

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUBJECT SPECIFICITY: CONCERNS OF RURAL, BEGINNING HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Most studies of beginning teachers' concerns tend to treat teachers as a homogeneous group. Just as research concerned with rural education suggests that beginning teachers in rural schools have particular concerns and needs, this paper claims that the subject area in which teachers work also shapes their professional and personal experiences. The concerns of beginning Health and Physical Education (HPE) teachers in rural and provincial secondary schools are shared to reveal both similarities and differences when compared to generic research on rural, beginning teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Educational research, when addressing what are considered to be generic issues such as teachers' working conditions, teacher attrition or indeed rural education issues, tends not to discriminate amongst teachers in different curriculum areas. In doing so important contextual characteristics and differences may be overlooked. The case can be made that the curriculum area in which teachers work is a determining factor in how teachers experience teaching and schooling.

The purpose of this paper is to extend what is understood as the concerns for beginning teachers in rural schools (Boylan and Hemmings, 1993; Crowther, 1987; Crowther, Cronk, King and Gibson, 1991; Gibson, 1993, Loney, 1992; Watson, Hatton, Grundy and Squires, 1986) by introducing those additional concerns that have been raised by Health and Physical Education (HPE) teachers. It is argued that the problems that were of greatest concern to beginning HPE teachers were not necessarily those which may have benefitted from specialist rural preparation but rather stemmed from working in a low status, 'specialist' area.

Much of the relevant literature on beginning teachers' concerns is presented acontextually within mainstream education. Student management, lesson planning, alienation, isolation, distrust, denigration of personal interests and dependence on outsiders' opinions have been identified as concerns (Bullough, 1987; Fuller, 1969; Veenman, 1984). Loney (1992) listed the specific concerns for teachers in remote areas as 'high costs, scarcity of resource people, relief often unavailable, limited contact with fellow professionals, resource centres non-existent, (and) distance from home' (p.80). Other challenges include living conditions, multifarious professional tasks, and forming positive relationships with communities (Crowther et al., 1991; Gibson, 1993; Watson et al., 1986). Research outlining the problems for HPE teachers indicates concerns centering on the marginal status of HPE teachers and their subject, poor communication with administration, sexism, work overload, poor resources, isolation, routinization of work, and lack of career mobility (Evans & Williams, 1989; O'Sullivan, 1989; Sparkes, 1991; Templin, 1989). No literature which focusses on beginning HPE teachers in rural schools could be found.

In exploring the issues and concerns for beginning secondary HPE teachers in rural schools, data from a parent research project into the attrition of HPE teachers was drawn upon. The main participants in the project were ten female HPE teachers, four of whom worked in private

schools and six in state secondary schools. Four of their schools were located in Brisbane and five were in rural or provincial towns. Another female participant had already left teaching from a state, rural school. The eleven males who participated were drawn from three private schools and seven state schools, five of which were located in rural or provincial towns and six in Brisbane. As with the female group, another male participant who had left teaching from a state, metropolitan school was also interviewed. All of the participants had graduated between 1987 and 1992, with the majority having graduated in either 1991 or 1992 and thus were in their first or second year of teaching during the period of data collection.

Discussions with the participants took place in a variety of locations with the convenience of the participants being a priority. However, it was our goal to spend a day in the teacher's school, to have discussions with the teachers and make fieldnotes about the nature of their day's work. In order to do this we travelled by car and plane throughout the state of Queensland. Without exception, the teachers were welcoming. For those practicing teachers that it was too difficult to visit, we met in Brisbane during their holidays. In addition to our discussions and fieldnotes, the practicing teachers also agreed to make diary entries, for ten days of their choice, concerning the rewards, frustrations and challenges they were encountering.

Interview transcriptions, fieldnotes, diary entries, documentation and photographs were analysed using a constant comparative method in order to generate themes and issues (Miles and Huberman, 1984). The following data is drawn from rural and provincial schools. Where HPE teachers are quoted, pseudonyms have been used in order to ensure anonymity.

