Physical Education Teacher Students – Attitudes, Knowledge, and Skills

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Introduction

As of today, about 600 teacher students in physical education and health (PETE students) are engaged in various programs all over Sweden, from Luleå in the North to Malmö in the South, at 16 places. In previous time, all teacher education in physical education and health was located at GIH, The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, in Stockholm, an institute with a long history dating back to 1813 when Per-Henrik Ling became the first director of the institute (under the name of GCI standing for The Royal Institute of Gymnastics).

People responsible for the teacher education program at the various places have their own network and meet regularly. A few years ago the question of knowing more about the students accepted at the 16 departments was raised. As a first step GIH itself made such diagnostic measurements on students accepted at GIH (see Meckbach & Wedman, 2007). Among other things the results showed a high achievement at high school on students at GIH, a result that was in one way as predicted based on general experiences on a number of years.

As a next step the present study was planned for all PETE students in Sweden taking their courses at 16 various places and adding up towards 600 students. The study was carried out at Spring 2006, and has two aims. The first aim is to give a general diagnostic description of students at various programs. That information might give each department a working means for own considerations concerning steps to take to adjust the present education to the students at place, and also for enhancing important skills and knowledge to new students.
The second aim is to compare similarities and differences between the various study programs at 16 places. In such comparisons (like in all comparisons) information concerning differences might raise questions about necessary changes to make. As a part of the second aim, a picture of the future physical education teacher and in many cases the future sport leader might give rise to questions concerning necessary changes to make in order to teach young people the worth of regular physical activity.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire used consists of three parts of which two is of importance in this presentation, namely the parts concerning the students background in various aspects, and present skills and knowledge combined with attitudes towards the topic of physical education and health in school, including the idea of marking skills and knowledge.

Results

It turns out that the physical education and health teacher program is highly attractive all over Sweden. In most of the characteristics we have chosen to measure the picture is about the same at all places. As a summary it can be stated that most PETE students are high-performers at high school. As a side comment, the political idea of letting the physical education and health teacher program to become established at many places has not lead to different qualities of the students at various places. They show much more similarities than differences.

In general, most students are concentrating their efforts towards sports and sport achievement and to make themselves extremely fit according to present standards. The numbers of training and exercise hours on a spare time basis are high. At the same time, other activities not associated with sport have a low place on a list of interest during studies. Few student spent time on museum and associated cultural activities.
Another part of the results to discuss is knowledge of historical important persons concerning education and sport education (a role that these students soon will take on) is fairly low, a situation that is fairly easy to accept if this is a question that plays an important role in the studies at the various programs.

A third part of the results concerns the knowledge about disability sports. It turns out that the knowledge (and skills) in disability sport do not seem to be high. We believe, that here the programs should be changes to care more for this type of sports.

Men and women show small differences in most of the characteristics measured. Both men and women prefer to mark knowledge and skills in physical education and health, although how this should be carried out might differ between men and women. Men seem to take the activity per se as the ground for marks while women more give voice towards a more holistic judgement of skills and knowledge. However the differences are not many.

As an interesting results in relation to the students own interest is the fact that walking are valued as a reasonable activity to accomplish health and well-being for the pupils, an attitude that is different from how the students themselves form their own week-days.

A different finding and perhaps a surprising finding, concerns the school background of the parents to the student. The results show that the school background of the mothers is higher than it is for fathers – a result that does not correspond with the general education of fathers and mothers. One explanation for this to appear here is that the education of fathers plays an important role for selecting attractive studies that will result in high income later on. As a teacher in physical education and health the income is not particularly high and the fathers have already played their role in selecting other educational programs than physical education, leaving mothers with a lower (but still high) education to play a role in selecting physical education as a study program.
Discussion

Teacher education in physical education and health in Sweden is carried out by 16 departments spread over the whole country. Previously (30 years ago) there was only one department (a university college) located in Stockholm (the capital), a department with almost a history of 200 years. Over the last three decenniums the political ambition has been to establish universities close to where people live.

The effect of building up universities at various places has been to divide up the students wanting education in physical education. Today it is clear that, as a main result, most students prefer to study physical education and health close to where they live. There is a tendency for GIH (the old department) to attract somewhat more able students measured in terms of high school results.

Generally, the results from the study presented here are that differences between various universities are small in most of the variables measured. Most students have positive experiences from earlier educations and can show results at the upper end of the market scale. In that sense, students in PE education is to be counted as a “high status”–group. Many students have the possibilities through their school marks to get access to other high-status educations.

There are two subgroup results that demand further comments. The first one concerns differences between men and women. On the whole there are small differences (in either direction) but on a few of the variables measured, there might be reason to observe the findings. There is a clear tendency for women to care about meal preparation more than men do, to show a greater interest in dance as a physical activity and to have a greater responsibility towards their own families than what men have.

The second sub-group difference is, perhaps, of greater interest. In the group studied, we find that mothers have a higher education than what fathers have. This is a result that is different from what one would expect (generally fathers have a higher education than what mothers have). A possible explanation might be that fathers of high education prefer other education
than what characterize physical education teacher. In Sweden, and in many other places, to become a physical education teacher does not guarantee a good income. It is not low but definitely not high. Perhaps fathers with a high education also act as a mentor for other educations than physical education, leading to higher incomes later on in life. Instead in our case, mothers get a much more say in stimulating education for their children, and for them the salary are perhaps not the most important thing. To care for one owns interests might be as important as the salary.

Finally, we like to add a further comment that gets some support from the data. At least the data support a hypothesis concerning the circumstances under which physical education is carried out. We can understand from data that there is a great interest in exercise and things connected to the body itself. Working capacity is well understood among the students and the interest to feel well physically is clearly expressed. Other interests like visiting museums, theatres and things that more easily are connected to the cultural life as it is often expressed, play a low role among the students. This fact might lead to an “out-door” criticism of physical education programs saying that a critical attitude towards sports and sport organisations may often not come from “in-door” persons. The life attitude among the latter group is in many respects similar to present attitudes among people favouring sport and sport activities. That might include an absence of a critical attitude (towards sports) that is one of the ingredients of university studies.

Reference