

# A Study of PE Teachers from Different Environments in Sweden

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## Introduction

A Physical Education (PE) teacher's work is both varied and shifting. The aim of this study is to describe and analyse PE teachers presentations of their practical work, i. e. make the environments and experiences that generate the contents of the subject visible. The starting point for this paper is an examination of PE teachers' customs and practices in school.

What is it that influences PE teaching of today? In today's world the focus is on the body and physical activity, in school as well as in society. Today, the individual teacher and schools in Sweden have a large responsibility to interpret the government guidelines, and implement meaningful teaching. Teaching practices in the goal related school of today vary greatly from school to school. Every school writes, on the basis of the guidelines, its own local work plan for every subject. In the local syllabus for Physical Education and Health, the teacher must take into consideration the guidelines, the individual community's school plan and the conditions existing at the school.

According to Engström, every child must have the right to be physically active and the right to participate in sports activities. Furthermore, he points out that because school reaches all children and teenagers, it is the most important environment for influencing physical activity (Engström 2004a). A message from the General Association of International Sports Federation president, Hein Verbruggen from the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Summit on Physical Education in Magglingen 2005, is that:

Physical Education is the most effective and reliable means to lay the foundations for an active, healthy and well-balanced lifestyle through the practice of sport and physical activity by today's children and youth. (Verbruggen, 2005)

A PE teacher must conduct himself/herself according to the social situation he/she finds in his/her school and also in relation to the environment of the individual school. The school itself is an institution with both long history and strong traditions, which most likely influence the work in school.

### **How it started...**

In spring 2001 Stockholm University College of Physical Education and Sports (GIH) started a multi-disciplinary study called School-Sport-Health (SIH) together with the Karolinska Institutet (KI), Stockholm Institute of Higher Education (LHS) and Stockholm University (SU). The scientific leader of the project was Lars-Magnus Engström, Professor in Sports Pedagogy. The aim of the study was to investigate 2000 school children at 9, 12 and 15 years of age with regard to their physical and health status, level of physical activity and how they experienced the subject Physical Education and Health.

The selection of children was based on randomly chosen schools and classes from the whole of Sweden. In the study 48 randomly chosen schools and nearly 2000 pupils from school year 3, 6 and 9 participated (figure 1). The study included background data such as socio-economic status, geographical and environmental factors.



*Figure 1.* Randomly chosen school

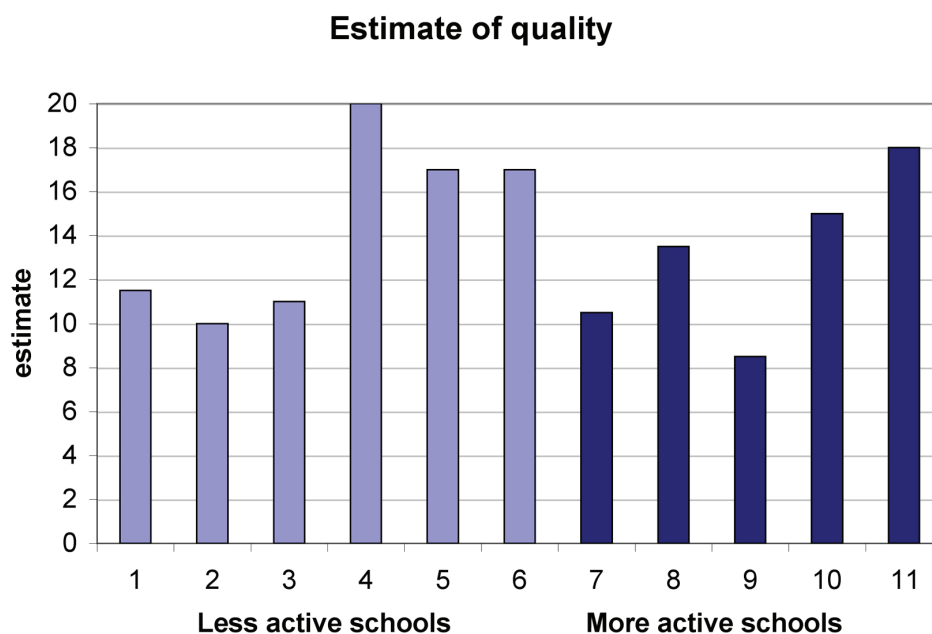
In addition, 75 PE teachers were given a questionnaire as part of the SIH-study in 2001. There were both multiple choice and open-ended questions. These studies are presented in previously published reports and articles (Lundvall, Meckbach, Thedin Jakobsson 2002; Lundvall & Meckbach 2004). Sixteen teachers of PE and Health took part in an interview study in 2001. The focus in this study was to explore and, from a didactical perspective, to

analyse the teachers' discourses in PE and Health, i.e. how to teach PE, goals and content of classes, and what students learn in PE and Health (Meckbach 2004).

