



## Entering secondary physical education student-teachers' expectations of their program of initial teacher education

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**Abstract:** The views and beliefs held by entering student teachers can be shaped by their expectations of teaching and initial teacher education. Whilst interest has investigated student teachers' expectations little exists in physical education. This qualitative paper examines the entering expectations held by 24 PGCE secondary physical education student teachers. Informed by the published literature on student teacher expectations and the specific purposes of this study, data were collected from participants on the first day of their initial teacher education course in the form of an open-ended survey that included eleven items. Participants discussed a range of expectations related to course content, pedagogy, course structure and staffing responsibilities and contributions. Student teachers should be encouraged to explore their expectations and consider which specific elements align with initial preconceptions concerning their teacher education.

**Key Words:** Physical Education, Student Teachers, Expectations.



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## 1. Introduction

Few would disagree the quality of teachers is a significant feature of any successful education system [1, 2]. Teacher educators have an important role in the professional development of pre-and in-service teachers [3], and improving teacher education has, in many countries, been a significant strategy within government policy aimed at school reform and the re-shaping of teachers' work [4, 5]. Many countries have witnessed a shift to greater school-based teacher education and the establishment of more formalized relationships between teacher education programs and schools. In England the government's White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' was a landmark in the move to involve schools more in teacher preparation [6]. In time, a more schools-led/employment led model based upon a 'craft orientation' has become the dominant form [7] and led to a reduction in both the role of universities and the time student teachers spend on a campus [8]. Within their international

review on teacher education quality Bills, [9] reported the widely held view that effective partnership between higher education institutions and schools was paramount to the quality of pre-service teacher preparation.

Whilst the typical components of an initial teacher education program include university-based work, field experiences and placement teaching, there is general consensus student teachers regard school experience the most important element [8, 10-12]. For many, placement is the dominant influence on developing classroom practice, and the degree of transfer from teacher education to placement teaching is considered by some to be minimal [13]. Indeed reviews suggest beliefs and practices around teaching are quite difficult to change [14, 15, 16] stated: "The extent to which initial teacher education programs can impact on student-teachers' beliefs and hence their classroom practices is a concern in teacher education" (p 320).

#### *Student teachers' prior experiences and expectations*

In general, beginning teachers' beliefs and values are shaped by what they bring to initial teacher education that can include prior conceptions and expectations about teaching [14, 17]. An understanding of student teachers' initial positions on and expectations of initial teacher education has emerged and is seen as essential to unearthing the content of pre-existing ideas about teaching, learning and Schooling [18, 19, 20]. Research on expectations held by student teachers about to embark on initial teacher preparation has been undertaken [18, 21] employed post-course interviews with student teachers, reporting many had entered with "...an apprenticeship orientation to their own learning of teaching..." (p.1). Using interviews [22] revealed student teachers placed considerable importance on the observation of experienced teachers deeming learning to teach would take place as a consequence of making mistakes [19] offered a retrospective account of the views and positions held by a number of student teachers prior to undertaking their initial teacher education program. Participants valued the following course elements: a) that other professionals watch their lessons and provide feedback, b) watching experienced teachers teach,

and, c) engaging in the study of how children learn. Research on student teacher expectations has also employed historical accounts gathered at the conclusion of initial teacher education [19]. One limitation is that the accuracy of student recollection might be questionable, as perceptions may have been influenced by interim experiences. [23] stated; "...we need to know more about the type of expectations students hold at the start of their PGCE course, and the extent to which these may change in the light of their subsequent experiences" (p.1247).

## **2. Acculturation in physical education**

Research in physical education and physical education teacher education has revealed socialization offers a theoretical framework, to help explain how teachers learn to teach [24-26]. This framework outlines a range of socializing factors that, at first, influence an individual to enter physical education and, in time impacts their actions and perceptions as teachers. Lawson's research revealed three forms of socialization. Of relevance to this paper, 'acculturation' refers to the physical education and sport-related experiences gained in early childhood and adolescence both in and out of school. Acculturation also concerns factors informing entering student teachers' appeal to teaching and their beliefs about the nature of physical education and its purposes [27-29]. Outcomes from reviews and research indicate these perspectives are shaped some considerable time before recruitment into teacher education [30-32]. This can lead to pedagogical models student teachers themselves experienced as pupils being replicated in their own teaching. More specifically the influence of physical education teacher education on some student teachers' beliefs has also been deemed by a number of scholars as 'weak' [29, 33-36].

