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An investigation into the perceived level of personal subject knowledge and competence of a group of pre-service physical education teachers towards the teaching of secondary school gymnastics

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Abstract

The future of physical education (PE) depends on the quality of emerging committed professionals and their ability to teach across the different activity areas contained within the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE). It is a role that requires extensive subject knowledge and perceived competence in the ability to use it effectively. Subject knowledge is identified as one of the professional standards to be met by students seeking the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). It is, however, an area frequently highlighted by students as the main source of concern throughout the process of Initial Teacher Training (ITT). This in turn can affect students' perceived confidence and competence to teach certain activities. One of the activity areas constantly highlighted as causing concern among pre-service PE teachers is gymnastics. This is often attributed to the fact that many trainees enter ITT with an impoverished background in this area. The purpose of the study was to examine the perceived level of personal subject knowledge and competence to teach gymnastics among trainees completing the School Based Experience (SBE) sections of a one-year secondary Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) PE course.

Key-words: Competence • gender • gymnastics • subject knowledge

Subject knowledge and teacher competence

The future of PE in schools depends on the quality of newly qualified professionals (Stidder and Hayes, 2002) who are able to organize and teach within a dynamic subject area. Schempp et al. (1998: 342) state that 'The act of teaching implies the transmission of knowledge from one to another. To teach one must know.' The acquisition of a secure knowledge base that enables one to 'know' is one of the standards to be met by all students aiming to acquire QTS and is frequently highlighted as the essential

component in successful teaching (Matanin and Collier, 2003). In terms of standards to be achieved, trainees at both primary and secondary level are expected to 'have a sufficient command of the subject and of the professional knowledge they will require to teach their subjects effectively in their selected age-range' (OFSTED, 2005: 8). A number of authors (Geddis, 1993; Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1987) have utilized frameworks to categorize the different elements of required teacher knowledge. While each framework is unique they do refer to similar knowledge domains, each of which is dependent on the other in order to ensure success, mainly (a) general pedagogical knowledge which is generic and applicable to many different aspects of teaching and learning and (b) subject-specific or content knowledge, enabling an in-depth understanding of the concepts and skills necessary to teach across the areas of a teacher's chosen specialism. For this study the focus on trainee perceived subject knowledge and competence can be described as a combination of the general teaching and subject-specific knowledge types. This could also be described as pedagogical content knowledge, which Shulman (1987: 8) terms: 'That special amalgam of content and pedagogy'.

When teaching PE, knowledge can be described as secure understanding of the concepts and skills necessary to teach across the six areas of activity of the NCPE (DfEE, 1998). This ideal has recently been further developed through the *Qualifying to Teach* document and accompanying handbook of guidance (TDA, 2006), which replaced DfEE (1998) Circular 4/98 (the document that previously outlined statutory professional standards to be met in order to be awarded QTS). The TDA (2006: 216) states that the central aim of teaching is to help pupils develop a detailed insight and understanding of the subject and topic under study and:

To do this confidently and effectively, teachers need a high level of subject knowledge and understanding relevant to the pupils' curriculum. Secure subject knowledge enables teachers to judge how ideas and concepts can be broken down and sequenced logically so they can support pupils' learning. This helps teachers plan lessons and sequences of lessons, set teaching and learning objectives, and evaluate pupils' progress towards these objectives.

Perceived lack of subject knowledge to teach across the activity areas is one of the most commonly raised concerns amongst trainees (Capel, 1998a, 1998b; Hardy, 1997; Meek and Behets, 1999) and indeed Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) of PE (Hardy, 1999; Hutchins and MacDonald, 1993; McCormack, 1997). This in turn can affect trainees' perceived confidence and competence to teach certain activities. During the most recent published cycle of inspections in secondary teacher training OFSTED, while acknowledging that the percentage of trainees that were deemed to have developed a good level of subject knowledge had risen significantly since the previous inspection, stated:

Nevertheless, a minority of trainees on postgraduate physical education courses still did not use their degree knowledge effectively in teaching the subject, for

example to identify principles underlying the lessons they had planned. Both undergraduate and postgraduate trainees often had trouble in explaining issues of cause and effect in the execution of pupils' movement. (2003: 8)

Fairclough (2003: 5) defines competence as referring to 'one's beliefs about his or her ability in an achievement domain'. Competence relates to teachers' perception of their personal subject knowledge appropriate to all aspects of teaching and the confidence to apply this knowledge in an accurate manner. Teacher training is a stressful time (Meek, 1996) during which trainee competence is rigorously tested, with PE students in particular often displaying a variety of concerns directly relating to school experience (Capel, 1996).

Projected concerns towards gymnastics in the PE curriculum

Research has been performed in the area of student teachers' attitudes (Morgan et al., 2001, 2002) and perceived subject knowledge/competence to deliver the primary school PE curriculum (Carney and Armstrong, 1996; Davies and Haines, 2001; Morgan, 1997). Results of these studies reinforce the fact that students' prior experiences do affect their perceived confidence and competence to teach certain NCPE activities. Gymnastics was one of the activities constantly highlighted as an area in which students possessed limited subject knowledge. Overall the development of subject knowledge and competence to deliver the subject by non-specialist teachers is often restricted due to the low amounts of time dedicated to it during ITT (Benn and Benn, 2000; Clay, 1997; Davies and Haines, 2001; Jones, 1992; Warburton, 2000). Perceived levels of subject knowledge and competence to teach the secondary PE curriculum has also formed the basis of a number of studies (Capel, 2001; Capel and Katene, 2000; Gower and Capel, 2004; Katene and Capel, 2000). Results from these studies suggest that a proportion of trainees possess an inadequate knowledge base and are insecure in their perceived competence to teach the full range of curriculum activity areas. Again one of the six activity areas that students have most frequently highlighted as causing concern is gymnastics. For the majority of PE specialists, gymnastics is one of the most difficult activities to teach (Crutchley, 1985). Trainees often dislike or even fear teaching gymnastics and thus leave college qualified yet ill-equipped to teach gymnastics confidently and effectively (Jackman, 2003).

