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Student's Voice Online: Experiences of PE in Finnish Schools

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The aim of this descriptive study was to find out how people describe their experiences of physical education (PE) in Internet discussion forums. The data for this study were collected during one randomly chosen week in April 2007 via a Google™ search using the Finnish word "koululiikunta" [school PE]. The first 200 hits lead into nine discussion forums, which were analysed by using qualitative content analysis. These nine discussion forums included all together 356 messages. For searching these discussion forums no criteria about the writers' age, race, class, gender or other were set. The messages were coded with sequential classification and grouped into positive, negative and both positive and negative messages. The results revealed that the messages were positive (12%), both (24%) and negative (64%). In the positive messages the focus was on physical education in general and the experiences were more related to the writer him/herself. In the negative messages the emphasis was on factors external to the writer. The writers' messages, in particular where they reported negative experiences revealed strongly held feelings and emotions. We need to widen our understanding of the relationship between PE and the contents of teacher education curriculum to guarantee every pupil the opportunity to have positive experiences in PE. These, in turn, help to create a basis for life-long physical activity and a positive relation to one's body, the main target of PE. In PE one's own body and feelings are intensively involved at a time when vivid and memorable experiences are taking place for a young person and lasting damage can easily be done. Teachers should listen to students' voices and consider what lies behind them in order to develop PE pedagogy and a safe PE learning environment.

Keywords: School Physical Education; Peoples' Experiences; Internet; Discussion Forums

Introduction

The large scale of discussion forums allows people to network easily. When doing this the individual can guarantee that the message is sent without embarrassment, meaning that whatever one writes can be said anonymously. Different kinds of discussion forums make it possible for people to express themselves through real or fictitious messages (Markham, 2007). The personality itself can be totally hidden behind the screen (Markham, 1998; Tapscott, 2009). Such forums are places for bringing out the opinions, feelings and experiences created by people interested in the same topic published on the Internet. Joining is not dependent on time or place. In Finland about 85% of people have access to the Internet at home and almost all people (89%) under 74 years use the Internet (Statistics Finland, 2011). Of all Internet users in Finland, 44% of men and 45% of women use the net for chat or discussion forums (Statistics Finland, 2011). A user is likely to have joined a Web forum voluntarily. He/she has a need to comment, object, defend or introduce something new in order to share opinions about the subject with others. The writer has every opportunity to tell the truth and describe a real experience, but just as easily the story told may be wholly imagined. Control of the self, conditions and presentation is an important benefit of online communication (Markham, 1998). Deep-felt emotions, disappointments and experiences create strong feelings that people want to write about and share with others. It seems to be easier to express these negative feelings online (e.g. Ransom, La Guardia, Woody, & Boyd, 2010; Seale, Charteris-Black, MacFarlane, & McPherson, 2010). Physical education aims at producing positive experiences in schools (NASPE, 2004). However, it is a subject that strongly divides people's opinions. The present study aimed to examine how people describe their experiences of physical education (PE) in the Internet forums. Thus far, there has not been enough research about the discussions around physical education in the Internet forums.

Earlier Studies Concerning School PE Experiences

Today's sedentary lifestyle has been accompanied by global concern about the resultant increase in overweight (McKenzie, 2007), while at the same time health-related physical education aims to promote life-long physical activity. How PE is experienced at school is important for the future sport and health behaviour of the student him/herself (Trudeau & Shephard, 2005; Yli-Piipari, 2011). Therefore, today's schools and the prevailing physical education culture are under strong pressure to produce positive student experiences.

According to the substantial body of earlier research most pupils (around 75%) like physical education at school (e.g. Carlson, 1995; Dyson, 2006; Groves & Laws, 2000; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). Researchers chiefly highlighted positive experiences despite the fact that opposite opinions among the pupils also exist. In researching the relationship between PE bibliographies and the PE teaching practices of classroom teachers, both quantitative and qualitative analyses (Morgan & Hansen, 2008) showed that negative PE

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experiences were common within the teachers' own school time memories. The main reason given for bad experiences were the feeling of not being taught, not having learned and the teachers being "tyrants". Some teachers produced negative experiences related to the strong atmosphere of competition, in which the pupils felt uncoordinated and scared. Such a situation can lead to avoidance and alienation in PE. Carlson (1995) published an alienation-nonalienation model for be in investigating student alienation from PE in schools. She found that around 80% of students enjoyed and had positive experiences of PE. She was worried about the remaining 20%, for whom meaninglessness (understood as lack of personal meaning), powerlessness and isolation were the three main feelings that caused those students to have a negative attitude towards PE. In their study, Williams and Bedward (2001) focused on issues related to female gender and culture and the differences between teachers' and students' constructions of physical activity, sport and leisure. They found that some activities, e.g. football and swimming, and having a school uniform policy, were highly related to cultural differences and suggested that "the complexity of issues of culture and gender in relation to physical activity should not be underestimated" (Williams & Bedward, 2001: p. 63). Rikard and Banville (2006) found that most high school students like PE, the main reasons given being fun, liking sports in general and liking the activity offered. The most common reasons for disliking PE were dislike of the activity offered, too much teacher talk, too little playing time, and that it was boring.