This period prior to beginning initial education is quite likely a source of the expectations of the programs on which prospective physical education student teachers are about to embark. Both [37, 38] have argued the views entering physical education student teachers hold do need to be unearthed and considered if programs are going to impact upon their perspectives on teaching,

learning and schooling. O'Sullivan sets out some key questions, which might be posed in order to reveal the expectations student teachers might hold. These relate to the scope of physical education teacher education, the place of the essential content within the program, and the sequence of the constituent parts of the course provision [university-based lectures & practical work, field experiences, and periods of extended student teaching]. Expectations in relation to these questions formed part of the data collection in this study.

This paper examines the entering expectations of initial teacher education held by a cohort of physical education student teachers on a one-year postgraduate course. The paper focussed on students' entering positions on; a) the scope of initial teacher education and the essential content, b) how parts of the course are expected to be taught, c) expectations of the role of the university tutor, d) expectations as to the purpose of the university-based component, and, e) expectations of the place of school experience.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Participants and Setting

Twenty-four secondary physical education student teachers [13 male 11 female] participated in the study. They were enrolled in a 36-week postgraduate certificate of education [PGCE] course at a large university in the southern half of England. Students on a PGCE spend two thirds of their initial teacher education in the school setting with the remainder of the course engaged in university-based work.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

Informed by the published literature on student teacher expectations [19, 23] and the specific purposes of this study, data were collected from participants in the form of an open-ended survey that included eleven items. These items were distributed to student teachers on the first afternoon of their programme following a general morning induction. The items appear in Appendix 1.

Internal approval to undertake this research was sought and granted by the university and informed consent obtained from all participants prior to completing the survey.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

The initial phase of data analysis commenced by examining data collected from each student teacher for each item. This involved reading and re-reading individual responses to identify and highlight significant comments and themes or constructs. All data were coded and categorized using analytic induction and constant comparison [39, 40], where pieces of evidence in one survey were cross-checked with evidence in other surveys. Negative case analysis served to disconfirm instances and this was employed to either refine or revise potential themes [40]. Based on this process data analysis revealed six themes that these student teachers deemed to be significant.

### 4. Findings

The student teachers' expectations are organised and presented around the following themes: a) Being shown; b) Guide, mentor & advisor; c) Addressing concerns and expecting (some) failure; d) Learning actively; e) Maximise (real) time in schools, and, f) Steep learning curve.

#### 4.1 Being shown

There was a strong emphasis on 'being shown' in responses. Over half expected to be shown the most appropriate teaching strategies to teach the curriculum in physical education, which they typically conceptualized as learning, in a practical context, the appropriate skills and drills to then use in their teaching in the school setting. A sense of needing to know everything was evident, and many also expected the course to demonstrate what was required to be successful when teaching in the classroom:

"...it [initial teacher education programme] will teach me everything I need to become a good PE teacher".

"...to give us the tools to be able to teach well"

Student teachers expected to be shown how to manage a classroom, how to maintain appropriate pupil behavior and how to teach physical education content in a safe manner. All believed this 'showing' would mostly take place in the school under the supervision of qualified secondary physical education teachers. Student teachers set out their expectations of the practical sessions at the university in terms of content and pedagogy:

"...go over the basics...demo of skills and drills" "...how to teach specific skills"

"...have a quick recap of the main sports and teaching techniques in terms of drills and practices"

"...do drills to be used in the classroom"

While some mention was made of having opportunities to contribute to these sessions, there was general agreement the university tutor would lead this work. In reference to the practical elements, only one student expected to be shown; "...research on new ed (ucational) thinking and theories".

#### **4.2 Guide, mentor, advisor**

Occasional mention was made of university tutors being expected to: "...oversee the successful running of the course" and "...to be highly professional", practically all student teachers described their entering expectations of the university tutor in pastoral terms.

For some, university tutors were; "...mentors more than lecturers", who were expected to guide them through the course. Furthermore, tutors were expected to be approachable, a source of continuous support, to be available when needed, and to be able to answer questions and deal with any problems student teachers might encounter. Very few made reference to the contributions university tutors might make given their knowledge of teaching, learning and curriculum, their qualifications in physical education or previous teaching experience. Furthermore, no mention was made of university tutors modelling new educational and/or curricular ideas.