Perceived demise of gymnastics

A collection of articles (Garner, 1985; Lister, 1985; Neuss, 1985; Williams, 1985) published prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum served to promote the assumption that if positive steps were not taken to revitalize gymnastics in schools then its future was potentially very bleak. This was emphasized through reports such as that by Williams (1985: 17) who noted that, 'by the 1970s it (gymnastics) had been

written off by some as a curriculum activity, although its popularity as a sport had never been greater'. Gymnastics, especially in the male PE curriculum, was tending to lose ground and in some cases phased out as it was either taught not at all or in very small blocks of time. One of the main difficulties found when attempting to rectify the gradual demise of gymnastics was the fact that many of the specialist PE teachers of the time had 'an impoverished school gymnastics background, having been taught by a teaching force substantially lacking the necessary motivation and expertise' (Crutchley, 1985: 31). More recently a number of authors (Cale, 1997; Chedzoy, 2000; Kirk, 1992; Severs, 1999a, 1999b) have all expressed concern at the fact that gymnastics has witnessed a decline in allocated curriculum time and the overall quality of teaching. Again it is a problem that could be addressed through promoting the activity and educating trainees during ITT. One of the main reasons why this often does not happen is the time available to develop subject knowledge. Luke (2003: 27) stresses that in turn this causes a 'major problem in the teaching of gymnastics. However, with time constraints unlikely to disappear, the development of gymnastics in ITT needs to be re-examined.'

Benefits of participating in gymnastics

Despite these concerns Benn and Benn (2000: 36) stress that:

The reality that gymnastics has survived in a core physical education curriculum place for so long suggests that many within the profession are convinced of the value of the activity area as a medium for a worthwhile educational experience in its widest meaning.

Involvement within gymnastics can contribute greatly to the all-round development of a child. It can augment physical and social development (Dickenson, 1985), skilled body management along with an increased level of confidence, performance and individuality (Smith, 1991). It embraces the promotion of intrinsic rewards such as excitement of sport and personal accomplishment as opposed to more extrinsic factors like winning (Goudas and Biddle, 1993). As such it should be placed within the broader context of the PE programme, curriculum and philosophy of schools. The introduction of the NCPE sought to address the issue of a balanced curriculum as it set out to establish a clear, full and statutory entitlement to learning for all pupils (DfEE and QCA, 1999). When it was introduced in 1992, gymnastics was identified as one of the six activity areas designated to be delivered within schools (the other five being dance, games, swimming and water safety, athletics, outdoor and adventurous activities). However, following on from the introduction of the revised NCPE (2000) it has been reported that some schools have

... been slow to modify their planning to address Curriculum 2000 developments. The time allocated to invasion games is sometimes between three and five times that for gymnastics, dance and other aspects that contribute significantly

different skills, knowledge and understanding in the development of pupils' physical competence within the statutory curriculum. This creates a very unbalanced curriculum. (OFSTED, 2001: 4)

Perceptions and attitude towards NCPE activities

Imbalance in curricular planning and delivery can result in school-age pupils becoming reliant on a limited, narrow and basic repertoire of skills within certain activity areas. The nature of the sports in which pupils participate, or do not have the opportunity to participate in, can generate the cultivation of very negative attitudes and perceptions (Cockburn, 2001) towards certain activities that could threaten the future of the PE profession. This has severe ramifications for activities such as gymnastics, in which school age pupils may be 'learning more about what they cannot do than about positive achievement' (Williams and Woodhouse, 1996: 209). The short units of time often allocated to gymnastics within the curriculum can limit the available opportunities to enjoy and build a positive image of the activity. In addition it can inhibit learning and professional development amongst pupils, trainees and qualified teachers alike. Research has shown that the major implication for the development of subject knowledge within ITT is that a large proportion of trainees have little or no previous experience of gymnastics immediately prior to commencement of their training (Capel and Katene, 2000; Crutchley 1985; Hornsby, 2003; Neuss, 1985). Hornsby (2003: 13) summarizes this notion:

For the majority of students, gymnastics is something completely new. Despite the NCPE specifying that pupils should be taught either gymnastics or dance at KS3, there appears to be many schools where this does not happen. Consequently many of the students on the degree courses have little experience from which to draw.

Prior experience of NCPE activities through higher education

Trainees enter PGCE courses with a diverse range of background experiences and subject knowledge gained from personal involvement within sport through roles such as playing, coaching and officiating. Consequently, many do not enter teacher training with secure subject knowledge across all six NCPE activity areas. The normal prerequisite for entry to a postgraduate course is the completion of a prior degree in a relevant subject, for example, sports science. However, as the sports industry sector has continued to grow, the course content of many sports orientated degrees has become increasingly wide-ranging and may not necessarily include reference to areas that are relevant to teaching the NCPE (Griggs and Wheeler, 2005). Previously the content of a first degree should have provided 'the necessary foundation for work as a

teacher in the phases(s) and subject(s) that they are to teach' (DfEE, 1998: 135). A number of authors (Capel, 1995; Gower and Capel, 2004; Katene and Capel, 2000; Kay, 2004; Mawer, 1995a, 1995b; Morgan, 1997) have shown that students enter their teacher training year with varying levels of experience relating to NCPE activity areas gained from their first degree.

The importance of the school experience during teacher training

The time spent on SBE has been identified as one of the most important parts of the teacher training process in relation to the development of subject knowledge (Capel, 1998b, 2003; Lind et al., 2001). Capel (2003: 132) states:

The results of research to date suggest that schools and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) make distinctive and complimentary contributions to supporting students development as teachers, with schools having major responsibility for supporting students' development of practical teaching competence.