A follow-up study was carried out in the autumn 2002 and its aim was to illustrate differences in children's physical activity and how this was reflected in motor skills and health condition, but also to analyse the schools surroundings and the significance of living conditions. Furthermore, an important purpose was to study how children's habits changed from spring semester in year 6 to autumn semester in year 8. To make these analyses possible, five schools which had the most, and six school which the least physically active students were chosen from the base material from 2001 (Engström 2004b).

In the base study from 2001 a questionnaire was answered by a total of 75 teachers. Ten of these (5 men and 5 women) came from schools that were included in the follow-up study one and a half years later. The material showed that one man and four women were teaching at schools with low rates of activity (grade 6) and three men and two women at schools with high levels of activity (grade 6). All of them except for one had a degree in teaching. The length of time devoted to teaching PE and Health varied between the less active schools (70–90 min/week) and more active schools (90–105 min/week). Other results that emerged are that teachers from the more active schools preferred professional development with focus on the PE and Health subject. At the less active schools the teachers prefer professional development given to the whole group of staff at school. Concerning the goals for teaching, the teachers at the more active schools point out that swimming and developing social skills are important. Teachers at the less active schools believe that knowledge of the most common sports is very important.

The follow-up study, which was carried out in the autumn of 2002 on location at the respective schools, also included an estimate on the quality of the premises and equipment, issues related to indoor and outdoor activity, the condition of the school grounds and the surroundings (figure 2). On the whole, a clear distinction of facilities did not emerge, however more of the lesser-active schools assessed (4 out of 6) have a low standard.



**Figure 2.** Estimates of quality for lesser active schools and more active schools.

Allow me to give a short description of students from the highly active schools and the lesser active schools with the help of Engström's accounts. Some of the results that stand out between the data collected in 2001 and the data collected in 2002 are that the differences between the highly and lesser active schools are still apparent. The more active schools still have students that are more active than the students from lesser active schools, the proportion of students that are members of sports clubs is higher among students from highly active schools and students from the highly active schools exert more effort in their PE and Health lessons (Engström 2004a).

The conclusion points to observations that the differences between high active and low active students can be, to a large extent, explained by environmental factors. What influence do the PE teachers have on the students' desire for movement and knowledge within the subject of PE and Health? Why is it that at some schools the students are much more physically active, and yet at other schools much less so? Is it the PE teacher's attitude to the subject, his/her method of teaching, or are there other factors that influence student's level of activity/participation? These were a few thoughts that justified interviewing a group of teachers again.

In this follow-up study, in which teachers from both highly and lesser active schools were interviewed, I wanted to describe and analyse the teachers' accounts of their practice, i.e. highlight the environment and experience issues that generate the subjects content. This study focused on questions concerning the teachers' education, what knowledge they believe to be of significant importance in the subject of PE and Health, the aim of the subject in schools, and thoughts about their own teaching.

## **Learning and experience**

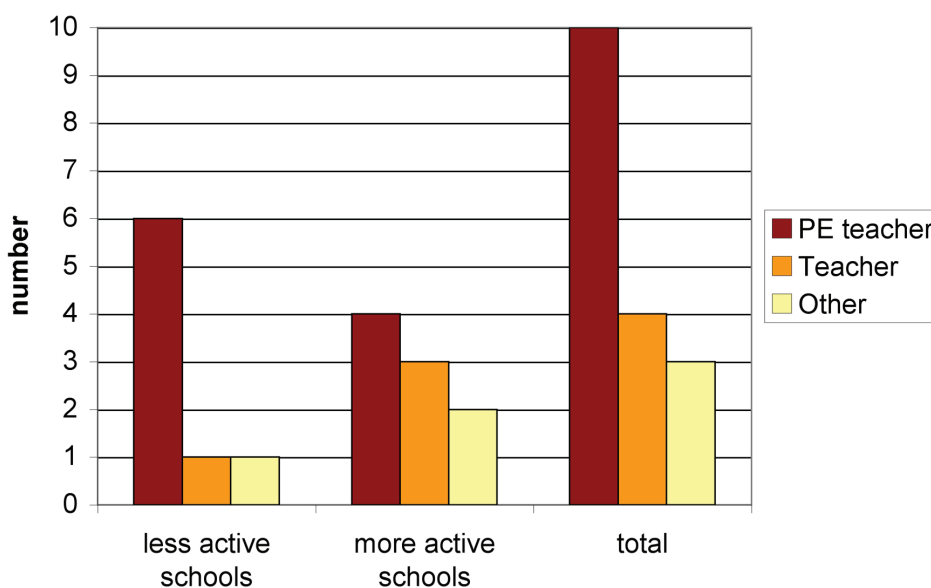
Schools have often been criticised for not resembling reality or not including practical activities. Schoolwork has become part of school culture and a form of replacement activity in relation to authentic experiences (Carlgren 1999). As a result students activities are not practical, which means that school becomes less meaningful. How does this relate to a subject that, which for a long time has been characterised as a practical and aesthetic subject, i.e. a subject where the gathering of knowledge can be achieved through experience, perception and the training of the body's movement? (Meckbach & Söderström 2002).

