT centres on the concept of basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and is crucial to understanding the satisfactions and supports necessary for autonomous forms of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Within the context of studying at the university, autonomy might be understood as students' perceptions of themselves as causal agents of their respective lives and that they act in harmony with their integrated self. Furthermore, competence might be understood as students feeling competent and experiencing mastery. The basic psychological need relatedness might be understood as students experiencing personal relations and wanting to interact, be connected to, and experience caring for their classmates.

Autonomy-supportive teachers

SDT can be used to understand classroom conditions. Students' classroom engagement depends, at least to some extent, on the motivational climate and, here, teachers can motivate their students by being either controlling or autonomy-supportive (Reeve, 2006). Reeve (2006, 2009) suggests that teachers who adopt a controlling motivational approach rely on extrinsic motivation. This approach is characterised by merely adopting the teacher's perspective, intrude into students' thoughts, feelings, or actions, and pressure them to think, feel, or behave in certain ways (Reeve, 2009). Here, instructional behaviours include relying on external sources of motivation, disregarding explanatory rationales, and relying on pressure-inducing language. As the alternative, autonomy-supportive teachers rely on intrinsic motivation (Reeve, 2009). Key characteristics of an autonomy-supportive motivational approach include adopting the students' perspective; welcoming their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours; and support students' motivational development and capacity for autonomous self-regulation (Reeve, 2009). Instructional behaviours related to supporting autonomy include nurturing internal motivational resources, providing explanatory rationales, and relying on non-controlling and informational language (Reeve, 2009).

It is critical to stress that autonomy support is not synonymous with an unstructured learning environment (Reeve, 2006, 2009). Here, it should be noted that, although autonomy-supportive teachers adopt (and value) the students' perspective, it does not downplay the importance of acting on the teacher's perspective. The teachers' strategies, priorities, and goals can be expressed through the provision of a structured learning environment by, for example, communicating expectations, giving directions, and taking the lead during instruction (Reeve, 2009).

Available research suggests that teacher-provided autonomy has been shown to benefit students in terms of, for example, curiosity, engagement, creativity, competence, academic achievement

and, importantly, attendance during formal teaching sessions (Reeve, 2009). Despite this, studies suggest that many teachers tend to adopt a controlling motivational approach. According to Reeve (2009), this might be explained by several reasons, including that teachers assume an inherently powerful social role where they possess both power and influence over their students. It might also be because teachers bear responsibility and accountability for their students' academic outcomes and, therefore, experience pressure to ensure that their students perform up to standards. Some teachers might also equate control with structure (Reeve, 2009).

Many previous studies have focus on reasons why students do not attend formal teaching sessions. There are also studies to suggest that high student motivation and interest can positively influence attendance, yet less is known about what students believe teachers could do to facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions. Therefore, the present study aims to explore what students believe teachers could do to facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions at the physical education part of the teacher education program in Sweden. Based on the aim of this study, the research question was: What do students believe teachers could do to facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions?

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIAL

This study embraced an interpretive approach, suggesting that the constructed and contextual nature of the students' experiences are complex and allows for shared realities (Thorne, 2016). To capture such complex and shared realities, focus group interviews were used to produce data (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). Such interviews allow for students to make their voices heard and express themselves without restrictions. Also, it was anticipated that this type of interview would enable students to relate to each other's mutual realities and thereby stimulate them to share their experience in relation to the focus area of this paper.

Recruitment and participants

To be included in this study, the participants were required to have at least one full year of experience in higher education. This criterium was set arbitrarily but with the intention of including those who had previous experiences from many formal teaching sessions (e.g., lectures, seminars, and workshops) delivered by several different teachers.

In Sweden, the teacher education program is organised into the following four parts: 1) Courses directed towards specific subjects (e.g., physical education), 2) core courses in educational sciences, 3) teaching practice, and 4) degree project. In October 2019, students who attended the physical education part of the teacher education program at a large university in Sweden were invited to participate in this study. Three classes were visited to briefly explain the aim of this study and distribute written information about the study procedure. Students interested in participating entered their email address on a separate sheet and were then contacted and provided with information on time and location for each interview.