Additional research however (Stidder, 2000a, 2000b; Stidder and Hayes, 2002) has served to highlight how trainees do not always have the opportunity to teach and assess pupils across all six activity areas. This is an issue that needs to be addressed within training institutions and partnership schools that are ultimately responsible for the provision of a quality teaching and learning experience. Trainees are now required to spend 24 of the 36 weeks training time actively involved within schools. Research has highlighted that the reduction of time spent within the training institution actually learning to teach the PE curriculum could contribute to concerns and conflict while on SBE. This is due to the fact that 'apprehension is heightened by the fact that trainees feel more vulnerable because of a more limited preparation in the practical activities' (Hardy, 1997: 125). The shift towards 'partnership delivery' has resulted in more power being given to schools, including the major responsibility for mentoring of trainees. Thus teachers, acting as subject mentors, now play a leading role in the professional preparation of trainees to teach their specialist disciplines (Breckon, 2000; Flintoff, 1996; Hardy, 1995a). Kay (2004: 21), however, states that 'present research shows an increasing lack of empathy by some mentors towards some trainee teachers in terms of trainees' perceived lack of subject knowledge'. Direct reference is made to trainees entering their school experience(s) with a distinct lack of understanding of certain games activities and associated rules along with a lack of experience in teaching gymnastics.

Gender

The term gender has been used to 'describe the culturally and socially constructed status and expected behaviour associated with the sex group' (DES, 1991: 57). The concept of gender has been highlighted by a number of authors (Brown and Evans, 2004; Harris, 1993; Hayes and Stidder, 1999; Stidder, 2002a) as having the most

significant influence on the time spent within schools by trainees in relation to the breadth of activity areas that they experience. A study by Stidder and Hayes suggests that:

The range of trainees' teaching experiences on placements was often dictated by the gender of the trainee. For example, many male trainees gained limited experience in teaching dance and team games traditionally associated with female participation such as netball and rounders. (Stidder and Hayes, 2000: 47)

Gymnastics has been traditionally regarded as a 'female'-type activity (Cockburn, 2001) and thus may be excluded from the curriculum within male PE departments. Male trainees are thus potentially disadvantaged in relation to teaching gymnastics upon entry to ITT due to having limited experience of an activity that is strongly associated with the opposite sex (Stidder, 2002b).

Methods

Subjects and procedures

During the 2003/4 academic year, trainees at one British HEI, studying on a one-year secondary PGCE PE course, were administered a questionnaire on two separate occasions during timetabled sessions of their course: (i) in the final third of their first SBE; (ii) upon completion of their second SBE. A total of 30 trainees, 15 male (m) and 15 female (f), were present on both occasions and completed both questionnaires. All 30 entered the course having previously completed a sports orientated first degree. In addition the interview component of the study also involved two experienced PE subject mentors, both of whom have been teaching for over 18 years, from one of the training provider's partnership schools.

Instruments

Two separate questionnaires were designed and entitled 'Gymnastics Research Questionnaire: SBE 1' and 'Gymnastics Research Questionnaire: SBE 2'. Both questionnaires comprised a combination of closed and open type questions. On both occasions the questionnaire was administered during a timetabled session of the course. All trainees were asked to read through and sign an informed consent form prior to completing the questionnaire. This included a description of the rationale behind carrying out the study and a clear outline of when and how the results would be published (it was made clear that they would only be published upon completion of the academic year). It also made clear who would have access to the original data through which respondents might be identified. Trainees were assured anonymity (they were asked to indicate their gender and age range but not their name) and were assigned an identification number in order to encourage the responses made to be as honest as possible. The questionnaires were comprised of a series of questions relating to previous knowledge of gymnastics, opportunities made available to teach gymnastics and

perceived competence and confidence to do so. In addition several questions were based upon the perceived level of professional development arising from (i) tuition received within the HEI and (ii) knowledge gleaned through time spent on SBE under the guidance of a member of the PE staff acting as a subject mentor. Students were placed in a different school for each of the two SBEs. By the end of the course students had completed two separate experiences comprising of a combined total of 120 days spent within schools. Four students ($m = 2$, $f = 2$), all of whom were placed within the same partnership school (two during each school experience block), agreed to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. These interviews were carried out after each trainee had successfully completed the final review stage of the relevant SBE. Two PE subject mentors ($m = 1$, $f = 1$), also from the same partnership school, both agreed to undertake semi-structured interviews and informal discussion relating to the topic under study and subsidiary issues. Interviews with trainees and subject mentors lasted approximately half an hour each and were recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

Numbers and percentages were calculated for the closed type responses generated through the completion of both questionnaires. Open type responses to the questionnaire were grouped into categories according to similarities and compared to the themes that emerged from the literature review. Data from the semi-structured interviews was also analysed in this way in order to highlight emerging patterns and relationships and included to supplement results. In addition a number of direct quotations from individual responses, contained within both the questionnaire and interview transcripts, were included within the text in order to substantiate points made.

Analysis and discussion

Mentor view of trainee subject knowledge

Semi-structured interviews carried out with the two subject mentors supported the importance of subject knowledge in teaching across the NCPE activity areas. Both were in agreement that the majority of trainees that they had supervised had not possessed adequate subject knowledge across all six areas. This is a major issue that needs to be addressed by all partners within the teacher training process. From their experience of mentoring, trainees were generally very confident and competent in their ability to teach games. Gymnastics was one of the activities highlighted as being one of the main areas of weakness in terms of subject knowledge amongst both male and female students.

