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Student experiences of learning how to teach primary physical education during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a snapshot into the unexpected and yet positive results of a small-scale survey about learning to teach Physical Education within initial teacher education and school-based settings. It shares data from four institutions about how pre-service teachers explained their learning and teaching experiences within Physical Education during the COVID-19 pandemic, often working within a number of social and physical restrictions and teaching within enforced bubbles.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Primary Physical Education; COVID-19; initial teacher education; pre-service teachers

Introduction

Early in 2020, universities across the United Kingdom (UK) and globally were required to close their doors and cease face-to-face teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a difficult time for schools, with many closed to the majority of pupils and with rapid adjustments being made to create 'bubbled' spaces that reduce physical and social interaction. Such disruption had an immediate impact upon how initial teacher education (ITE) providers were able to work with pre-service teachers (PSTs) in Physical Education (PE).

Prior to the pandemic, research highlighted that many primary school teachers had low confidence and poor knowledge and understanding of teaching PE (Harris, Cale, and Musson 2012). This has been due, in part, from limited time allocated to PE during the ITE phase (Griggs 2015). Further compounding the issue over the last decade, has been additional government investment into primary PE and sport, totalling over £2 billion, which has enabled schools to 'outsource' the delivery of PE lessons (Randall and Griggs 2021), thwarting the teacher and ITE student, of this opportunity. However, COVID-19 disrupted this practice, as many schools had to cease external providers from entering the school to prevent school 'bubbles' from bursting. With the importance of physical health and wellbeing becoming a key priority during the pandemic, alongside an encouragement to use outdoor spaces, PE ITE was well positioned to embrace change.

The study

The aim of the study was to explore primary education PSTs' experiences of learning to teach PE during the 2020–21 academic year. During this period, COVID-19 public health

and social measures were in place across all education settings. Final year students on a primary PGCE course, from four institutions in England, were invited to complete an online survey (JISC online surveys). Fifty-three students responded to the survey, 46 of whom were on a generalist pathway and 7 were on a specialism pathway.

The survey sought information particularly on perceived confidence and knowledge to teach the subject at the end of their ITE programme. This study was conducted as a pilot for a larger study, aiming to explore how ITE providers may need to develop and strengthen their programme delivery in response to COVID-19. The survey included closed and open questions to allow respondents the opportunity to provide additional information about their experiences that may not have been anticipated by the research team. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of each participating institution.

Findings and discussion

The findings show that for the majority of participants, there were good opportunities to engage with PE as part of the ITE programme. Over 80% of participants received more than 5 hours of taught input for PE over the course of the year. While the very nature of PE requires PSTs to engage in practical, theoretical and physical-based learning environments, these findings demonstrate that the ITE providers in this study showed flexibility and adaptability to include a range of blended learning approaches, including face-to-face and online lectures and practical face-to-face (COVID-19 secure) sessions. The experience of school-based training was also positive, with 91% of participants reporting teaching PE when on school placement, ranging from 4 to 17 weeks in duration. Those who were unable to teach reported that this was due to outside providers coming into the school or COVID-19 restrictions. Participants further shared that they taught a range of activities for PE including athletics, games, gymnastics, dance and fundamental movement skills.

Positively, at the end of their studies, over 75% of participants had confidence in their ability to teach PE and 89% of participants felt that they had developed sufficient knowledge and experience to teach PE. This is seen as a positive improvement in experiences from pre-COVID restrictions, where a comparatively larger proportion of PSTs reported that they were low in confidence and understanding to teach the subject after completing their ITE course (Harris, Cale, and Musson 2012). It is hard to unpick whether this is a result of the opportunities in school to observe and teach PE or the blended approach to learning (virtual and face-to-face) provided by the ITE provider, so further exploration is warranted to better understand the mechanisms that shape this. To further prepare for teaching PE in the future, some participants suggested that they would have benefited from more face-to-face sessions, which suggests that although COVID-19 resulted in some positive changes (such as increased opportunities for students to teach and observe PE in schools), there is also a need to return to face-to-face sessions rather than an online delivery method.

Conclusion

The study has provided preliminary insights into learning to teach primary PE during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that there were increased opportunities for ITE students to teach PE with the positive outcome of greater confidence and understanding of the subject. This was despite the numerous challenges faced by education providers

during this time. These welcome findings to address historic issues around primary PST confidence and competence in PE.

From this initial study, it is simply recommended that ITE students are afforded opportunities to teach PE when in school. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an unprecedented situation which has enabled primary PSTs to teach PE, typically in the absence of external providers. Such opportunities have the potential to empower more PSTs to 'give PE a go'. A lack of opportunity may have been the single biggest factor leading to the confidence deficit amongst the primary PE teaching profession.

A further larger scale study will be carried out in the academic year of 2021–22 to ascertain if this pattern of primary PE experience continues, or if there will be a return to pre-COVID engagement. The study demonstrated that the survey was a valid instrument for collecting data from a dispersed population; particularly as we aim to upscale the study to more ITE providers across the UK. However, further contextual questions would need to be added to standardise patterns of practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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