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Girls' and boys' conditions in Physical education and health.

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Background

This presentation deals with girls' and boys' conditions in physical education and health (PEH). It is based on a study funded by the Swedish National Agency of Education as a response to a call in 2009 from the Minister of Gender Equity and Integration. This suggests that the issue of gender equity in PEH has become a political issue at a national level in Sweden, likely to be seen as intertwined with a general concern about young people's physical activity habits and weight. Gender and gender equity in PEH has been on the research agenda both in Sweden and internationally for several decades, in particular the masculine and heteronormative character of the subject. Thus, what is specific, and perhaps new, is that this project takes its starting point in statistical data about 15-16 year old girls' and boys' distribution of grades, parents' educational level, and students' and parents' place of birth (Sweden/not Sweden). The Swedish National Agency of Education (SNAE) has access to statistics from every Swedish school about this kind of information.

Research Questions

The aim of the study is to scrutinise girls' and boys' conditions in PEH in terms of their success in the subject (what grade) in relation to their family background on the one hand and the kind of PEH they encounter (content, work form, teaching style, etc) on the other. How do family background and kind of PEH relate to success in PEH?

Methods

Out of the approximately 1800 schools in Sweden with school-year 9, SNAE provided the project with the above mentioned statistical information from 350 randomly chosen schools. We also used this material to make a selection of schools for the purpose of participation in an interview study and an observation study respectively. One PEH teacher at each of the 350 schools was asked to fulfil a **questionnaire**. 16 teachers at schools within Stockholm and the Lake Mälaren district were selected for **interviews** according to the following criteria (4 teachers/category):

- - a lot of the students acquire the grade Passed with special distinction (the highest grade) in PEH,
- - a lot of the students do Not pass in PEH,
- - an equal number of girls and boys acquire the grade Passed with special distinction,
- - a large portion of either boys or girls acquire Passed with special distinction (while the other do not).

Lastly, six classes in schools in the area of Stockholm were selected for an **observation** study. The selection was based on the available statistics in the following way; 2 classes at schools where:

- - an equal number of girls and boys acquire Passed with special distinction (the highest grade) in PEH,
- - a large portion of either one boys or girls acquire Passed with special distinction (while the other not),
- - a lot of the students do Not pass.

Both the questionnaire and the interviews served to provide information about the teachers view on the subject (its aims, organisation, content) and the students (attitudes and abilities), how they dealt with equity issues and how they carried out their assessment of the students (what criteria, what kind of documentation [if any].).

Frame

The theoretical approach is inspired by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His analyses starts from the notion that the students' tastes for PEH and their success in this subject is conditioned by on the one hand their family background and previous experiences from sport and PEH, and on the other hand what kind of teaching they meet during PEH lessons and what is valued within the teaching. Gender is constructed as an outcome from this encounter between background and previous experiences, and the kind of teaching they meet. Put in other words, practice - and gender patterns - in PEH is the result of the students' habitus encountering a social field characterised by a certain (principally masculine and heteronormative) value structure. In this study, we regard the grades (Not passed to Passed with special distinction) as indicators of what is assigned value by the PEH teachers, but also what content they select for the lessons and how they teach. Information about the grades is collected from SNAE. Information about PEH (content, organisation, etc.) is collected from the questionnaires (quantitative approach) and from the interviews (qualitative approach). The students' habitus is studied through the statistics from SNAE. The observations provide information about the logic of the physical activity that constitute the teaching. In Bourdieu's terms the logic of practice refers to the underlying rational that the participators of an activity has to obey in order for the activity to run smoothly - or challenge in order to change.

Research findings

Since the study is ongoing, no clear conclusions can be drawn from the project as yet. However, since preliminary results are to be presented to SNAE in June this year, they can be presented for an international audience in September at BERA. A preliminary analysis of the statistical material suggests that there is a high correlation between a high share of students with a certain privileged, socio-economic background (born in Sweden by Swedish parents with university education) and a high share students awarded with the highest grade, Passed with special distinction. This seems to be the case for both boys and girls, but in particular for girls. The preliminary results indicate the occurrence of a relative subordination of girls in relation to boys since a high share of the highest grade among girls seems to be correlated to a high share of the same grade among boys - if the girls are not in a majority in the class (as is the case in some schools with an arts profile).

References

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