Trainees' school age experiences of gymnastics

The subject mentors interviewed indicated that one of the reasons that trainees had potentially impoverished gymnastics backgrounds was due to having 'a lack of

exposure to the activity at an early age, for example through primary and secondary school sport' (Male PE Subject Mentor, 36–40). Ninety percent ($m = 13$, $f = 14$) of trainees surveyed had participated in gymnastics when at school, with 48 percent ($m = 7$, $f = 6$) stating that they both enjoyed the activity and were confident in their own performance; 27 percent ($m = 1$, $f = 7$) had developed knowledge of the activity and performance through having been a member of a gymnastics club. In addition all but one of those ($f = 1$) had competed in a gymnastic competition. All four subjects interviewed agreed that early experiences of gymnastics through school and club involvement contributed to both positive and negative views of teaching the activity. To a certain extent this agrees with Morgan et al. (2001: 2) who reported that 'there is a general agreement among educational researchers that pre-service teachers have already formed beliefs about teaching, developed through their life and especially in their personal schooling experiences'. This process of 'occupational socialization' has formed the basis for a number of studies (Matanin and Collier, 2003; Morgan et al., 2002; Schempp and Graber, 1992) which highlight that negative personal schooling experiences have resulted in some trainees entering ITT with less favourable attitudes towards certain activities.

Fifty-two percent ($m = 6$, $f = 8$) stated that they did not enjoy gymnastics and were not confident in their own ability to perform to a satisfactory standard within the activity. This links with research (Cockburn, 2001; Davies and Haines, 2001; Morgan et al., 2002) that suggests that negativity towards both general and specific areas of physical activity and sport is linked to the perceived level of competence experienced by participants. Those who stated that they enjoyed gymnastics when at school commented that this was due to participating in an exciting individual activity in which they were both competent and confident in their own performance. Trainees who indicated that they did not enjoy gymnastics provided a number of explanations. The most common reasons for disliking the activity again centred first upon perceived difficulty in performance and second embarrassment caused by the nature of the activity. This is highlighted through comments made such as:

I did not enjoy it as it involved just travelling and balancing. However I felt that I would struggle to perform any more advanced movements confidently.

(Male Trainee, 21–25)

I found gymnastics very embarrassing due to the fact boys and girls tended to do it together. Also the fact that we had to wear gym knickers. I just was not interested, I would rather have been out on the hockey pitch in a more competitive environment.

(Female Trainee, 21–25)

Undergraduate degrees

All trainees had completed a sports-oriented degree prior to entry to the PGCE course. Seventy-seven percent ($m = 8$, $f = 14$) stated that completion of their courses did entail active participation in practical modules. The central underlying theme of these practical modules tended to be centred upon development of subject knowledge

necessary to teach games. Thirty-three percent ($m = 3$, $f = 7$) had participated in practical modules through their undergraduate degrees, based specifically on developing subject knowledge in gymnastics. None, however, received any sort of formal qualification in teaching gymnastics as a result of engaging in these taught modules. The fact that at least some of the trainees surveyed had developed specific knowledge relating to gymnastics through their initial degrees is positive. However, the fact remains that results continue to support previous research conducted, which suggests that the majority of sports related undergraduate courses do not always enhance practical subject knowledge (Capel, 1995; Capel and Katene, 2000; Gower and Capel, 2004; Katene and Capel, 2000).

Entry to the PGCE course

The subject mentors interviewed agreed that HEIs should exercise greater scrutiny of student applicants' undergraduate degrees and their background experience of PE before admittance to the course. This agrees directly with recommendations made previously (Capel and Katene, 2000; Gower and Capel, 2004; Hardy, 1997; OFSTED, 2005). In addition, the subject mentors suggested that prospective entrants to the course should be required to take responsibility for their own development before embarking on the academic year. One of the subject mentors interviewed supported the inclusion of a practically-based examination within the interview process in order to help potential trainees identify subject knowledge and pedagogical issues that require immediate attention prior to beginning the course. All four trainees interviewed agreed with the notion of the training provider exerting greater scrutiny of previous practical experience. They were wary, however, of going so far as to include a practical examination. The general consensus was that this could prove off putting to potential applicants. One subject interviewed noted:

I think that including a practical exam could provide a very negative feeling towards participation on the course. While it may work in some instances one could merely have a 'bad day' in terms of teaching and potentially be rejected on those grounds. It could in turn encourage some applicants to forget the idea of teaching mainly through the fear of failure. (Subject 2, Female, 21–25)

All subjects also agreed that if such measures were introduced then the training provider would also have to respond to the resultant areas of trainee expertise that were clearly identified as requiring additional attention. This is an important component relating to the inspection process of the quality of provision offered by training institutions. Inspectors evaluate the extent to which providers enable trainees to meet the required standards. One of the evaluation criteria points makes specific reference to 'how the trainers identify trainees' prior experiences, relevant knowledge and understanding and respond to their specific training needs' (OFSTED, 2005: 7).

HEIs and gymnastics provision

Luke (2003: 27) states that, 'trainee teachers often fear teaching gymnastics. It may be that time for specific subject knowledge development is perceived as a key reason for this fear by trainee teachers, teacher mentors and others involved in ITT.' All of the trainees surveyed had participated in gymnastics-oriented practical modules through the HEI based learning component of the course. In addition, the course included provision for all trainees on the course to complete the British Gymnastics Extra Curricular Award (BGECA). This is a certified gymnastics-teaching award and participation on the course was fully financed by the training provider. Funding of such courses designed to enhance subject knowledge and professional development is a very positive indicator of the quality of the course and their commitment to developing competent teachers. Morgan (1997: 33) outlines that, at a time when fees are becoming increasingly prohibitive, the stance of the HEI as provider is essential: 'all ITT students should have access to a range of governing body coaching/teaching courses in order to gain additional qualifications and at minimal financial cost to the students themselves'. The majority of trainees were satisfied with the quality of the gymnastics provision offered through the course, especially the provision made to complete the BGECA. Ninety percent ($m = 13$, $f = 14$) stated that they enjoyed the actual learning involved with teaching gymnastics, which is a hugely positive response. They did, however, suggest that during internally-based gymnastics sessions it would be more realistic to teach groups of children as opposed to peer groups within the class. In addition, several trainees requested that more time be spent on learning to use/organize apparatus, developing vaulting techniques and more advanced floor routines.