The goal was to include four to six participants per interview. Although arranged accordingly, unexpected and late drop-outs meant that two interviews were conducted with two and three participants, respectively. In total, three interviews were conducted (in Swedish) with eleven participants (both males and females) who were 20 to 35 years of age. The participants had one to four years of experience of higher education and attended the physical education part of the teacher education program directed towards secondary school (4th to 9th grade, approximate ages: 10 to 15 years) or upper secondary school (10th to 12th grade, approximate ages: 16 to 18 years). Table 1 provides an overview of the interviews.

All participants had Swedish as the language of instruction. They also had experiences from attending different types of teaching sessions, such as lectures, seminars, workshops, and didactic teaching sessions. These teaching sessions were carried out with varying group size, attendance rate, and room size. In general, the participants had been taught by teachers who had several years of teaching experience in the teacher education program.

Procedure and data production

An interview guide was developed and subsequently tested among former (graduated) students who had previous experience from formal teaching sessions at the physical education teacher education program. Any suggestions and comments to improve the interview guide were noted and the guide revised accordingly. The revised, final version of the interview guide comprised the following two areas:

- *Introduction*: An introduction that outlined the aim, structure, and organisation of the interview, as well as ethical considerations such as volunteerism, the opportunity to withdraw participation, and collection of written, informed consent.
- *Questions*: The main part of the interview that revolved around two main questions: Why do you (or your classmates) attend lectures, workshops, seminars, and similar formal teaching sessions? What do you (or your classmates) believe teachers could do (i.e., make different, improve etc.) to facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions?

Each interview was conducted at the university department in facilities familiar to the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded using a Dictaphone and microphone. The two authors of this study conducted the interviews. Both were senior lecturers in sport science with experiences from both teaching and focus group interview methodology.

The second author (L.J.) acted as moderator and had the responsibility of steering and maintaining the discussions' focus. The first author (A.F.) acted as assistant moderator and was responsible for asking follow-up questions and summarising what the participants had expressed to ensure correct interpretation.

The interviews began with everyone introducing themselves. After that, the assistant moderator clarified the aim and procedure of the interview. Throughout the interviews, questions were asked to engage all participants, and each interview ended with a summary of the participants' expressed thoughts. The interviews lasted on average 60 minutes (range: 57 to 64 minutes) (Table 1), and the participants were offered refreshments (e.g., coffee, tea, and biscuits) to maintain focus.

Table 1. An overview of the interviews according to duration, number of participants (males/females), age (range), number of years of higher education experience, and which teacher education programme they attended

Interview	Duration	Participants	Age	Experience	Programme
1	59 min	6 (3 m/3 f)	20 to 35 y	1 y	Secondary school[1]
2	57 min	2 (1 m/1 f)	23 to 25 y	4 y	Upper secondary school[2]
3	64 min	3 (2 m/1 f)	22 to 32 y	1 y	Upper secondary school[2]

Abbreviations: f, females; m, males; min; minutes; y, years

[1]Represents 4th to 9th grade in Sweden (approximate ages: 10 to 15 years)

[2]Represents 10th to 12th grade in Sweden (approximate ages: 16 to 18 years)

Ethical considerations

During the recruitment procedures, it was elucidated that participation was voluntary and that everyone had the opportunity to withdraw their participation at any time without any explanation. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants before each interview.

At the beginning of each interview, an explanation was also given that all statements would remain within the group. Also, the findings would be presented to make it impossible for individual participants to be identified.