#### **4.3 Addressing concerns, expecting (some) failure**

The majority of student teachers expected the essential content of university-based lectures to address classroom management, pupil behaviour, lesson planning, and the wider role of schools. A major concern was perceived limitations in subject knowledge. Student teachers expected to spend time addressing these weaknesses, typically expressed as areas of activity [e.g. gymnastics, dance. outdoor and adventurous activities]. As a consequence, many expected not to spend time in content areas they claimed to have sound knowledge and/or were those where they had previous instructional experience.

Responses from many predicted some failure in initial efforts to teach physical education lessons in school. Failure was seen as inevitable, but at the same time considered desirable. There was much agreement learning to teach would be as "....a consequence of trial and error".

#### **4.4 Learning actively**

Student teachers expected the 'pedagogy' of university-based theory sessions to be student-centred. Respondents anticipated previous experience would be acknowledged, that learning would be active, and the use of lecture would be kept to a minimum.

Sessions that were interactive and which would include in-class discussion opportunities and group/cooperative tasks were predicted but that there should be some; "...time to learn independently". It was expected theory-practice links would be made across sessions to illustrate how teaching strategies and approaches might be introduced into the school context and "...irrelevant knowledge" avoided. Students were mostly of the opinion university-based sessions should not "...include anything that would normally be covered in school", although they did not indicate what that content might be and what might be irrelevant! Regarding what should not be included in their PGCE physical education course, nearly all claimed to not know at this point in time.



#### 4.5 Maximize (real) time in schools

Student teachers expected to spend most of their time in school working with children and learning from experienced teachers by observing, as one stated, "...as much realistic practice and practical lessons as possible". The school is where student teachers expected to learn to teach; "...on the job" and that responses indicated a desire for real experiences through trying out some teaching quite quickly. One student teacher offered the following comment;

We should not just sit in a room talking about PE. I appreciate that we need to learn the theoretical side of PE ... I believe in getting out there and doing it.

The experiences they expected to encounter were deemed, "...training for the real thing" and this comprised observing, helping out, teaching and receiving feedback. The majority view was that school was where to "...find out what works or does not work".

#### 4.6 Steep learning curve

Considered a potentially difficult period and likely to be "...chaotic to begin with", student teaching for many was anticipated to be: "hard work", "tough", "hectic". Several made mention of the necessary preparation time and the expected 'paperwork'. Others hoped student teaching would be developmental and a number were optimistic that they would improve over time with the support of their physical education department. These students also looked forward to a time when "...things would get easier...but I am nervous but excited". Whilst others anticipated that placement(s) would be a challenging experience with "...good days and bad days". Many communicated a degree of confidence in their own teaching abilities and claimed they already had considerable teaching experience, "I have experience so I am confident around children".

### 5. Discussion

On day one student teachers had already placed higher importance on the school-based elements of their PGCE and were of the view these

would be the most valuable and helpful parts [18, 41]. Many seemed in: "...no doubt about the importance of learning through and from experience" [42]. It seems plausible these students were aware they were following a postgraduate route to qualified teacher status and that they would spend at least two thirds of their one-year course in school, which might explain their "...desire for greater practicality" [42].

Some different stances on the learning of teaching appeared evident ['being told/shown', 'having a go', 'already experienced']. These stances echo previous work undertaken by [43]. Like [22] student teachers were expecting to fail in initial efforts to teach, but such experiences would be useful. As reported elsewhere student teachers were quite open in identifying their content knowledge weaknesses [22]. It would seem many regarded initial teacher education as a 'deficit' model built around the need to address aspects of content knowledge they claimed required some attention. The content areas identified by these PGCE student teachers echo findings elsewhere [44].

In terms of course content initial expectations made reference to some known sources of teacher concerns for self [45], in that student teachers at the outset were quite consistent in the view that classroom management, lesson planning and teaching approaches constituted the essential content within their course. It is perhaps reasonable that an appreciation of the 'theoretical' contribution of the university-based component had little mention in responses. What these student teachers might say about this element of their initial teacher education at the conclusion of their teacher education is beyond the scope of this paper but research has indicated the value pre-service teachers place upon the 'theory' included within the university-based element of the program can increase over time [46, 47] has however claimed that for physical education student teachers, "...practice is perceived by trainees as significantly more influential than theorizing" (p.211).