Perception of NCPE activity areas

Trainees were asked, using the rank order 1–6, to indicate the order of preference in which they (a) enjoyed teaching the six NCPE activity areas and (b) felt most competent teaching. Seventy-three percent clearly indicated that they most enjoyed ($m = 14$, $f = 8$) and 67 percent felt most competent in ($m = 13$, $f = 7$) teaching games. This does not necessarily mean that trainees are competent in teaching all types of games as the questionnaire asked for a general response and did not identify distinct activities. Athletics proved to be the most common second and third choice of activity which trainees both enjoyed and felt most confident teaching. During both school experiences 100 percent of trainees were given the opportunity to teach games activities. All four subjects interviewed concurred with this finding. An example of the type of comment made during interviews relating to teaching games is as follows:

Teaching games gave me the confidence to develop a host of associated skills such as class management and organization. Due to the fact that I already had a secure knowledge base for a number of games activities I was able to concentrate less

on lesson content and more on planning how the lesson should progress. While this helped immensely in the early stages I do feel in retrospect that I did need more opportunity to teach other areas of the NCPE in which I was much less competent. (Female Subject, 21–25)

Harter's (1981) theory of competence motivation refers to the fact that the quality of an experience is the critical factor in determining perceived competence. Katene and Capel (2000) highlight the fact that SBE content too frequently concentrates on developing subject knowledge within games. This in turn questions the overall effectiveness of ITT in relation to providing a range of quality experiences and thus the development of subject knowledge across the activity areas. As the majority of PE trainees' strengths tend already to relate to games (Capel and Katene, 2000; Hayes and Stidder, 1999; Stidder and Hayes, 2002), more attention needs to be paid to areas such as gymnastics, in which trainees have had limited experience. Previous research has suggested that trainees often do not enjoy teaching gymnastics (Jackman, 2003; Luke, 2003). Indeed, 47 percent ($m = 9$, $f = 5$) indicated that gymnastics was only the fifth choice activity that they enjoyed teaching. It was, however, chosen by 10 percent of trainees ($m = 1$, $f = 2$) as the activity which they most enjoyed teaching. Examples of comments made through the questionnaires outlining why trainees enjoy teaching gymnastics were:

Teaching gymnastics was more enjoyable than I expected. It seemed easy to teach with good class management and provided great opportunities for pupil development through guided discovery. (Female Trainee, 21–25)

Gymnastics provides opportunities for pupils to develop their aesthetic appreciation. It allows for both command and guided discovery teaching styles to be combined and used in order to promote an exciting and vibrant learning experience. (Male Trainee, 21–25)

Almost half the number surveyed ranked gymnastics in the top three activities which they enjoyed teaching. This again provides a more positive indicator towards the position of gymnastics within future PE curricula. This point is strengthened further by the fact that 90 percent ($m = 14$, $f = 13$) of trainees stated that they would include at least some gymnastics if in the future they are responsible for organizing planned activities within a school. Even more positive is the fact that 60 percent ($m = 10$, $f = 8$) of trainees view gymnastics as being a neutral type activity in relation to its gender stereotype.

Trainees' views on the benefits of gymnastics to the curriculum

Those surveyed presented a range of responses as to what they felt were the benefits of gymnastics within the curriculum. All responses were in line with research performed in this area (Benn and Benn, 2000; Hall, 1996; Jackman, 2003; Severs,

1999a, 1999b) as to the benefits of gymnastics to the development of the 'whole' child. Examples of comments made by trainees were:

Gymnastics allows for wide-ranging development of physical qualities and skills such as balance and coordination that can be applied to other activities and areas of life. (Male Trainee, 21–25)

Gymnastics allows for an increased level of creativity within a group. It promotes a greater degree of individual and group assessment through peer observation. It helps to enable pupils to perform at a level at which they feel comfortable and encourages them to be unique. (Female Trainee, 21–25)

Opportunity for trainees to observe gymnastics being taught

Observation of experienced teachers delivering lessons is an essential part of learning within ITT (Breckon, 2000). Over the two separate school experiences the majority of trainees were given the opportunity to observe gymnastics being taught: 80 percent ($m=13$, $f=11$) surveyed observed Year 7 gymnastics being taught, decreasing to 53 percent ($m=6$, $f=9$) in relation to Year 8 classes. The number of trainees who observed Year 9 gymnastics lessons shows a significant decrease, with only 20 percent ($m=3$, $f=3$) being given the opportunity to do so. None of the trainees surveyed were able to observe any Year 10 or 11 gymnastics lessons during their first SBE. This in turn suggests a lack of KS4 gymnastics being taught in the partnership schools linked with the training provider involved within the study. When interviewed both subject mentors agreed that the level of gymnastics provision within their own school curriculum is satisfactory at KS3 but requires attention at KS4. A number of trainees chose to emphasize the importance of being able to observe and share teach lessons. Examples of comments made justifying the process of observation are:

Observing experienced teachers helps you see how to structure, organise and deliver lessons. It enables you see how skills are taught and broken down to make easier. (Male Trainee, 21–25)

Observing lessons helps to build your confidence especially when watching activities that you are unsure about teaching. (Female Trainee, 21–25)