Furthermore, conducting interviews might be accompanied by power relation (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013). The moderator had no previous experiences teaching any of the participants included in this study, and it was unlikely that he would do so in the future. The assistant moderator had previously taught most of the participants in a previous course, and it was likely that he would do so in the future. Therefore, it should be noted that a power imbalance might have been present, which could have inhibited the participants' opportunity to express themselves without restrictions. With the ambition to reduce such power imbalance, the moderators made an effort to develop trust by advising the participants that there were no correct or incorrect answers, etc., and that all thoughts and opinions were equally as important and would contribute to the general understanding of the focus area of this study. Because the focus area of this study might be perceived as sensitive, the moderators also encouraged the participants to discuss the questions from their perspectives and their views on how past and present classmates have reasoned regarding why they do not attend/attend formal teaching sessions. The moderators also adopted a neutral approach by not engaging on one side of the argument or another or affirming or disapproving of the participants' expressed thoughts.

Qualitative content analysis

The analysis of the interview material was performed using qualitative content analysis (Graneheim, Lindgren & Lundman, 2017; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Qualitative content analysis is considered suitable for performing a thematisation of the data to obtain a description of why students do not attend/attend formal teaching sessions and what students believe teachers can do to facilitate attendance. Below is a summary of the qualitative content analysis that was performed according to previous recommendations (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The audio recordings from each interview were transcribed verbatim by the first author (A.F.). The two authors repeatedly read the transcriptions in their entirety to understand the contexts and dynamics of the interviews and obtain a sense of the whole. After that, the two authors analysed the collected data as described below.

Firstly, sentences or phrases containing features related to each other through their context and content and were relevant to the research question were highlighted as meaning units and then inputted to a separate sheet to assist the categorisation process. The meanings were then condensed, abstracted, and coded, and similarities and differences were sorted and compared to each other. Similar codes reflecting like aspects of the transcribed text in relation to the research question were merged into tentative categories. These categories captured the general meaning and expressed the manifest content of the text.

Secondly, the tentative categories were reviewed repeatedly and then revised and encoded into the final set of categories. Finally, an overarching theme that intersected with the categories was generated to describe the content on a latent level. Although the analysis is described linearly, the authors undertook a back-and-forth process when critically analysing and reflecting

on the codes, categories, and the (tentative) theme. An example of the categorisation procedure is provided in Table 2.

The findings of this study are presented and discussed below. Each category begins with a description of the participants' statements followed by an interpretation through the lens of the SDT. Occasionally, quotes (translated to English) illustrate the characteristic of each category, and clarifications are stated within square brackets (and in italics) when needed. To avoid identifying participants, any information regarding sex, age, and which interview the quotes are derived from is omitted. Further, each category is concluded with a statement regarding possible implications for teachers.

Table 2. Example of meaning units, codes, and category from the data analysis

Meaning units*	**Codes**	**Category**
"We want to exchange thoughts with each other, discuss and such things … everyone has different experiences from the past and then … everyone interprets knowledge in different ways."	Learning from and with classmates	Interacting with classmates
"I go there [*to class*] to experience social connectedness with my classmates."	Experiencing personal relations	
"Although I only meet five persons … it's still a social affinity … I get to meet friends … I get to hang out."		

*Clarifications are stated within square brackets (and in italics) when needed

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During all interviews, the participants referred to lectures, seminars, workshops, and didactic teaching sessions when discussing why they attended lectures, workshops, seminars, and similar settings and what they believe teachers could do to facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions. Also, the participants made references to both courses directed towards specific subjects (mostly physical education) and core courses in educational sciences.

In addition to the main findings of this study, as presented below, the students stated the following reasons for not attending formal teaching sessions: illness, oversleeping, long commuting distance (the longer the travel distance, the less likely to not attend sessions), and poor time-management (e.g., pending assignment deadlines). They also mentioned alternative priorities, such as paid work, exercise, and socialising with classmates, as common reasons for not attending formal teaching sessions. Moreover, the participants stated that students attended formal teaching sessions to pass the course, thereby secure economic income (receiving study maintenance grants and loans), receiving high grades, and avoiding supplementary assignments. Many of these reasons have been reported in previous research (e.g., Sloan et al., 2020).