SPECIFIC CONCERNS OF HPE TEACHERS

Beginning HPE teachers in rural schools shared several of the concerns identified in studies of rural teachers. They too felt the loneliness of being away from family and friends and familiar social lives.

The loneliness is probably one of the bad sides... and it's a kind of strange loneliness. I don't have any intimate relationships here. I don't have any chummy best friends. I have a lot of acquaintances. (Ben)

I'm sick of being out in the cold. I need a beach.... There are so many limitations on what I can do after school here.... You save money... like I've got thousands of dollars... but nothing else. (Russell)

As with some teachers reported in Crowther, *et al.* (1991) and Gibson (1993), HPE teachers talked of the difficulties of multi-age classes, accessing professional support materials and in finding time to adequately plan for teaching. However, HPE teachers major concerns stemmed from the; (a) status of HPE; (b) spectrum of HPE teachers' responsibilities; (c) routine nature of HPE teaching; (d) sexual harassment; and (e) public scrutiny of their lives. Each of these areas of concern shall be briefly explored.

(a) Status of HPE

Forms of knowledge carry different status and, in turn, school subjects vary in status. For example, while the subject matter of mathematics, and those associated with it, are considered important, intellectual and deserving of curriculum space, resources and support, other school subjects do not fair so well. The negative impacts of the marginalization of HPE and HPE teachers, both personally and professionally, is well documented (eg. O'Sullivan, 1989; Sparkes, Templin and Schempp, 1990). HPE teachers in rural schools reported patterns of marginalization despite the fact that many taught a subject in years 11 and 12 which theoretically carried full academic status.

In speaking of the perceived status of HPE in their schools teachers commented:

In my last school it was a case of, 'Well go and occupy them for 40 minutes and then bring them back'. (Carl)

The administration does not give so much support. I think their perception of phys.ed. is 'Go and run around the oval' In their eyes it isn't a worthwhile subject. Our job was to organize carnivals and that was about it.... Physical activity for these kids is just a chance to get out of the classroom.... And I suppose for me it's become that way too. (Russell)

Teachers were caught in a bind that was underpinned by HPE being seen as a break from more educationally worthwhile 'mental', rather than 'manual', activity. This perspective permeated the administrations' positions' in terms of how HPE was inappropriately defined as sport, how it was timetabled and as highlighted by Sally and Gail, how it was resourced.

We don't have any undercover area here. (Sally, who teaches outside in temperatures ranging from 3-40 degrees celsius)

The principal said, 'Write a new Board programme... but you don't have any extra money in your budget'. I got down on my hands and knees... I physically got down on my hands and knees and asked for money. The Principal felt sorry for me so he gave me an extra \$500 which wasn't enough... so what I'm having to do now is borrow equipment from other schools which takes a lot of time.

(Gail)

It seems that the focus on physical activity, together with the teachers tending to work more so with the less academically able students in years 11 and 12 brought with it personal insult.

When I first came here the kids thought I was dumb because I was the PE teacher.... It's difficult, like the staff they'll go, 'PE teachers have an IQ of 10'. Everyone thinks you're dumb and you just get used to it.... And I suppose that most of the kids that do (Board) HPE are the slower kids. So automatically we're dumb because we've got all the dumb kids. (Russell)

I told all the teachers they could do a sport and organize one district carnival to help me. They just went 'Gasp... that's your job... you're the sports teacher'. That's what they call me... the sports teacher. (Gail)

(b) Spectrum of HPE teachers' responsibilities

In rural secondary schools there is frequently only one HPE teacher, as is the case for some other specialist areas. If there are two teachers, it may be that they are heavily involved in teaching subjects outside their area of specialization. Therefore, HPE teachers in rural schools were faced, not only with the challenges of beginning teaching in a rural setting, but also with many responsibilities that are considered more appropriate for experienced teachers.

When I first got here there was nothing on paper.... All I got was a note, 'Have fun, good luck... your athletics carnival is on in a week or two' ! I was then told I had to write a Board HPE programme. It was difficult because I've got no-one to consult with.... (The Board) said they didn't know that there was a course out there. And I said, 'Well there is and I'm the only one to teach it!' (Gail)

While many teachers in metropolitan schools were able to concentrate on their teaching, their peers in rural schools were frantic. Gail's story is exemplary.