Planning gymnastics lessons

Trainees who were less confident in their ability to teach gymnastics generally felt they were restricted in terms of content when planning lessons. Trainees perceived themselves to be at least of average confidence and competence when planning gymnastics lessons for low ability pupils but 53 percent ($m=7$, $f=9$) indicated that they were not confident in their ability to plan more advanced lessons for gifted and talented pupils. This was also the case in relation to planning lessons involving special

needs or disabled pupils. Trainees highlighted the need for greater emphasis to be placed upon developing knowledge based on differentiation and inclusion within gymnastics within both university based sessions and the SBE component. The main source of gymnastics related concern reported in published literature centres upon the issue of safety surrounding the activity (Capel, 1996, 1998; Crutchley, 1985; Davies and Haines, 2001; Hall, 1996; Neuss, 1985; Williams, 1998). Ninety-three percent ($m = 14$, $f = 14$) of the trainees surveyed highlighted knowledge of health and safety issues as the main cause of concern in planning for gymnastics lessons. This also contributed to the perceived confidence in planning quality and safe gymnastics lessons. Only 13 percent ($m = 2$, $f = 2$) felt very confident in their ability to structure quality lessons. This left an equal split of those who felt fairly confident ($m = 7$, $f = 6$) and of average confidence ($m = 6$, $f = 7$) in terms of planning and safety. The competency to provide adequate visual demonstrations of the skill or movement to be performed was also highlighted as a primary area of concern. Upon completion of their first SBE, 20 percent ($m = 4$, $f = 2$) felt that they were competent enough to perform all necessary demonstrations during lessons with a further 40 percent ($m = 4$, $f = 8$) demonstrating some of the time. The remaining 40 percent ($m = 7$, $f = 5$) did not feel that they had the competency to demonstrate on a regular basis. Instead they tended to demonstrate more simple movements and relied on more able pupils within the teaching group to perform more complex actions. This would suggest that HEI based sessions should place more emphasis on teaching trainees to break down more complex movements.

Teaching gymnastics

Previous studies have found that the range of activities experienced by trainees while on SBE is often influenced by gender (Capel and Katene, 2000; Stidder, 2002a; Stidder and Hayes, 2002). However, in this case 80 percent of the male trainees had been given the opportunity to teach gymnastics and therefore an activity that has traditionally been associated with the opposite sex (Cockburn, 2001). This would suggest that these male trainees were not at a disadvantage during ITT in relation to the opportunity to teach gymnastics. Additional detailed research is required to determine whether this would remain the same for other stereotypical feminine type activities such as dance. By the end of the second school experience 83 percent ($m = 12$, $f = 13$) of trainees had been given the opportunity to teach at least some gymnastics, although the number of lessons across different year groups varied. None had the opportunity to solo teach gymnastics lessons to Year 10 and 11 PE groups. This subsequent lack of KS4 gymnastics experience is an area that requires further research in order to explore the rationale of why many schools tend to exclude it with older pupils. Examples of comments made by the trainees interviewed were:

Younger pupils did not seem to mind participating in gymnastics. However, as you taught the older age-groups they demonstrated much more enthusiasm towards games activities and almost none towards gymnastics. (Female Subject, 21–25)

Gymnastics was not one of the activities included within the GCSE PE activity areas studied. This was because the pupils get marked on their practical abilities and it was felt that the time would be better of spent on improving performance in other individual and team activities. (Male Subject, 21–25)

The fact that none of the trainees were given the opportunity to teach any form of gymnastics to Year 10 or 11 PE groups is a concern that has been raised in previous research (Hayes and Stidder, 1999; Stidder and Hayes, 2002). Hayes and Stidder (1999: 31) state that,

... it would appear that trainees have limited teaching experience at KS4. Is the training process guilty of producing only NQTs experienced at teaching KS3 education and even then, only in certain activity areas? If this is the case nationally, then this raises some concerns with regards to trainees' ability to meet the needs of pupils in their first year of teaching.

The majority of lessons taught to Year 7 PE groups comprised of floor-work such as balancing, travelling and creating sequences. Only 17 percent ($m = 3, f = 2$) taught flight to Year 7 PE groups. A similar trend existed in terms of the lesson content taught to Year 8 PE groups. Trainees indicated that lesson content comprised mainly of developing floor-work and the other associated disciplines. Only 20 percent ($m = 2, f = 4$) mentioned using apparatus within lessons. This indicates that the trainees participating in this study potentially gained only a narrow insight to teaching gymnastics through their school experience. Only 17 percent ($m = 3, f = 2$) were given the opportunity to contribute to extracurricular gymnastics sessions over the two school experiences. The remainder of trainees participated in mostly games orientated extracurricular activities. Extracurricular gymnastics is an additional area that should be developed in order to promote learning among both pupils and teachers (Cale, 2000).

Gymnastics lesson content

In relation to the teaching of different aspects of gymnastics, the vast majority of trainees indicated that they viewed themselves as very confident and technically able to teach lessons surrounding floor-work themes. This is another positive theme to emerge as, to a certain extent, it questions the notion that trainees dislike or indeed fear teaching gymnastics (Crutchley, 1985; Jackman, 2003). Those who were less confident in their perceived ability to teach floor-work again raised the issue of lacking the competency to provide consistently good-quality demonstrations as the reason for viewing themselves as this. All those surveyed indicated a high level of perceived competence towards performing movements such as forward and backward rolls. As the sample were asked about more complex movements, however, the responses became more varied. While 60 percent ($m = 11, f = 7$) felt very or fairly able to perform a headstand, 40 percent ($m = 4, f = 8$) were not at all confident. A distinct perceived lack of competency was also apparent towards the inclusion of handstands,

with 46 percent ($m = 11$, $f = 3$) indicating that they possessed less than average confidence in performing this movement. Trainees were generally less confident in their perceived competence to teach flight-orientated gymnastics lessons involving apparatus. Over half the sample ($m = 6$, $f = 11$) indicated that they were not confident of teaching vaulting. This included the provision of demonstrations with 77 percent ($m = 10$, $f = 13$) stating that they are not confident in performing a hand-spring vault. This provides further support for the need to develop both confidence and competence among students towards more advanced movements in gymnastics.

Audit of NCPE activity areas covered

Hayes and Stidder (1999: 32) recommend:

The placement of trainees in terms of progression of practice needs some attention. It would be beneficial to look at what the trainees' taught in their first placement in relation to NC areas of study and then ensure that the second placement covered areas that the trainee had little experience in, thus ensuring a breadth of experiences.