Moreover, the data analysis generated four categories that are described below. Embedded within the description of each category is the participants' statement concerning why students do not attend and attend formal teaching sessions. The four categories are formulated in a positive, encouraging manner with references to the research question: What students believe teachers can do to facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions. The four categories were *interact with classmates*; *match challenges and skills*; *engaged, enthusiastic, and caring*; and *value and rationale*. The overarching theme was formulated as *Strategies to encourage attendance.* Table 3 illustrates the codes, categories, and overarching theme.

Table 3. The codes, categories, and overarching theme

Codes	Categories	Theme
Learning from and with classmates	Interacting with classmates	Strategies to encourage attendance
Experiencing personal connection		
Not too low requirements	Matched challenges and skills	
Not too high requirements		
Teachers are engaged and enthusiastic	Engaged, enthusiastic, and caring	
Teachers are interested in, and care about students and their learning		
Teachers explain the value and rational in relation to course assignments and future profession	Value and rationale	

Interact with classmates

The first category that emerged from the data analysis was *interact with classmates.* Here, the opportunity to interact with classmates and learn from and with each other was described as reasons for attending formal teaching sessions. For example, the participants stated that attendance provided opportunities to spend time with classmates and experience social connectedness and learn from and with each other, which is illustrated by the following quote: "We want to exchange thoughts with each other discuss and such things". The opportunity to discuss seemed to be important since the participants perceived their classmates as having different backgrounds and experiences, which, in turn, could lead to different interpretations of the subject matter discussed during lectures, seminars, and workshops.

Some participants also stressed that discussions were welcome features during formal teaching sessions, especially during long lectures. They had the opportunity to be active in the learning process by interacting with each other and making sense of the information communicated. Consequently, lectures arranged in a way that combined sequences of lecture with discussions in pairs or small groups were considered more engaging. Importantly, it was suggested that students were more likely to attend a lecture when they knew that the teachers generally arranged their teaching sessions accordingly.

Lectures in smaller classes were perceived as more appealing compared to large classes because they generated a more personal connection with both classmates and the teacher. This personal, familiar connection seemed to encourage attendance since classmates knew and cared about each other and asked for each other's presence. For these reasons, participants also stated that they were more likely to ask questions and comment on content during lectures in smaller classes.

Desires such as to interact, socialise, and raise the value of personal connection to classmates connect to SDT and the basic psychological need for relatedness. The concept of relatedness stipulates that students' wish to experience personal relations with and concern from classmates through care (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Thus, teachers might facilitate attendance by providing students with opportunities to discuss and interact with each other. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to frequently introduce student-centred activities such as discussions to provide opportunities for students to learn from and with each other. Research also shows that discussions might improve learning (Balta, Michinov, Balyimez & Ayaz, 2017) and develop abilities central to critical thinking, skills, and dispositions (Abrami et al., 2015). Group discussions in the classroom, as opposed to passively listening to a teacher, is a form

of active learning that has shown to be associated with increased academic performance (e.g., Freeman et al., 2014).

Match challenges and skills

The second category that emerged from the data analysis was *match challenges and skills*. On the one hand, participants described that they perceived the requirements to pass some courses as being too low. For example, some suggested that classmates could pass a course despite not attending lectures or reading the course literature. Others made references to their previous school experiences and argued that the study effort during secondary school and upper secondary school was more time-consuming compared to the university. According to the participants, there were basically two approaches to obtain the knowledge required to pass some courses: either read the course literature or attend lectures. Of these, some participants believed that attending lectures was the most (time) effective strategy, as illustrated by the following quote: "I don't want to read everything [*the course literature*], so … I save time by attending lectures instead". Another participant with a similar view articulated the following: "I think it can be a lot of text to read … and the text is often summarised quite well during lectures […], so either you read the text or attend the lectures". As suggested by these quotes, students might not consider attendance during lectures to be required to obtain the knowledge necessary to pass some courses since they could choose to read the course literature instead. In turn, these quotes might suggest that the requirements to pass some courses are perceived as being rather low.