In Finland findings regarding experiences of PE have mainly been positive (e.g. Palomäki & Heikinaro-Johansson, 2011; Yli-Piipari, 2011). According to the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education (2004) the aim of PE is to build the pupil's self-esteem and a positive physical self-concept through favourable PE experiences and to encourage cooperativeness and positive future sport and health behaviour. These objects are in line with the international targets of physical education (NASPE, 2004).

An important question, however, remains: why is it that 20% - 30% of pupils do not like physical education or have negative feelings towards it? Because the Internet offers a "safe" channel to express one's emotions and describe one's experiences during PE classes, it might be fruitful to analyze how PE experiences are described through this medium.

Purpose of the Study

A student's experience of PE at school is important for his or her future sport and health behaviour. For this reason schools and physical education culture are under strong pressure to produce increasingly positive student experiences. The aim of this descriptive study was to find out what kind of PE experiences people describe in Internet discussion forums.

Methods

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from Internet discussion forums during a randomly chosen week in April 2007. During the weeks before that date nothing in particular had happened in Finland to prompt any special reason to motivate the discussion about PE. The data were collected using a Google™ search engine that shows the requested documents according to the number and quality of the links leading to them. It is the most widely known and used search engine in Finland. Via a Google™ search with the broad term "koululiikunta" ("school PE" in Finnish) the first 200 hits included nine discussion forums. Since no criteria (age, race, class, gender or other) were set, these Web forums represented a variety of areas including discussions on animal rights [www.oikeuttaelaimille.net], junior football [www.nappulafutis.com], health [www.myartic.net], overweight [www.terhi.net, http://chat.yle.fi] and memories of sports in school [http://ranneliike.net; http://chat.yle.fi; http://demi.fi,; http://keskustelu.suomi.24.fi]. All nine forums were selected, numbered from one to nine and analyzed further. The forums contained between 11 - 150 messages varying in length. Altogether the nine discussion forums yielded 450 separate messages.

Data Coding

Using qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002), going through and reading the messages several times, they seemed to fall clearly into four different groups.

1) If no negative comments about PE were contained in the message it was called "positive". Also a message stating an opinion or agreement with the former writer and not containing anything negative was included in this group.

2) If the message included a single positive comment while the rest was negative—or vice versa—it was assigned to a group labelled "both".

3) If the message contained no positive comment it was called "negative".

4) The fourth group consisted of messages with various topics mixed in with the issue of PE. This group was called "other". The messages in this group included, for example, messages about eating and being overweight, smoking, the writer's own physical condition and other school subjects.

These groups were labelled positive, negative, both positive and negative (later called both for short) and other. After reading the messages in the "other" group more closely, the whole group was discarded because it did not directly com- monthe topic of this research. Having done this, 356 messages remained. To ensure reliability the data were coded with sequential classification within six months. In case of unclear or ambiguous messages our research team classified them as a team in order to avoid subjectivity.

The Ethics of Internet Research

The Internet can be seen as a form of cultural production where people build virtual persons and social images for the self and others (e.g. Basset & O'Riordan, 2002). In line with other researchers (see e.g. Bruckman, 2002), we see the Internet as a social environment for publishing one's thoughts and feelings. We also assume, like Pitts (2004), that the web forums we research are "truthful" (see Hine, 2000), and that the issues the writers raise are real for themselves. In our data the 365 messages were posted by 239 different pseudonyms. Trolls (Tepper, 1997), seeking to disrupt these forums with provocative messages about school PE, did not seem to be present. This was not, however, empirically verified and must thus be considered a limitation of this study. The ethics of online research depend on the nature of the research and on the target group (e.g. Basset & O'Riordan, 2002). In this study the data were collected from open forums, which are available to everyone, whether as a subscriber or reader. Discussions and opinions exist in these open

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forums independently of research purposes. Out of the nine forums only two (animal rights and junior football) could be considered as primarily for a more limited audience, although they too were openly accessible. By chance, the selected forums were discussing PE during that particular week. No claims about the writers' off-line identities can be made.

