

Personality and its Relation to Becoming
A Physical Educator

Submitted by:

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Abstract

This research examines the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of undergraduate students enrolled in two separate Faculties of Education as physical education majors. Specifically, the study will focus on the reasons why undergraduate students, enrolled in teacher education programs, choose physical education as their major subject of specialization. This paper inquires into how personality traits influence undergraduate students into becoming physical education majors. The information gained from this research will help improve teacher preparation as well as inform both novice teachers and those with extensive experience in the professional teaching ranks.

Background

Lortie (1975) reported in discussing his apprenticeship of observation model that teachers normally have over 16 years of contact with teachers and professors prior to entering the profession (p. 61). Because of this, student teachers enter the profession with an initial conception of teaching as largely dominated by their experience of teaching and learning through the experience of their teachers (John, 1996, p. 93). As a result, for many, the desire to teach came from a personal interest at a young age or from teachers whom they had during their 16-plus years of schooling (p. 96).

Several factors influence a person's career choice. Batesky, Malacos, and Purcell (1980) explored why some students select physical education as their major and whether personality differences influence this preference. In a previous study, Ruffer (1976) generalized that the male undergraduate physical education majors in his study were enthusiastic, adventurous, and controlled and that the female physical education majors were tough minded and adventurous and had high levels of intelligence, ego strength, and dominance. It is possible that, along with personality traits, experience in schools and success in physical education classes in schools may also be factors in the choice of physical education as a teachable major for students who are entering education.

Batesky et al. (1980) administered Holland's (1970) self-directed search questionnaire to 49 physical education majors—23 males and 26 females—from 1978 to 1979 at Rio Grande College and Eastern University. The self-directed-search was self-administered, self-scored, and self-interpreted. Holland developed this questionnaire to study the relationship between personality and career choice; it categorizes people according to six personality types:

1. Realistic: Prefer manipulation of objects, tools, and machines; they enjoy outdoor mechanical activities and generally have good physical skills.

2. Investigative: Are mathematics and science oriented and prefer to think through problems rather than act them out.
3. Artistic: Prefer ambiguous, free, unsystematized activities that lead to creativity and self-expression.
4. Social: Enjoy informing, training, or developing others; they are sociable, responsible, humanistic, and concerned with the welfare of others.
5. Enterprising: Prefer tasks in which they can assume leadership; they enjoy organizing and persuading others and value power, status, and material wealth.
6. Conventional: Enjoy ordering and systematizing data and numbers; they are organized and stable and work in organizations to make them run smoothly. (p. 1292)

The test provides a way for people to determine to which of the six personality types they belong and which occupational environments match or parallel their personalities (p. 1293). The majority of people do not fit into just one personality category; many fall into two or three.

Batesky et al. (1980) found in their study that the males and females in physical education were socially oriented and described them as enjoying activities that involved helping people (p. 1295). The males were more realistically oriented than the females were, which indicates a preference for physical, mechanical, manual, and outdoor activities (p. 1295); they were also more enterprising and preferred activities that included verbal skills and decision making, which validates their preference for teaching as an occupation. Batesky et al. also concluded that both male and female physical education majors have highly social needs and that there seems to be a congruency between personality characteristics and the professional environment for both groups. He therefore referred to physical education majors in general as social-enterprising-realistic. Batesky et al. also explored the factors that influence students in education to choose physical education as their teachable major. Is it still possible that

personality influences this decision and that the students whom Batesky et al. studied almost 30 years ago are similar to the students today who are choosing physical education as a major?

Method

This research focused on the beliefs and perceptions of physical education majors as they progressed through the teacher preparation program from two major postsecondary institutions in Western Canada. I developed and administered precourse, postcourse, and postpracticum surveys to all physical education majors registered in a physical education methods course at each institution. Four cohort groups, each consisting of approximately 30 preservice physical education teachers, answered written surveys prior to taking their physical education methods course and practicum. The participants (N = 127) from both institutions were surveyed between 2006 and 2008 on an annual basis; they were both male and female, and most were near the end of their education degree programs. Prior to answering each survey, the students had had one practicum experience, most of them not in physical education.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was used in this study. Using a case study approach as Yin (2003) defined it revealed what, if any, changes occurred in the beliefs and perceptions of undergraduate physical education majors as they progressed through their teacher preparation program. I recorded and analyzed the participants' written comments. Statistical software helped to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaires to track changes as they occurred from the start of the semester to the completion of the students' practicum. Numerous questions were identical in all four surveys, and I tracked and analyzed the students' responses to determine whether their responses to the same questions differed over time.

During the first methods course for physical education majors, as a researcher and the instructor of the course, I outlined and explained the procedures and purposes of the study to the

students. The students in these courses completed both a precourse and a postcourse survey as part of their regular curriculum and instruction course, as well as a postpracticum survey. The students who attended institution A completed two postpracticum surveys, but because of the nature of the education program at institution B, I administered only one postpracticum survey to these students.