On the other hand, some participants acknowledged that students occasionally did not attend formal teaching sessions because they did not comprehend the subject matter being taught. The following quote suggests this: "If you don't understand anything … then you don't go there". One participant elaborated on this by referring to a lecture series covering subject matter that she perceived as too difficult to comprehend: "I didn't understand anything at all … and I couldn't bear to sit there and feel stupid all the time". The fact that students might decide not to attend lectures that deal with overly challenging subject matter ties to the basic psychological need for competence and thus that students want to perceive themselves as competent and experience mastery over a task (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Given that students might choose not to attend formal teaching sessions due to too low or too high requirements, teachers might facilitate attendance by matching the course challenges with students' skills. To do so, teachers can inform themselves by, for example, discussing the students' previous knowledge with the course administrator before any teaching session. The teacher can also begin each teaching session by asking students to discuss their prior knowledge of the subject matter.

Engaged, enthusiastic, and caring

The third category that emerged from the data analysis was *engaged, enthusiastic, and caring*. The participants stated that teachers could facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions by being engaged and enthusiastically present the subject matter. Teachers who were perceived as being engaged and enthusiastic were more likely to appear credible and inspiring. The participants stated that such enthusiasm could stimulate and elicit not only interest but also commitment among themselves and their classmates.

Furthermore, it was considered important that teachers showed sound interest in the students and *their* learning. One participant described such a teacher as follows: "He [*the teacher*]

is there and wants us to learn … all the time he says 'I want you to learn … you have to tell me if you don't understand' … then it's commitment". According to the participants, it was also important that teachers showed care by, for instance, keeping their promises. The following quote exemplifies how a caring teacher promptly posts study material or similar resources on the university's electronic learning platform as promised: "It's also about showing interest as a teacher … like … 'we will post this' … blah, blah, blah … and then you notice like 10 minutes later … it's up … then you sense that they [*the teachers*] care and show commitment".

The above statements tie to the fundamental psychological need relatedness and, more specifically, the importance of students perceiving their teachers as caring about them (Reeve, 2006, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Despite teachers' personal preferences when it comes to subject matters, it is suggested that teachers should make an effort to introduce the subject matter to be taught engagingly and enthusiastically. Furthermore, it is suggested that teachers show students that their learning is the focus during formal teaching sessions. Although this seems reasonable, the interviews suggested that students do not always perceive that to be the case.

Value and rationale

The fourth and final category that emerged from the data analysis was *value and rationale.* According to the participants, teachers could improve their teaching by clearly outlining the formal teaching session's value and rationale and making lectures more relevant in relation to the course assignments and the students' future profession. The interviews suggested that the participants occasionally experienced some inconsistency among teachers who, on the one hand, did not always convey the value and rationale of subject matters being taught but, on the other hand, simultaneously emphasised the importance that students, in *their role* as future teachers, clearly communicate why something is being taught.

Furthermore, the participants stressed the importance of teachers' lecturing on subjects with explicit relevance for course assignments. The participants occasionally sensed that lectures were disconnected from the course assignments and that this did not encourage students to attend formal teaching session. In a broader sense, the participants also stated that some critical skills and knowledge were deprioritised in favour of discussing theoretical frameworks and concepts that they perceived diffuse and without clear implications for future physical education teachers. One participant articulated the following: "There is a lot of knowledge that we want but do not receive … and a lot of information that we get [that] we do not know how to use". Some examples of deprioritised skills and knowledge were strategies to frame amotivated pupils and recommended approaches to manage conflicts between pupils during physical education. In contrast, lectures regarding theories of learning and education were perceived as interesting but too diffuse and challenging to put into practice.

The data was quite rich in statements indicating that participants sensed that some lectures, seminars, and workshops lack clear implications for them as future teachers in (upper) secondary school. In these cases, some participants also believed that time was more efficiently spent on either reading the course literature or working on pending assignments. To facilitate relevance in relation to students' future profession, the participants suggested that teachers should provide more concrete examples on *how* they could use the subject matter being taught. For example, it was stated that teachers could provide examples of how subject matter can be translated into different teachings scenarios. Similar to this, a previous study found that establishing relevance was related to creating interest among students, such as giving an application of a theoretical framework (Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2010). Another strategy that the participants

frequently mentioned was that of incorporating student-centred activities such as discussions since it would allow students to relate mutually and problematise the subject content in relation to their shared school experiences.