During the interim period between school experiences trainees were required by the training provider to complete and forward an audit to their second SBE institution. This was designed to highlight areas of strength and those that required additional attention. Fifty-seven percent ($m = 9$, $f = 8$) included gymnastics in their audit as an area for development. Less than half this group ($m = 4$, $f = 3$) were actually given the opportunity to teach gymnastics during their second school experience. Other areas included within the audit were mostly specific games activities and GCSE/A-Level-related. The majority of these were targeted for development during the second SBE. Gymnastics was the most common exception, although a likely explanation is due to the time of year when other activities are normally targeted. Specific comments made as to why gymnastics was not included on their timetable during their second scheduled placement included:

Gymnastics was taught within the curriculum between September and February before I arrived. Therefore no provision was made due to the fact pupils had already covered it. (Female Trainee, 26–30)

Different activities were included on the curriculum during spring/summer terms. In addition the gym was not accessible during summer term as it was used as an exam area and was filled with desks. (Male Trainee, 21–25)

Workload associated with the PGCE course

Hardy (1997: 121) states that 'Institutional demands and expectations placed on pre-service teachers often resulted in their being pulled in opposite directions'. Student concerns about the amount of paperwork to be completed have been reported by a

number of authors (Capel, 1996; Hardy, 1997; Kay, 2004; Mawer, 1995). Seventy-seven percent ($m = 13$, $f = 11$) of trainees agreed that the amount of paperwork to be completed throughout the year detracted from the development of practical subject knowledge. Throughout the duration of the course pupils were expected to compile and maintain comprehensive files in order to evidence the standards required to meet QTS. Observation of all four subjects working within the PE office indicated a large percentage of time dedicated to maintaining files and portfolios. In addition students were required to complete three 3000-word assignments throughout the course of the year and successfully complete skills tests in maths, english and information communications technology. All four subjects interviewed agreed that the amount of paperwork required to be completed and submitted was very time-consuming, especially during the second SBE. In addition they highlighted the usefulness of maintaining their teaching file and stressed that it would prove to be a useful resource to reference in the future. One subject stated:

One way of making the workload more manageable was to work together and pool resources. I did this through sharing units of work and lessons plans with other friends from the course. A group of us would get together and determine who would outline which units of work. We would then meet again at a later stage and copy the units for each other. (Male Subject, 21–25)

While this clearly highlights the advantages of networking, the solution may not be accessible to all students on the course. One suggestion would be to schedule organized HEI sessions to enable students to disseminate information amongst themselves. Alternatively, students could submit specific units of work that could be photocopied and placed on the internal network for students to access and print. Seminar groups could also be organized in order to present views on topics such as unit content, ways to improve content and different teaching styles to adopt. This in itself would promote generic discussion in relation to current topical issues within PE and wider teaching circles within teacher training. In relation to the other items of paperwork to be completed, respondents reported concerns about the level of duplication of information that seemed to occur. This was most commonly highlighted when completing lesson evaluations that were required for each lesson taught.

Mentoring

Support from subject mentors within school was highlighted as the key component to developing subject knowledge during the SBE section of the course. All four subjects interviewed stated that they were satisfied with the level of mentoring they had received. Several others, however, indicated through the questionnaires that they felt that they received a lack of support from their mentors. Common issues highlighted by trainees in relation to this topic included a lack of informal and formal observations being carried out, limited verbal and/or written feedback and little

intervention to lesson planning/organization. Examples of specific comments through the questionnaires were:

At times I felt very isolated within my placement school. It was a busy department and it often seemed that there was no time to deal with my concerns.

(Male Trainee, 21–25)

My subject mentor also had a variety of other formal roles within the school. This meant that he very rarely was able to schedule specific times to sit down and discuss things with me as things kept cropping up.

(Female Trainee, 21–25)

During the first school experience only 20 percent ($m = 5$, $f = 1$) indicated that specific time was allocated for mentoring in gymnastics activities. As this is an activity area that is constantly highlighted as being a source of concern, HEIs need to encourage mentors during training sessions to schedule sessions in order to develop it. During the second SBE, 80 percent ($m = 12$, $f = 12$) indicated that no specific mentor time was dedicated to developing subject knowledge within any activity areas. As trainees often view asking for help as a sign of weakness (Hardy, 1995b, 1996) the area of providing specific mentor support time needs to be addressed, possibly through additional training. Hardy (1997: 123) provides support for this factor, stating that ‘the more staff trained and involved in the mentoring process, the more likelihood there is of pre-service teachers being provided with a supportive environment’.

When interviewed both PE subject mentors agreed that additional training is essential for mentors involved with the teacher training process, not just in relation to gymnastics but also other areas. One comment made suggested that,

An audit be carried out by the University of mentor areas of strength and perceived areas for further development. This could also aid in the placement of pre-service physical education teachers according to their areas of need of development.

(Female PE Subject Mentor, 36–40)

However, they also agreed that such a move could cause resentment amongst mentors, along with unwillingness to commit to the ITT process as well as additional costs and organizational problems for the training provider. A further suggestion was made by one of the subject mentors that would seem a viable solution. It would entail,

... [c]lusters of partnership schools trying to group together to deliver mentor sessions to those PE students within these schools together. Thus mentors from those schools could deliver model lessons and offer advice to students on activity areas in which they are particularly strong. Students can then return to their original school and deliver lessons to gain the necessary practical experience.

(Male PE Subject Mentor, 36–40)

Again, problems were highlighted such as the logistics and costs behind organizing such sessions due to mentor timetables, differences in school timings and willingness of mentors to be observed by ‘outsiders’. It is, however, a potentially very valuable

learning exercise and should be explored further. Another option would be to invite mentors (and perhaps pupils from the schools) to the HEI to help deliver the practical based sessions (with the latter providing the necessary cover costs).

Conclusion

Results from the study do largely support available research that highlights the teaching of gymnastics as a source of concern among PE trainees. It should be noted, however, that findings are based on a sample of students from one HEI training partnership only and further research needs to be carried out in this area. More emphasis needs to be placed upon providing the opportunity for trainees to develop subject knowledge in areas of perceived weakness during the school experience component of the course. This includes building upon knowledge that they have gained through university based sessions.