We know that many youngsters come into contact with, and take part in organised sports activities in their own time from an early age. We also know that many who choose to educate themselves and go on to become PE teachers have a large experience of sports activity outside of school. As a result the teaching staff within the subject of PE and Health already have a sound understanding of how movement training should and shouldn't be carried out. From one perspective, these people have learned pedagogical, didactic and/or methodological ways of conducting themselves based on actual experience from participation (and learning) from well-distinguished socially focused sports activities, where the activities structured the practical work. Therefore, it is important to study the PE teachers' background and experiences as a mean of understanding their education/practical experience as a learning environment. This makes it interesting to study the backgrounds of those who teach PE and Health from the two extreme groups (more and less active schools).

### *The teachers included in the study*

The teachers of PE and Health interviewed for the follow-up study of 2002 were from either grade 6 schools (also comprising of grade 8) or from the upper level of compulsory school, where the students now attend. The total number of PE teachers came to 17, in which 11 were women and 6 were men. Of these teachers, nine (6 women and 3 men) came from schools, which in this study were classified as having the most physically active students (more active schools), and eight teachers (5 women and 3 men) from schools with the least physically active students (less active schools). How did the education status of the two groups of teachers appear?

At the more active schools, four teachers had a degree in teaching physical education with a minimum of 90 ECTS in Physical Education (PE teacher), three had a degree in teaching of another subject (teacher), one had local teacher exemption and finally one was uneducated in this field (other). At the less active schools six PE teachers had a least 90 ECTS, one had another teaching qualification (teacher), and one was uneducated (other). Therefore, of the total number included in the study, ten were PE teachers, four had teacher qualifications in another area but between 7,5 ECTS to 30 ECTS in PE, and three were unqualified teachers. This shows that 82 % of the PE teachers had gone through teachers training. Approximately 40 % of the teachers interviewed had at maximum 30 ECTS or no education at all within the area of Physical Education. It is worth noting that most of the qualified PE teachers were in the less active schools (figure 3).



*Figure 3.* The education of the 17 teachers in the study

75 PE teachers from 48 randomly chosen schools participated in the base study from 2001, in which 73 % had been through a teachers training programme. The study showed that lesser-educated teachers often taught younger students. Similar results are also found in international studies (Hardman & Marshall 2000; Hardman 2003; Eriksson et al 2003; Brettscneider et al 2005). Approximately 40 % were not qualified to teach PE and Health in the follow-up study. The consequences for learning and the status of the subject in school can therefore be discussed.

A consequence of this may be that the teaching is built up around teacher's practical knowledge, which has its motor and carnal base deeply rooted in the body (Liedman 2002). The sport you can control bodywise and have experience of will most likely be the sport that dominates your teaching in a stressed or pressured situation.

## **How is the teaching carried out and what must the students learn in PE and Health?**

I have chosen to study what the teachers point out as important knowledge, which activities structure the practical work and how the actual process of knowledge is carried out in the two studied environments, less and more active schools.

### ***What do the teachers want from their students?***

The teachers from the less active schools want their students to be physically active and to enjoy PE and Health lessons. Some of the teachers point out the importance of teaching their students different sports. One teacher says that the aim is to help the students to feel safe during the lesson and to be "friends with their own body" and "to try on the basis of their own conditions". One teacher believes in encouraging students to assist in the design of the lesson plan, which will motivate the students to participate, and to take greater responsibility for their own training. The picture that appears in this group of teachers is that the students should learn why they learn different kinds of sports. One teacher expresses this by saying: "When doing hurdles I try to teach them which is their strong foot."