Results

The results of this study reveal how the writers in the Internet discussion forums described their experiences of PE in Finnish schools. Of the 356 messages 12% were positive (n = 41), 24% included both feelings (n = 87) and 64% were negative messages (n = 228). The purpose was to gain an overview of the kinds of experiences people recounted in the Web forums. The results and excerpts are given in order of frequency. All the writers behind the messages referred to in this study were given codes in which the first digit indicates the discussion forum and the second the running number of the message. Since the messages were written anonymously the gender and age of the writers are unknown. In addition the time when the writers experienced school PE varies. The original messages have been translated from Finnish into English for this report by a native English speaker translator.

I Liked School PE

Positive messages included statements about the writer's success in PE, the writer's development when his/her skills were not yet very advanced and positive attitude towards the subject. Good memories about PE teachers, their enthusiasm and assistance as well as their positive attitude towards sport as a hobby were also mentioned.

> "The best things in PE were the games and even the individual sports; our teachers encouraged the weaker ones too to join in, and nobody was given a hard time if a girl couldn't really take part or didn't understand. Teachers like that are rare." (4,25)

The wide range of PE, especially during the higher classes, the importance and the amount of PE lessons and good feelings about competitions between schools were also mentioned. What also seemed to be important was a good class atmosphere and environment, where the pupils felt accepted as a part of the group.

> "We've always had a good PE group in which it's been fun to do things together. Myself, I've never been brilliant at PE, but I'm reasonably good at most things. Ice skating is the only thing that genuinely causes me problems. I've never been tremendously popular among the other pupils, but in PE lessons I felt I was welcome in the group." (8,14)

These positive results are in line with those of earlier research (Groves & Laws, 2000; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Strean, 2009).

I Like PE, but...

In the messages referring to both positive and negative experiences, opinions were very different and conflicted with each other. The main focus in these messages was on the teacher and to almost the same degree the writers' self-esteem. In some messages the writer liked the teacher but hated something about the particular sport itself and in other messages just the opposite. Many messages described one unpleasant or traumatic experience while the rest of the message was positive.

> "The same PE teacher from seventh grade right through to the end of upper secondary school, yippee! And exactly the same stuff EVERY YEAR! Compulsory! By the way, my mum had the same teacher as well... and no doubt she's still there, that dry old bag of bones." (5,47)

In this group the memories of the lower grades were generally not as positive as later on, but again in some messages it was just the opposite. The lower comprehensive school teacher's skills were complained about more than the subject teacher's teaching skills in PE in the upper levels of comprehensive school (see also Strean, 2009).

> "In the lower comprehensive our PE teacher was abysmal. In his lessons roughly 80% of the time was devoted to him explaining how things should be done, and then for the remaining ten minutes we played according to "simplified" rules. In the upper level of comprehensive school the PE lessons have been significantly better because we've had a professional PE teacher." (2,12)

Attitudes towards one' own body, being overweight and teenage in general were frequently presented. In particular, the compulsory showering after PE lessons was a highly controversial topic. Opinions were divided over team versus individual sports. Some wrote in favour of team sports but described negative experiences of individual sports, and vice versa. It was impossible to identify sports that were generally liked or disliked, because opinions differed so widely (see also Williams & Bedward, 2001). The monotony of sports was another common complaint. Writers reposted doing the same sports year after year finding this repeated boring.

> "Personally, it's not like I hate school PE, but team disciplines in particular piss me right off. Swimming and orienteering, on the other hand, are really great sports." (8,41)

PE Is Traumatic

The biggest number of messages fell into the negative category. The teacher was the focus of most of them. The teacher's behaviour was often mentioned. A common complaint was the teacher's attitude, which was even seen as teachers being 'Nazis'. Also hate towards teachers was strong. The teachers' way of teaching the subject or of treating the pupils was heavily criticized. Descriptions along these lines have also been found earlier (Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Strean, 2009; Trout & Graber, 2009; Williams & Bedward, 2001).

> "Here's to my PE teacher in lower comprehensive, he was a complete Nazi, I HATED him. Always getting at the ones who couldn't do things, shouting, taking the mickey out of people, behaving like a total sadist. Once he even laughed when I got hit in the nuts by a ball during the lesson. I was pretty lacking in confidence anyway… well, that really didn't make me feel any better or help my self-image." (4,31)

The class environment, especially the competition and depressing nature of the interaction between the pupils came up in

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many ways in a large number of messages. The other pupils watching while one pupil was doing an exercise were an unpleasant moments. These results support earlier findings (e.g. Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Trout & Graber, 2009).