My priorities are organizing... if the school has the equipment, the bus, finding out... whether we'll be missing a lesson. You could say my least priority is how my lessons run... which annoys me a lot because that should be my number one

priority... reflecting on my teaching.... I'm having to spend my whole time on the admin. side.... When I go into the classroom it's like a relief... away from everything else... and away from worrying that all the sports arrangements are in place.... I spoke to the Principal at one stage and said, ' This has got to stop, I've got too much work. Let's be realistic, I've got 60-70 hours of work a week and I'm still in my first year!' Anyway, it got to one stage where I said, ' I'm not going (to the carnival), you find another teacher' . The Principal did agree with that... but only he and two other teachers have their bus licences. (Gail)

Gail said that she liked 'the independence. I just don't like having to make the decision on my own straight away when I've never had to make that decision before.' She also found it difficult that her efforts went relatively unnoticed except 'by the secretary of the school.... None of the other teachers realize what I do.'

(c) Routine nature of HPE teaching

Despite the multifarious responsibilities of HPE teachers in rural secondary schools, several teachers were concerned with the potentially routine and 'boring' nature of their work. For example, Russell reflected that he had:

worked really hard for about six months and then got a bit slack.... A whole day of prac. is good... because I haven't got to do much. And that's pretty slack I know... I'm bored basically. (Russell)

After teaching for six months, Gail could foresee a time when her work required fewer decisions, more repetition, when she:

had everything perfect... then I'll be ready to give up teaching.... If I got into a bigger school I would just be a HPE teacher. I would not be my own boss.... I feel I'm going to be bored. (Gail)

The routine of teaching was aggravated by what they considered as 'wasting my intellect' or the lack of intellectual challenge. 'Even though it is only two years that I'd been out of uni. I felt like I was going brain dead', said Sybil who had recently left a rural high school.

It was somewhat ironic that many of the non-teaching responsibilities, mentioned as workload concerns in the previous section, were also:

the stuff that makes the time worthwhile because the opportunities associated directly with teaching are sometimes monotonous... you do the tasks over and over again. What's so good about teaching are the extra-curricula activities... like the volleyball camps, the athletic afternoons. (Ben)

This problem of lack of stimulation was clearly related to how the teachers thought about the work of teaching, and how school systems have defined HPE teaching, and not necessarily related to teaching in a rural setting.

(d) Sexual harassment

Stories from female HPE teachers exemplified the problems of harassment, the constraining feminine images to which they were to adhere, and the stereotypically masculine staffroom culture which they felt was unprofessional and exclusive. Sally recalled a colleague in HPE who would read:

*his Playboys or Penthouse... and tell me what he was looking at and I'd be saying, 'I really don't care to hear it.... If you want to discuss it, discuss it elsewhere' He ended up telling me to 'f*** off' The manual arts teacher in here was very much the same sort of bloke... talking about going out to strippers... and just generally demeaning talk.... Why should I have to put up with this in my place of work? (Sally)*

Sally was also most concerned about the concurrent harassment of the students and the sexist expectations her colleague held for the male and female students.

The female HPE teachers were also aware of the more subtle forms of constraint that they associated with being a HPE teacher in a conservative town.

(The male teachers) were waiting to see what I looked like because I was a female phys. ed.... And I think they were a little bit shocked because they thought that I was going to be butch.... They hate that I enjoy soccer. (Gail)

Given the sexist interactions and expectations described above, it is no surprise that the teachers' staffrooms were not the professionally and personally supportive retreats they are intended to be. Barbara felt alone yet she:

wouldn't choose to spend time with the people in the phys. ed. staffroom.... They really were just a mob of jocks, and I was the only female in the staffroom.... I found it absolutely abhorrent. (Barbara)

(e) Public scrutiny of the HPE teachers' lives

Due to the public nature of HPE teachers' work and the physicality which it embraces, together with the small town living conditions, many beginning HPE teachers, mentioned aspects of professional and personal surveillance was a great responsibility, if not intrusive and oppressive. While HPE teachers and perhaps those involved with undertakings such as school musicals and the like, have their work more open to criticism, those teachers who live in a small town felt an added dimension to being watched.