Respondents anticipated the university tutor would offer a predominantly pastoral role, which would likely subordinate 'other' contributions [48, 49] discussion on the university teacher educator

acting as a “super-mentor” seems relevant to these student teachers’ preconceptions of such a role. In terms of teaching, student teachers did not expect to be passive learners during their university-based theory sessions [18] but rather appeared anxious to be taught in what could loosely be termed a ‘constructivist’ approach. They depict an active learning environment, with regular opportunities for discussion and group –based/cooperative learning where prior knowledge and experiences are shared and developed. Interestingly this instructional representation sharply contrasted their expectations of the pedagogy of the practical work. Here student teachers seemed to be expecting a more teacher-directed form of instruction led by university tutors and based principally around the use of drills and basic skill acquisition across a broad range of games and sports. In view of the apprenticeship orientation to the learning of teaching [28], it is therefore sensible to suggest that these student teachers may have only experienced a mostly ‘traditional model’ of physical education in their own time as pupils. Their depictions seem to reinforce the dominance of command styles of teaching in games and sport rather than a more pupil centred approach evident in some alternative models such as Sport Education [50], Tactical Games [51] or Cooperative Learning [52]. We could conclude the manner in which these student teachers were taught in school was quite likely a significant factor shaping their entering expectations of the ways in which key elements of their course would be taught. [47] noted student teachers are already; “...generally comfortable with the more traditional games and sport-based curriculum models with custodial orientations, with which they themselves grew up” (p.209).

## 6. Conclusion

At entry these physical education student teachers have some reasonably consistent expectations of their course. They prioritise the school as the appropriate setting to support their development and see the school-based physical education teacher as demonstrating what it takes to teach the subject effectively and their university tutor as the pastoral support mechanism. It must,

however, be acknowledged that these findings should be read with a little caution. A requirement for entry into initial teacher education in England is that all prospective teachers must attend an interview. This interview commonly includes an introduction to the course, and meetings/interviews with both university tutors and school-based mentors. These activities, in addition to any material that is publically made available through department websites, might also have contributed to a shaping of these student teachers’ initial expectations. Furthermore, it is quite possible that as prospective applicants, they may have spoken to students currently completing a PGCE or someone who has recently completed their teacher preparation. As others have acknowledged there can be some difficulties accessing prospective student teachers before they begin teacher preparation [19]. Given the vast majority of physical education students complete their undergraduate degrees in sport-related fields, recruitment of individuals currently enrolled in such programs but planning to train to teach would appear to be a viable research option.

Accessing and sourcing the expectations of students who have strong aspirations to learn to teach physical education before they enter the application and recruitment process and at the same time investigate factors that they believe might have contributed to their entering positions would be worthy of investigation. Indeed we know very little about the acculturation of school-aged pupils who are intending to teach [31]. The sources of these initial expectations would therefore be worth exploring and ultimately where appropriate, challenged during the preparation period [53] as the tracked student teachers are encouraged to question how their background and socialization may have influenced their positions on teaching and learning in physical education. It is hoped that this work might offer teacher education programmes a sense of some possible starting positions held by entrants. For as [20] state; “...Such starting points are important: they may ‘block’ or distort some elements of the ITP programme, or lead to disappointment or dissatisfaction if other expected elements are not provided” (p.16-17).

## Appendix 1

Q1. You are about to start your physical education teacher training program. What do you expect this program to be about?

Q2 Describe what you want to spend your time doing during your PE teacher training course?

Q3 What physical education lectures do you expect to encounter that would be the most important for you?

Q4 How do you expect to be taught during these physical education lectures?

Q5 Describe your expectations of the practical PE sessions that will take place at the University during your course?

Q6 What expectations do you have of the University physical education lecturers? Q7 What do you expect your student teaching to be like?

Q8 Describe what you believe will be the most useful experiences when you are in schools?

Q9 Describe what will be expected of you when you are learning to teach physical education?

Q10 In your view what should NOT be included in your PGCE physical education course? Why is this?

Q11 Describe any other expectations you have of the PE course which you are about to begin?

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