> "The teacher actually had less influence than my classmates. At the end of the day the teacher was pretty powerless to do anything about the internal hierarchies in our class. These can't be altered by simply changing the way teams are picked. However you look at it, for a long period PE was a drag, the pressures to perform enormous, and even now I don't want to know when it comes to team games." (4,20)

Self-esteem was often mentioned from the bodily attractiveness and sports competence point of view (Fox & Corbin, 1989). In particular pupils who were more grown up and physically more mature than the others felt embarrassed. Physical fitness and an overweight body were often subjects of comparison and caused bad experiences. Skills or the lack of them as well were mentioned many times.

> "Traumatic. My grade for PE was 6 - 7. From the first grade right through to the end of upper secondary school, for a full twelve years PE has caused me stomach cramps and anxiety. The most enjoyable school days were those when there was no PE. Since I was the diligent sort I didn't even dare to skip the PE classes. Throughout comprehensive school everybody got down on me in PE lessons, pupils and teachers alike, because I was totally useless. In upper secondary school things were a bit more civilized, but still caused me grief." (4,35)

Some sports created strong negative feelings and anxiety that affected pupils' attitude towards PE as a whole during their school years. Team sport and playing games were most often mentioned, but individual sports received negative feedback as well. (See e.g. Rikard & Banville, 2006)

> "One word: gymnastics. I'll remember forever the humiliation, when I couldn't do any of the compulsory exercises. I couldn't get over the horse, and the teacher had to LIFT me over. I was so, so embarrassed. And what's that movement, when you kind of have to swing around a horizontal bar? Well, I didn't make it even onto the bar. I couldn't do a cartwheel. I couldn't even do a somersault. Finally in the upper comprehensive I learned to bounce on the trampoline, and even there I flew off and hit the ground. I hate, hate, repeat, hate gymnastics." (5,19)

In this group of negative messages the facilities and the equipment were important factors as well. Small gyms or lack of them, unpleasant dressing rooms and showers, different items of sports equipment and carrying them to school—like cross-country skis or ice skates—were mentioned. An interesting group of messages dealt with the question of the leather material used in sports equipment.

> "… what should you do, when almost every item of sports equipment is made of leather? Basketballs, footballs, baseball gloves... My old skates are made of leather, and skating on the timetable?" (1,1)

> "First of all we lugged the skis to school in the morning, and then stuck them in a really tightly packed store room. In spite of the racks the skis in the store room were in a totally chaotic state and finding one's own skis amongst all the rest was a real struggle. If you didn't have your own skis then you had to use the school skis, which didn't usually match, and which were straight from the Stone Age. During PE classes we walked a few kilometres to the sawdust circuit carrying our skis and then staggered around the track, all the same if it was minus 25 or we were up to our ankles in water. Then we walked back carrying our skis and watched as the PE teacher went shooting past in his car." (7,3)

Testing and evaluation as well as report numbers for PE have left bad memories in some of the writers' minds. This is a common result found in many earlier studies (Hartmann, Zahner, Pühse, Schneider, Puder, & Kriemler, 2009; Trout & Graber, 2009; Wrench & Garrett, 2008)

> "We had fitness tests, at which I was naturally absolute rubbish. Doing so badly was horrible and unpleasant in itself, but the final humiliation came when on the next occasion the teacher gave us all a handout showing each pupil's results in the different parts of these tests. My name showed up in virtually every activity right at the bottom of the list." (5,31)

To summarize the present results, in the positive messages the focus tend to be physical education in general and personal experiences. The messages dealt with the writer's sport competence and general physical self-worth. In the negative messages the emphasis was more on factors external to the writer like the teacher or the other pupils, the curriculum, facilities and equipment, and also showering.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine what kinds of physical education experiences in school are recounted in Internet discussion forums. The main findings were the themes that the writers sent into cyberspace. The messages posted in the Internet discussion forums studied here referred to negative experiences more frequently and more vehemently than has been previously reported in PE studies. Despite sometimes even very strong expressions of disliking physical education it is important for pedagogical reasons to sort out what kind of situations cause negative messages. Earlier studies have found that most pupils like physical education in school. These prior results have been based on surveys and questionnaires (Carlson, 1995; Palomäki & Heikinaro-Johansson, 2011), interviews (Carlson, 1995; Williams & Bedward, 2001) and through the analysis of diaries and classroom observations (Groves & Laws, 2000). The use of the open discussion forums as data base could be seen as a further, nontraditional, possibility to listen to students' voices. When interpreting these results we have to emphasise that the messages are from writers in Internet discussion forums and therefore not representative of all school pupils or all people. The Internet as an anonymous forum offers an easy opportunity for the expression of the strong feelings and often in a very extreme way. However, this method of data collecting enables the description of experiences that might be too personal to describe by other means. It might be easier to talk about very sensitive, even intimate matters on the Internet (Pitts, 2001; Seale et al., 2010).