Both the pre-course survey and the postcourse survey were the same tool and were administered to determine whether the beliefs and perceptions of the undergraduate physical education majors had changed at the conclusion of a theoretical course that focused on the specific aspects and requirements of teaching physical education. In addition, the intent of the postpracticum survey was to focus the participants' thoughts during their subject-specialized practicum on how theory and practice mesh and whether their beliefs and perceptions changed as a result of their time in the schools. This inquiry examined whether changes in these students' attitudes and perceptions following a methods course and practicum experiences influenced their career choice.

Results

Because of the nature of each survey, the students checked or circled the answer to each question, which was the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a statement or question. Section II of the survey addressed the students' personal and professional beliefs about physical education. To the question "What are your reason(s) for wanting to become a physical education teacher?" they had an opportunity to check as many options as they wanted. Some of the choices included "the desire to coach," "love of sports," "a great PE teacher in the past who influenced you," and "a terrible PE teacher in the past." The top three answers were love of sports ($f = 114$), love of children ($f = 102$), and past success in sports and PE class ($f = 97$).

The students had room to write comments or remarks on certain questions; not all questions required qualitative answers. Each of the four surveys included the statement, “At the present time, I feel as though I know a lot about what it means to be a physical education teacher.” The students who responded to the precourse survey reported that they knew some things about what it means to be a physical education teacher, but that they had more to learn (especially through practical experience). Student 93 from institution A replied, “I have a lot of training, education, and skills I believe are necessary to be a ‘great’ teacher but experience in the classroom is important.” The responses to the same question on the postcourse survey were similar to those at the beginning of the course, except that now they had learned new ideas in the methods course. Student 30 from institution A noted, “I feel as though I have a better understanding since taking this course, but I also realize that there is so much more I have to learn. I don’t think I would ever know it all.”

Following their practicum, the students reported that they had learned a great deal more about what it means to be a physical education teacher after having received “hands-on” experience. Student 112 from institution B identified the changes: “Seeing all of the day to day procedures, spending time with the students during class, coaching and outside of class, planning, marking and teaching have all taught me more about what it means to be a PE teacher.” Following the second practicum, student 31 from institution A suggested that becoming a successful teacher requires more experience:

Prior to this practicum I was only teaching 20-25 minutes of PE a day. With this practicum, PE is all I am teaching. I have learned how to really plan out a year and be flexible with changes that may alter my plans.

The pre- and postcourse surveys asked the students whether they thought that physical education is generally easier to teach than some of the other courses offered in schools. Most of

the students responded that physical education is not easier to teach because of the class's unstructured nature. According to student 41 from institution A, "The environment is always changing, never static and must take into account students' physical attributes, mental attributes and skills. This makes for a challenging learning and teaching environment." However, some students felt that teaching physical education was easy because they enjoyed the subject: "I find it easier only because I have the love and passion for the subject" (student 14, institution A) and "For me personally it would be easier because of my knowledge in it [physical education] but in general I'm not sure" (student 127, institution B). Generally, the qualitative responses from the students did not change from the precourse to the postcourse survey.

Only the precourse and postcourse surveys asked the students whether they believed that the success of a school physical education program is largely contingent upon the students' willingness to be active and involved. Many believed that it is important to have, as one student expressed it, "cooperation and participation from students" (student 32, institution A). Student 108 from institution B added, "You can't teach someone that doesn't want to learn." Following the methods course, student 31 from institution B thought that the teacher plays a large role in influencing a student's willingness to learn: "Yes, we need willing participants in order to have success, but the teacher must take on responsibility for motivating and meeting the needs of students who are not eager." After the methods course, student 32 suggested that "the best teachers should have great skills in motivating and encouraging students; however, the desire to participate and be active must come from the student." The students' answers changed from the precourse to the postcourse survey: They identified the importance of the teacher in motivating students, even those who do not want to learn.

The students answered questions on what is required of those who decide to teach physical education. Each survey asked them whether they believed that being an athlete makes a

person a better teacher of physical education, and the themes from the responses from each cohort were similar: It does not make a better teacher, but it does help with demonstrations and background knowledge of certain subjects: “It may help that individual but it doesn’t mean an athlete PE teacher would be better than a non-athlete” (student 82, institution A); and “It will definitely help, but non-athletes could teach equally well or better” (student 89, institution A). The students’ answers following their practicum did not differ from their answers before and after the course. They reported that being an athlete made demonstrations easier for them during their practicum; however, they still needed to learn skills that they did not have.

