

Shaping the beliefs of beginning primary teachers: documenting personal and field-based experiences of physical education

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Background

Quality Physical Education (PE) programmes at primary level require teachers to teach and assess with confidence and competence across a variety of activities. While traditional models of teacher education have focused on the development of content knowledge and personal and pedagogical skill development, there is an increasing emphasis on the role of student teachers' beliefs and attitudes related to PE in the promotion of effective teaching and learning (Xiang et al, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2005; Garrett and Wrench, 2008). Research indicates that beginning teachers' confidence and competence to teach Physical Education (PE) are influenced by both Initial Teacher Education courses and their personal experiences in PE, Physical Activity (PA) and sport (Morgan and Bourke, 2005; Garrett and Wrench, 2007). By examining beginning primary teachers' experiences, both personal and those related to field-based teaching practices, we can gain an insight into the factors that may shape their belief structures related to teaching and learning in PE. Such factors are central in order to understand their belief system and thus any attempts to connect belief systems to action (Kulinna et al, 2000).

While there is a growing body of research internationally examining student teachers beliefs and perceptions/attitudes related to PE, little is known within the context of Irish primary schools. Much of the research has focused on Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) at second level, where PE teaching is specialised (Graber, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2003). This paper seeks to address the dearth of research relating specifically to beginning primary teachers and their beliefs regarding the teaching of PE.

Research Questions

This paper sets out to investigate/document (a) the personal experiences of a sample of beginning Irish primary teachers with regard to PE, PA and sport and (b) their experience and perspectives of primary PE based on teaching practice placements undertaken during their initial teacher education course. The sample of student teachers (N=233) completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Primary Teaching in two Colleges of Education in Dublin (2008-2009). This paper represents part of a larger study that seeks to establish a more thorough investigation of their perspectives on PE in primary schools.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was deemed most appropriate by the researchers so that baseline data could firstly be collected with subsequent opportunities to probe issues raised by respondents via interviews. Data collection included a questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended responses followed by semi-structured interviews with a group and with an individual.

The questionnaire was divided into sections which were used to ascertain student teachers' (1) biographical information and their experiences of PE through their own schooling (2) physical activity and sport background (3) experiences of teaching practice placements (4) perspectives of primary PE in general and (5) intentions to teach PE. For the purposes of this paper, the researchers focused on aspects 1-3. These sections provided an important starting point for analysis which was initially undertaken using SPSS 11.0 and SPSS Text Analysis 2 for open-ended questions. While these pre-structured sections assisted in providing a framework for analysis and discussion, they were not rigidly adhered to nor did they preclude the investigation of additional emergent themes.

In order to gain a richer understanding of the themes and issues arising from the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were undertaken; one with a focus group and one with an individual. The schedule of these interviews was informed by the questionnaire and the literature pertaining to teachers' beliefs and teacher socialization. Interview participants were selected using criterion sampling according to self-perceived levels of sport involvement and to ensure that males and females were represented. While the interview schedule was utilised, participants were given ample opportunity to explore other issues and concerns. This data was analysed manually using the constant comparative method and themes were identified.

Frame

The stimulus for this research was provided by theories relating to teacher socialization (Lawson, 1986; Stroot and Whipple, 2003; Curtner-Smith et al, 2008) and teachers' beliefs (Xiang, et al, 2002). The theoretical framework of teacher socialization as defined by Lawson (1986) identifies various types of socialization that influence teachers' experiences which consequently affect their beliefs, perceptions and actions when they enter the teaching profession. While Lawson's theories were informed by work undertaken with specialist teachers of PE, mainly at second level, the researchers in this study believed that this framework was transferable to the position of the primary generalist teacher.

This theoretical framework consists of three types of socialization: accultural, professional and organisational. The first two types are most relevant in this study. Accultural socialization is an ongoing process which begins at birth and is concerned with experiences, incidences and influences which take place during the natural course of life. Childhood experiences in particular are believed to shape subsequent beliefs, so this paper explored beginning teachers' recollections in relation to PE in primary and secondary school. The possible influence of significant people during this time was also investigated.

Professional socialization refers to the influence of the postgraduate diploma on teachers' beliefs, specifically here regarding the PE methods course and teaching practice placements. The programme in both participating colleges consisted of a 30 hour methods course and three month-long teaching practices. During the methods course, student teachers are actively involved in practical sessions which deal with curriculum content, pedagogical principles in PE, peer teaching and reflection. During teaching practice students are required to plan, teach and assess as many PE lessons as is feasible within the constraints of the individual school environment.

Research findings

Analysis of the data from the questionnaires and interviews suggests that these beginning teachers exited the colleges of education with varied, complex and often contradictory personal experiences of PE, PA and sport. The findings indicated that a third of participants rated their overall experience of PE classes in primary school as excellent or very good with the results similar at second level. The range of activities they engaged in was limited in many cases, with an emphasis on team sport at second level in particular. In terms of possible influences associated with acculturation socialization, both the questionnaires and interviews highlighted teachers as being significant in their impact on the student teachers' beliefs. Primary teachers in particular were perceived as central in developing early attitudes towards PE and sport.

Students' self-perceived levels of physical activity and sport involvement were high. A large majority considered themselves as very sporty or sporty as well as having average or above average fitness levels. Almost half the cohort engaged frequently in competitive sport. The influence of extra-curricular physical activity and sport during childhood and adolescence was also frequently referred to. Family members such as parents or brothers/sisters as well as coaches featured strongly as influential factors.

The impact of teaching practice placements during the postgraduate course on the students' professional socialization was clearly demonstrated in the findings. The majority of the cohort believed teaching practice was valuable and that their experiences, both positive and negative, assisted them

in their understanding of what it means to teach PE in primary schools. The interview data in particular highlighted the significance of the varied classroom and school contexts in which the students were placed. The influence of individual classroom teachers and whole school ethos during placements appears to be a significant factor in this aspect of socialization.

As teacher educators this study can provide a valuable insight into the motivations and expectations which influence beginning primary teachers' and their teaching of PE. This research may (a) influence the design, delivery and assessment of programmes of PE in colleges of education, (b) influence the professional practices of beginning teachers in PE and (c) ultimately impact on children's experiences of PE at primary level.

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