The results indicate that both the training provider and partnership schools do provide opportunities for students to develop gymnastics knowledge, although this is mainly confined to KS3 level. Being given the opportunity to teach gymnastics at KS4 level is an area that should be addressed, although trainees must also take responsibility for their own personal development. They need to contribute to the training process by clearly identifying areas in which they perceive themselves to be less confident and competent. One method of doing so is through the audit process that should be acted upon more diligently by trainee, training provider and partnership schools alike. While the results show that trainees are generally confident about teaching gymnastics, a large percentage are shown to not enjoy teaching the activity, thus creating a prominent imbalance between the two categories of response.

Enjoyment of teaching the activity is a critical component implicit in its promotion as a valued contributor to the curriculum. It is necessary to make the activity both attractive and enjoyable for the pupils involved. This is equally important for younger pupils in order to encourage them to enter the activity and among older pupils so as to retain interest within the sport. It is imperative that this issue is addressed, by both experienced PE teachers and trainees, in order to aid the continued regeneration of gymnastics within schools today.

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Résumé

Enquête sur le niveau ressenti de sa connaissance de l'activité et de sa compétence chez les futurs enseignants d'éducation physique dans l'enseignement de la gymnastique dans le secondaire.

Le futur de l'Éducation Physique (EP) dépend de la qualité de l'implication des nouveaux venus dans la profession et de leur capacité à enseigner dans les différents domaines d'activités rassemblés dans le programme, National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE). C'est un rôle qui requiert une connaissance exhaustive de l'activité et une compétence reconnue dans la capacité à l'utiliser efficacement. La connaissance de l'activité est identifiée comme un des pré-requis professionnels pour les étudiants souhaitant atteindre le Statut de Professeur Qualifié (QTS). C'est cependant un domaine fréquemment mis en avant par les étudiants comme la préoccupation principale tout au long de la Formation Initiale à l'Enseignement. Ceci peut tout à tour modifier leur estime de soi et la perception de leur compétence à enseigner certaines activités. Un des domaines d'activités constamment mis en avant comme source d'inquiétude chez les futurs enseignants d'EPS est la gymnastique. Ceci est souvent attribué au fait que de nombreux stagiaires entrent en formation avec un déficit de connaissances dans ce domaine. Le but de cette étude était d'examiner le niveau perçu de sa connaissance de l'activité et de sa compétence personnelles à enseigner la gymnastique chez des stagiaires

Resumen

Una investigación sobre el nivel percibido de conocimiento de la materia y competencia de profesores de Educación Física en prácticas hacia la enseñanza de la gimnasia en la escuela secundaria.

El futuro de la Educación Física depende de la calidad del compromiso de los profesionales y de sus habilidades para enseñar a través de las diferentes áreas de actividad presentes en el Currículo Nacional de Educación Física (NCPE). Es una tarea que requiere un amplio conocimiento de la materia y de una clara percepción de competencia respecto de la

habilidad para utilizarlo de forma efectiva. El conocimiento de la materia está identificado por los estudiantes como uno de los estándares profesionales por alcanzar en la consecución del Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Es un aspecto frecuentemente destacado por los estudiantes como fuente principal de interés durante el proceso de su 'Formación Inicial como Enseñantes' (ITT) que puede afectar la confianza y la competencia percibida por los propios estudiantes para enseñar ciertas actividades. Una de las áreas frecuentemente señaladas como centro de interés por parte de los estudiantes en prácticas, es la gimnasia. En la mayoría de los casos, dicho interés es atribuido al hecho de que muchos aprendices entran en la ITT con un nivel deficiente de formación en esta área. El propósito de este estudio fue examinar el nivel percibido del conocimiento personal de la materia y de la competencia para enseñar gimnasia por parte de los aprendices que cursan la School Based Experience (SBE), secciones anuales del Certificado de Postgrado en Educación (PGCE) del curso Educación Física.

Zusammenfassung

Eine Untersuchung der Wahrnehmung des Niveaus des persönlichen Fachwissens und der Kompetenz von zukünftigen Sportlehrern beim Gymnastik-Unterricht an der Mittelstufe

Die Zukunft des Sportunterrichts hängt von zwei Faktoren ab: Der Qualität der engagierten Fachkräfte und ihrer Fähigkeit in den verschiedenen Sportfeldern (zusammengefasst im 'National Curriculumm for Physical Education – kurz: NCPE) zu unterrichten. Es ist eine Funktion, in der besondere Fachkenntnisse und wahrgenommene Kompetenzen benötigt werden, um das Fachwissen effektiv zu nutzen.

Fachwissen ist eins der professionellen Standards, die Studenten sich aneignen müssen, um den 'Award of Qualified Teacher Status' (QTS) zu erreichen.

Es ist ein Bereich, der regelmässig von Studenten als Hauptursache für Besorgnis im Grundstudium hervorgehoben wird. Dies kann wiederum das persönlich wahrgenommene Vertrauen und die Kompetenz der Studenten in ihrer Lehrtätigkeit bestimmter Übungen beeinflussen. Eins der Aktivitätsbereiche, der immer wieder als Ursache für Besorgnis von Studenten, die kurz vor dem Abschluss sind, hervorgehoben wird, ist Gymnastik. Dies wird häufig damit verbunden, dass viele Sportstudenten mit einem geringen Hintergrund in diesem Bereich ihr Studium beginnen. Der Zweck der Studie war es, den wahrgenommenen Level der persönlichen Fachkenntnis und Kompetenz zur Lehre von Gymnastik bei Referendaren zu untersuchen, die die Sektion 'School Based Experience' (SBE) Sektion eines 'Secondary Post-Graduate Certificate in Education' (PGCE) im zweiten Jahr absolviert haben.

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