A unanimous view of the teachers in this group (more active schools) is that they aim for all students to participate during the lessons. Furthermore, they say they want to create security in their groups of students, which one of the teachers expressed as following: "to give security to the pupils so they can handle different kinds of situations because there is no other subject that can damage someone's self-esteem as quickly as PE and Health".

This group of teachers also believe that the students must learn about how the body works. For example, one teacher expressed it as: "Firstly, motor skills.... you get better and can keep track of things and how the body works. Also, the significance of movement, body movement, that's important". Many of the teachers point out the importance of helping the students to understand the significance of taking responsibility for their own gathering of knowledge. To learn to warm up before an activity, and that they find out individually what is suitable for them and what they are interested in. Many teachers also draw attention to the importance of giving the students a good base of different kinds of sports and activities, a form of knowledge for life, but also to find individual solutions to stimulate physical activity. One teacher expresses the useful perspective and the importance of the subject as following: "They learn orienteering and it is useful for them, but they also learn that it's important to be physical and to train all muscle-groups". Another teacher states that the students should learn to understand the connection between physical activity and health. A more homogeneous picture appears in this group concerning important elements such as security, participation and self-responsibility.

### ***The meaning of the Physical Education and Health subject***

Since 1994 the subject has been known as PE & Health. It is not merely a name change (from Physical Education to Physical Education and Health); the time dedicated to the subject has been reduced, the subject has become goal-related (like other subjects in school), and it has a new curriculum. What meaning does the subject have in school today? How do the teachers conduct themselves during PE lessons and what does its name denote?

All teachers from less active schools point out that the biggest change is in the subject's health perspective. The interview material shows that focus is on the concept of health in different ways of teaching. So what is health? Someone expresses this as: "That your body is healthy, so to say, but it is also to do with your head". One teacher believes that PE teachers today talk about health with the students, "it has to be more healthy to bicycle to the supermarket to buy candy than to take the moped... What is more healthy than cycling then? Well you can walk or run... shall I buy candy or...?" It is evident from the interview data that the concept of health is analysed among the teachers. Firstly from a perspective of usefulness, to be active, to eat and sleep well etc, but also from an investment point of view concerning the pupils understanding of how physical activity can help the body to be functional throughout life. Some of the teachers say that they do prefer to have theory lessons, but tend to incorporate it into general teaching, and one believes that "health is to participate during lessons".

The teachers from the more active schools point out that the name change has brought a focus on exercise rather than achievement in different sports. As one of the teachers states, "the subject today stands for healthy youngsters and healthy adults who willingly participate in physical activity to keep themselves healthy". There is no clear-cut template for the conception of health in teaching. One teacher taking part believes that the goal is to encourage the students to understand the importance of physical activity and the means to achieve this are movement activities and games. One teacher teaches health constantly through dialogues with the students and with information supplied during the lessons. A useful perspective and investment viewpoint of having knowledge in health (physical activity, nutrition, sleep) also appears in this group. One teacher wants the students to understand connections such as "what can keep me fit and healthy", and another teacher gives the following example: "to feel good and to have the energy for daily life, and not to have to work 100 percent when you are carrying your shopping bags from the food store, but to have energy left to do other things".

### ***Important goals for teaching***

The goals for teaching among the teachers from the less active schools are focused around two main themes. Firstly, the teachers want the students to be interested in physical activity here and now, but also in lifelong exercising. The second motive is to get the students to be physically active and to encourage them to understand the importance of exercising the body: "to be active and for them to understand why it is important to be active". Other goals are exercising to feel good, aspects concerning motor skills, to have fun and to develop a positive attitude towards sports. To help the students to develop good social skills is something many PE teachers draw attention to.

Many different motives for goals within the subject stand out in the group of teachers from the more active schools. Some teachers express interest in the meeting of their stu-

dents, to encourage them to feel happy when exercising and to get to know their own bodies. The teachers emphasise physical, psychological and social skills. Others stress that the students should have an understanding of why exercising is important, how to carry out different activities and how this can be done in an enjoyable way. One teacher expresses this as: “get them to like and enjoy exercising, especially those who are less active. My goal is to try and reach everyone”.

### *How is the teaching carried out?*

The teachers from the less active schools were not as accustomed to analysing their own teaching process. Their responses concerned everything from individual teaching to yearly planning and periods devoted to different activities or structured lessons in relation to school competitions. The talks also touched upon the teaching in various situations depending on things like the student preferences, season, or access to premises. An individual lesson plan could look like the following:

...Firstly, I gather everyone together in the beginning, and then I check that everyone is there and if someone is not, I check why, to try and find the cause and if we can do something else instead, take a walk or go to the gym. Then, often some kind of warming up maybe to music or a game and then often a main activity, common exercises, one and one, bounce and catch and then a bit of fun with “FIA basketball”. Then the lesson is over.