One survey question asked the students whether they believed that a successful sports coach would make a successful physical education teacher. In their qualitative responses they suggested that coaching and teaching require similar skills, although the demographics of students on a sports team are very different from those in a physical education class. Student 126 from institution B recognized that coaches “may not know how to communicate the information” because of the group of students with whom they work. Coaches deal with highly motivated students who have been chosen to play at a competitive level, whereas physical education teachers deal with a variety of students, many of whom do not wish to be in a physical education class. The students’ answers did not change between the surveys. “There is a chance they [coaches] will be [good teachers], but just because somebody is a good sports coach does not mean they will be a successful phys ed teacher automatically” (student 28, institution A). In response to the same question, student 28 from institution A contended, “It takes much more than just a coach to be a good PE teacher; one must have the ability to motivate students to be passionate about PE.” The students agreed that coaching and teaching are two separate fields, although many of the skills are transferable.

At the end of the postpracticum survey the students identified their most important area(s) of growth. A common answer from each cohort was classroom management ($f = 50$). Student 40 from institution A explained: “Managing a large number of students in a small area, as well as working with little to no equipment, I had to find different ways of teaching lessons that do not require equipment.”

Many students also felt that their practicum improved their organizational and assessment skills. For example, student 21 from institution A reported improvement in his/her organizational skills: “Organizational skills and being prepared for various situations, my ability to include all of the students by getting them to participate in their own way and bringing enjoyment/fun.”

Many students, including student 30 from institution B, considered building positive relationships with students and other members of the school team an important area of growth: “Classroom management, developing positive relationships with students and parents, learning how to effectively develop professional and personal relationships with other staff members.”

The postcourse survey asked the students to identify the area(s) in which they felt that they had the most confidence and strength during their practicum. Many students ($f = 42$) affirmed that their ability to build relationships with the students was their area of strength. Student 65 from institution A identified “being able to work well with the children and letting them know that they were important, especially those children that needed that extra push” as his/her area of strength. Student 35 from institution A found that connecting with students eases classroom management issues: “My confidence and strength during my practicum was building relationships with my students. I felt that I was able to connect with my students easily, making classroom management easier and experience very enjoyable.”

Discussion

Numerous factors influence a person's choice of career as a physical education teacher, and one of these factors may be personality. Although in this study I did not directly examine the personality traits of physical education majors, I found similarities to those of the students in Batesky et al.'s (1980) research. The students considered the area in which they felt that they had the most confidence during their practicum, and the majority (from all four cohorts) identified building relationships with students as the most successful part of their practicum. Their love of children influenced their choice of physical education as their teachable major. This mirrors Batesky et al.'s findings that physical education majors tend to be social beings—they are kind and friendly—which may assist student teachers in building relationships with their students.

The student teachers surveyed recognized that it takes more than just background knowledge and building relationships with students to become successful physical education teachers; it also requires much time and preparation. Lortie (1975) called this the “backstage” (p. 62) behaviors that are an essential part of teaching:

Students do not receive invitations to watch the teacher's performance from the wings; they do not privy the teacher's private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events. Students rarely participate in selecting goals, making preparations, or post-mortem analyses. Thus they are not pressed to place the teacher's actions in a pedagogically oriented framework. (p. 62)

Because student teachers do not receive access to the backstage behaviors of teaching, areas such as classroom management and planning are a difficult part of making the transition from university student to professional. Classroom management was another common factor in physical education majors' level of confidence. As Batesky et al. (1980) found, physical education majors tend to be enterprising, which means that they are “leaders, self-confident, and

enjoy organizing and persuading others” (p. 1293). The similarities between the physical education majors whom Batesky et al. studied almost 39 years ago and the students whom I surveyed in this study indicate a strong correlation between personality type and the choice to become a physical education teacher.

John (1996) found that negative occurrences in school tend to inspire students to compensate for the poor teaching that they have experienced. Lortie (1975) also identified these negative experiences as influential for beginning teachers. According to Lortie, observation can have a weak effect on those students who have had poor encounters with past teachers: “This limited effect and the reported tendency for novice teachers, once they have entered the profession, to revert to their default model can lead to teachers teaching as they were taught (p.62). In the same sense, it is possible that positive experiences in school physical education classes inspire student teachers to teach physical education at the junior high/senior high levels. The student teachers identified their love of sports and past success in sports and physical education class as reasons for choosing physical education as their teachable major, as well as a strong knowledge of and love for physical education. The student teachers reported that because of the nontraditional learning environment of a physical education class, liability concerns, and preparation issues, physical education is not an easy class to teach; however, their knowledge of and love for the subject make it easier for them to teach. This may influence student teachers’ choice of a career as physical education teachers. The responses from the students in this study reflect what Lortie suggested over 39 years ago: that preservice teachers learn from their practicum experience some of the “backstage” (p. 62) activities that are required in teaching.

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