This particular town is very difficult to live in because the teacher accommodation is very poor.... and there's no sporting facilities except for tennis and netball... and the small town sort of mentality and the gossip... infringes upon school. You can't escape unless you get out of here. (Sally)

Added to these problems was the sharing of accommodation by teachers who must, in essence, live together 24 hours a day and this put an added strain on working relationships.

Donald also felt that he could not escape into a personal world in his town due to the limited venues for socializing and the constant awareness of his habits and diet being watched.

The worst thing is you go down to a pub with mates from football and there's students there from school.... Here there's such a limited choice that everyone goes to one of three places and everywhere you go you feel like you're being watched. I'd like to live here but in a different job, something where you're not so much in the public eye all the time. Like when you're walking down the street you have to be conscious of what you're eating because students will see the HPE teacher eating something they shouldn't.... I feel that pressure really badly. (Donald)

Not only were teachers' personal lives being watched but so too was their 'look'; what clothes they chose to wear or how they wore their hair. Russell felt that working in his town had been, 'good for about a year (but) it's the sort of town that if you're not born here you don't fit in.... People talk about me all the time because I'm different... like I've got long hair....' However, more oppressive was the community control which lead to Gail feeling uncomfortable teaching in a tennis skirt and awkward when she was seen not wearing her usual teaching shorts.

They make good comments, which should be flattering, but it still annoys me that they should have to notice me and say 'Oh, you are a lady!' That annoys me a lot. Why should you have to be noticed all the time? (Gail)

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

It is important that the abovelisted concerns of beginning HPE teachers are considered in the policies, planning and practices which support teaching in rural schools. Nevertheless, these concerns were not exclusive to teachers in non-metropolitan schools. The shared concerns of rural and urban HPE teachers are due to the nature of the subject matter knowledge of HPE, the status it carries within the schools, and the nature of HPE teachers' work, not necessarily the particular geographical context in which the teacher's work is carried out. Some distinct concerns did emerge, however, when the size of the school and number of teachers in the HPE department was considered.

Given the publicized issues and concerns facing beginning teachers in rural and provincial schools, there have been suggestions made in academic papers and teacher education documents (eg. Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987; Crowther, 1987; Gibson, 1993; Loney, 1992; NBEET, 1989; QCPCA, 1992) for the specialist preparation of teachers who intend to be considered for rural placements. Gibson (1993) summarized that the reports on teacher preparation recommend the inclusion of foci concerning:

rural culture and social conditions: Aboriginal culture and the multicultural nature of rural society; knowledge about the natural conditions of rural and especially remote areas...; the nature of small town life; mechanisms for adapting to local resources and limited services; and multi-grade teaching approaches as well as the provision of teaching practice in rural and remote areas. (p.8)

However, the most pressing concerns for the HPE teachers in rural locations (or elsewhere) would not have been greatly alleviated through such coursework. The concerns raised by HPE teachers in this study had less to do with the context of rural schooling than with the problematic nature and status of HPE teachers' work. Solutions may lie not only with addressing the induction needs of beginning teachers in rural schools but also with the generation of increased sensitivity in curriculum policies, school administrations and school communities to the role of HPE and HPE teachers. The HPE teachers themselves would be well-served by teacher preparation which skills them in context analysis, advocacy and negotiation so that they may effectively confront the problems of status, workload, sexism, resourcing, and the like. However, the benefits for students (especially those who have had their schooling in metropolitan centres) to have the opportunity to do their teaching practica in rural schools so that they develop an appreciation of the context of rural teaching is not denied (Boylan and Hemmings, 1993).

This paper has attempted to expand upon what have been reported as the concerns of beginning teachers in rural secondary schools. This has been done so on the premise that teachers working in different subject areas face particular problems. For HPE teachers, only when HPE is fully recognized as worthwhile knowledge in all schools can their working conditions become less problematic.

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