The teachers that described their planned periods base these on the seasons and particular sports activities. One of the teachers said:

...Well, the outdoor period consists of quite a lot of athletics...running short distance, long jump, shot put and of course ballgames like football... ultimate, lacrosse and then traditional rounders. In October we go inside and I guess it is cardiovascular, strength, sometimes to music and sometimes circle training... a bit of gymnastics. Well, cardiovascular comes up now and then during the year and the same with ballgames, which comes in different periods and also dance... well foxtrot, bug and some salsa.

Many of the teachers had made a plan for the whole year and some of them also pointed out that they tested the students' cardiovascular fitness or that school competitions controlled the content of the lessons. One of the teachers drew attention to the fact that students care about feeling safe in a group and the content of the teaching: “divide into teams and everyone work together...we will have a competition, but how do we act? Is it as important to be a good winner as a good loser? I feel that things like these are what I work with all the time”. None of the teachers questioned the contents in relation to the students learning or progression of knowledge in PE and Health.

A teacher from one of the more active schools follows an annual plan with periods of outdoor and indoor activities. A well-planned and varied content to meet the students' different needs is also mentioned. Some of the teachers point out the importance of good planning and of having a clear goal when teaching. One teacher expresses it like this: “ We

try to have a heading for ourselves, maybe so we know why we do this". Another teacher states that the PE staff plans the lessons together: "we plan the content together... we talk a lot about what to do in seventh, eighth and ninth grade and try to follow a path so that the students become absorbed in the subject and learn more and more". This group talks less about the specific sport activities, someone mentions outdoor teaching and its possibilities for learning and training of, for example, cardiovascular or learning how to do orienteering.

## Summary

Who are the teachers in the researched schools, which in this study are from two different environments, less active and more active schools? The base study within the SIH-project mentioned earlier, showed the diversity of teachers' educational backgrounds. The teachers' study is based on the selection of a number of classes from compulsory schools throughout Sweden (grade 3, 6 and 9) where the teachers were investigated. This follow-up study carried out one and a half years later, focused on a number of extreme schools and concerned the students' physical activity status. Five schools, which had the most, and six schools, which had the least physically active students, were chosen from the base material from 2001. PE teachers from these schools were interviewed. 17 teachers participated in the study and 82 % of these had gone through a teacher's education, but almost half (40 %) had only between 7,5 ECTS to 30 ECTS education or no education at all within the field PE and Health. There is the same amount of educated teachers in both extreme groups.

I have been trying to find differences between teachers' statements about the PE and Health subject from the less active and more active schools that could possibly explain the differences between the two types of schools. There doesn't seem to be a clear picture concerning what the teachers say about the subject's importance, learning focus or choice of activities.

In what way do the teachers talk about learning within PE and Health? They don't comment on the subject or learning in terms of movement culture, coordinate, rhythmic and motor skills etc. These goals for knowledge are found in the syllabus. However, the teachers from the less active schools stress the significance of participating in different sports, for all of the students to understand the importance of practicing physical activities, and the development of social skills in the subject. The teachers from the more active schools have formed similar opinions, but they emphasize even more the importance of developing the students' social, psychological and physical skills. Perhaps this can be interpreted in terms of the fact that most PE teachers are found at the less active schools. An English study claims that sports oriented teachers point out social goals for learning more than untraditionally educated teachers in PE who put the learning process first (Curtner-Smith & Meek 2000).

From a socio-cultural perspective on learning (Carlgren 1999; Säljö 2000, 2005) we can establish that students of PE and Health acquire information and knowledge in sport activities that give them the possibility to contribute and take part in socially designed sport practices, which seem to constitute the subject of PE and Health. They acquire information on how to cooperate and how different sport skills should be performed. Of the teachers

included in the study, several emphasised that they believe health work or “health” to be an important ingredient in teaching, which, one can assume, also influences the choice of activity and the environment which creates the subjects content.

In this study a general consensus did not appear over what constitutes the basis or foundation of the subject of PE and Health. Discussions about what will or should form the basis of the subject exist in many countries. For example in Germany the researchers and PE teachers discuss what quality in PE means (Brettschneider 2005). Another example: in Great Britain lecturers in the practise of teaching tries to introduce the concept of education (literacy) as a way of expanding the concept of knowledge (Whitehead 2001).

My text can be seen as a contribution to further understanding of how different social environments influence teaching circumstances for teachers and students, and what constitutes the environment for learning in the subject of PE and Health.

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