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Bad memories of body image and physical self-esteem (Fox & Corbin, 1989) and feelings of hurt caused by a teacher or peers may remain with the writer for life (Strean, 2009). They may have future effects, where such individuals become PE teachers themselves (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). The results of this study verify the target of PE, building up pupil's self-esteem and a positive physical self-concept (NASPE, 2004). This should effect the pedagogical decisions teachers make during PE lessons. Also extrinsic factors (e.g. facilities) seem to have a strong role, which should be taken into consideration while planning the resources of teaching for the future.

The findings are related to the method used to collect the data and the reality that only certain types of people are active in Internet forums. It is possible on the Internet to write about things that would not necessarily emerge in questionnaires. One particular example that shows the possibilities of the method used in this study, were some of the messages that were captured by the broad search term "school PE", such as the issue of animal rights. Most probably the aversion to using leather (in balls, baseball mitts, skates) during PE would never have emerged using other, less open-ended data sources. Such issues have not previously been noted out in the PE context.

The method used in this study clearly offers a new approach for research on people's opinions. Relatively few studies have used Internet forums in this way. Because the present data were collected from Web forums the research process did not influence the target group or their opinions (Seale et al., 2010). In some studies researchers investigate the subject in a specific forum specially set up for the purpose of their research. This was not the case in this study. Discussions and opinions exist in forums independently of research purposes. Data collected in this way are totally unaffected by social pressure or the need to please interviewers or teachers (cf. Seale et al., 2010). However, there may be an unwritten imperative in forums to compete with previous writers and make one's experiences sound even worse or better than theirs (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2009). It may be that the Internet encourages more forthright expression and that negative examples fuel the effects of other writers. Also, some controversial messages (trolling) might be posted with the express purpose of inciting strong reactions (flaming) from people (Millard, 1997; Tepper, 1997).

People writing in Web forums are active in giving and receiving emotional and informational support (Ransom et al., 2010; Pitts, 2001; Seale et al., 2010). Readers cannot know if the writers have really experienced the things they write about or whether they are dramatizations of their experiences or even wholly imaginary. These issues remain unresolved in this study.

Internet forums open the door to an inner world where neither the writers nor the messages are there explicitly for research purposes. This provides an opportunity to follow imperceptibly a conversation in its authentic environment. The clear difference between the positive and negative groups is in the strength of the emotions the writers describe. It is interesting to observe what major consequences small and sporadic experiences can have. It would be interesting to know what the true implications might be of the writers being hidden behind a screen. Sometimes a person's own uncertainty or ambivalence regarding his/her self-esteem underlies negative experiences (Fox & Corbin, 1989). To obtain the most inclusive view of these phenomena different data collection methods should be used in combination.

Some clear limitations in this study should be acknowledged. The first is that we do not know the identity of the person behind the computer. Tapscott argues that "they're screenagers, Net addicted, losing their social skills, and they have no time for sports or healthy activities. Time spent online could have been devoted to sports and face-to-face conversation; the result is a generation of awkward, fat people" (Tapscott, 2009: p. 3). If that is the case, it might mean that these individuals have difficulties coming to terms with the normal and natural effects of their own body and feel uncomfortable with it. Since the participants write anonymously, it is impossible to discover their cultural background, race, schooling, gender or age. In Finland, in most cases from the third grade (8 - 9 years of age) onwards girls and boys do PE separately: this may have influenced the view of some of the writers. Owing to these limitations, issues concerning the writer's personal background were not in focus in this study, and should therefore be examined in future research. In relation to discussions forums it is important to understand that a limited population segment find such sites, read the messages and react. In Finland, however, quite a large number of people use the Web forums (Statistics Finland, 2011). The present results are based on all the messages posted in nine Web forums during a specific period. The Internet is one way of listening to peoples' voices. When decoding the data one challenge is to be able to reach the writer's feelings. Another challenge is to understand and construe a message the way the writer intended. The smilies and other emoticons used in the messages helped to confirm the interpretation of the writer's feelings.

Since people are not physically active enough, it is important to find out and analyze in more detail what lies behind this. Our findings imply that physical education does not provide everyone with enjoyable experiences and happy memories. It would be helpful for teachers and teacher educators to be aware of the feelings that PE arouses in order to develop PE pedagogy and the PE learning environment to the advantage of all students. PE teachers make valuable and challenging work with sensitive students. Today's new school-going generation may have a different relationship with their bodies; if so, this challenges PE teachers to find new ways to encourage students to adopt a physically active lifestyle.

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