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"Investigating primary physical education initial teacher education: a story about a goat."

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Background

Initial teacher education (ITE) in primary physical education (PE) has become a key issue in the ongoing development of PE as a subject. There are those who question the quality (Talbot, 2008) or the time allocation (Caldecott, Warburton and Waring, 2006). Others question what can be made effective within current frameworks (Garrett and Wrench, 2007; Hopper, 2005; Morgan and Bourke, 2008). While there are suggestions focusing on developing a role for a specialist primary PE teacher (Carney and Winkler, 2008), any significant changes in policy will take time. Meanwhile, ITE remains the fundamental exposure to all University-based trainee teachers entering the professions.

Research Questions

The focus on the enquiry is on the factors that influence student teachers' perceived confidence and competence to teach primary PE. Research questions include those relating to the effects of the taught course and school experience on feelings of confidence and competence but also on which aspects of those opportunities have had a positive or negative effect.

Questions relating more to the second phase of the project focus more on identifying how students attribute importance to various factors effecting their overall confidence and competence in the subject. They also include questions focusing on identifying common factors and experiences that may contribute to a positive attitude to the subject or a more negative approach.

Methods

Key themes were identified in the literature suggested that key influences on students teachers' confidence and competence to teach primary PE centered on their prior personal experience of the subject, their taught course and their school experience (Chedzoy, 2000; Rolfe, 2001; Pickup, 2006a/b). The methods chosen reflect the nature of the study in terms of size and also the participants of the study.

Data was collected from second year students studying on a three year BA Primary Education degree. Phase one (2008/9) of the project focused on students (n=220) completing four questionnaires over the course of an academic year, pre-course, pre-school experience, post-school experience and post-course input. Follow up e-interviews (Meho, 2006; James, 2007) were carried out with (n=14) students focusing on key themes that had been identified through analysis.

Phase two (2009/10) of the project focused on the next cohort of students entering Year 2 of the programme (n = 215). A series of four questionnaires were again completed, but with additional focus on factors influencing their perceived confidence and competence and the perceived importance of these factors.

Throughout the project all students were fully informed about the aims and purposes of the study both. Although all students completed the questionnaires as part of their course reflections they had the choice whether or not to agree that the anonymous data could be used within the study. In relation to the e-interviews, students were asked to volunteer for the study after the course had finished and assignments had been marked. All data was collected and made anonymous by a non-teaching research assistant. Students who had chosen to take part could withdraw at any stage.

Frame

Pickup (2006a/b) identified three 'types' of students who experience ITE for primary PE: enthusiasts, middle ground and avoiders. Phase one data was analysed to investigate how the student cohort related to this typology and if these preconceptions could be changed. Follow-up e-interviews focused on analyzing why particular trends and patterns of change had occurred and focused on which aspects of the course had a more positive effect.

Phase two data was analyzed to consider how perceived confidence and competence changes over time and how it changes for students within each type. Pen portraits were created from most frequent experiences and summarised in relation to how this related to students perception of how they felt different factors affected their overall views. Further analysis focuses on how change in perceived confidence and competence occurs differently across a wide typology of students.

Research findings

Data from phase one demonstrated that 34% of students could be considered to be 'avoiders' at the start of the course compared with 26% as 'enthusiasts'. By the end of the course only 3% remained negative whereas 84% were now positive. Hidden in this positive trend is a more concerning pattern. Confidence and perceived competence rose after each taught input, whereas it reached a plateau while students were on school placement. The percentage of enthusiasts dropped by 3% during school experience while the 'avoiders' grew by 6%.

Data from the e-interviews supported this pattern with students identifying taught sessions as being the most significant positive influence on their progress. This contradicts the findings of Hobson et al (2006) who found that 61% of initial trainee teachers felt that their school experience was the most valuable aspect of their training. The findings also showed that students identified gaining experience as their biggest concern on leaving the course. E-interviews demonstrated that students did not always get adequate opportunities to observe or teach whilst on placement.

Initial findings from phase two focus on a distinct pattern of experience for those students who have positive or negative feelings of confidence and competence to teach primary PE. A small range of common experiences had been shared by those within a similar typology and they shared similar characteristics in terms of values, experience, subject knowledge and personal physical activity profiles. Additional analysis will consider how students within these groups respond to the course and school experience and whether there are issues related to non-differentiated teacher training courses where 'enthusiasts' and 'avoiders' are given the same input and experience.

These findings have concerning implications in the current climate. If trainee teachers are leaving their limited ITE still wanting experience to consolidate their fragile perceptions of confidence and competence they need to be facilitated in achieving this. Opportunities to teach PE are decreasing with outside agencies often covering to questionable effect (Lavin, Swindlehurst and Foster, 2008; Griggs, 2008) or with PE just not being taught. It also needs to be considered whether ITE should be designed to take into account student prior experience and perceived confidence and competence in both taught and experiential learning.