In many ways, the above statements tie to the concept of being an autonomy-supportive teacher. Teachers who are in sync with their students make formal teaching sessions relevant in relation to both the course assignments and the students' future profession. According to Reeve (2009), teachers who provide students with meaningful rationales and raise awareness of how certain tasks connect to their existing values, needs, and personal striving are those who take the students' perspective. Thus, teachers should support students' autonomy by offering a rationale and explaining why certain knowledge and/or tasks are worth the students' effort or support their understanding of why the uninteresting task is actually a personally useful thing to do (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Moreover, the above statements also suggest that teachers should make an effort to clearly outline the value and rationale for different teaching activities, thus explain why a certain task is personally worthwhile for the students. As suggested by the interviews, teachers could make formal teaching sessions more authentic and relevant in relation to both the course assignments and the students' future profession.

Together, it is suggested that teachers can become more autonomy-supportive. For example, teachers could make an effort to adopt the students' perspective by asking themselves questions such as the following, "If I was a student, then how would this theoretical framework make sense to me when I teach physical education among pupils in 7th to 9th grade?" Teachers can also provide concrete examples of how subject knowledge can be translated and used in different teachings scenarios. They might also introduce discussions to provide students with the opportunity to discuss and relate subject matters to their future profession mutually.

Methodological strengths and limitations

In the present study, data were produced through focus group interviews. One strength of focus group interviews is that participants are allowed to make their voices heard and express themselves without restrictions. Another strength is that two authors conducted the analysis to ensure that no relevant data were excluded or irrelevant data included. This also made it possible to discuss the codes and categories from different perspectives and interpretations. Furthermore, throughout this paper, we have strived to provide a clear and distinct description of the context, data collection, and analytic procedures to assist the readers in drawing conclusions regarding the transferability of the study findings.

Although focus group interviews allow participants to make their voices heard and express themselves without restrictions, there are also some limitations with this data collection method (Patton, 2015). For example, the fact that the participants had prior established relationships might be an issue. Those participants who perceive their viewpoint to be a minority perspective might also be less prone to address their thoughts on the specific issues. Focus groups interviews might also be susceptible to peer pressure, that a student does not feel allowed to say something when other students participate in the same discussion. Moreover, due to unexpected and late drop-outs, two of the three interviews were conducted with small groups of students (two and three participants). This is a limitation since the produced data might be less nuanced and varied in comparison to larger groups. It should also be mentioned that acceptance to participate in a study such as this might be a proxy marker for appreciating and raising the value of attending formal teaching sessions. Consequently, those who took part in

the interviews might also be most motivated to attend. Although this is acknowledged as a limitation, the authors experienced that the participants discussed similar issues in relation to the research question during the three focus groups. In addition, that the participants frequently referred to both their perspective and their views on how past and present classmates have reasoned about why they do or do not attend formal teaching sessions. Nonetheless, the small number of participants and the possible selection bias should be considered when interpreting the findings in the present study.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that students attend formal teaching sessions to spend time with classmates, experience social connectedness, and learn from and with each other. Other critical aspects related to attendance were that the requirements are not too low or too high, that teachers show sound interest in the students and their learning, and that they are engaged and present the subject matter enthusiastically. Also important is that teachers clearly outline the value and rationale for different teaching activities and make formal teaching sessions more authentic and relevant in relation to both the course assignments and the students' future profession. Ultimately, teachers might facilitate attendance during formal teaching sessions by providing opportunities for students to interact with each other; match challenges with skills; be engaged, enthusiastic, and caring; and outline the value and rationale.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors of this study gratefully acknowledge the students who participated in this study.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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