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Highly Able Students in Physical Education

The learning experiences of a group of highly able PE students at the end of compulsory schooling

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Abstract

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Aims

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the learning experiences of a group of highly talented year 9 physical education pupils. Further the aim is to gain an insight in to how the students feel they develop and improve and how they could maximize their experiences and learning. A key reason for this research is the apparent lack of studies surrounding highly able physical education students in Sweden.

Research Method

A qualitative interview based study has been conducted. A total of 12 highly able year 9 students from a large state school took part in the interviews. The highly able students were selected using the PESSYP definition of talented physical education students.

Results

The students taking part in the study felt their needs were not always met during physical education, though they really enjoyed the subject. Students often felt under-stimulated and wished for greater challenges. There was a general feeling that their requirements were not always met by the curriculum, syllabus, and the teaching practices.

Contents

Abstract		2
1	Introduction	4
	1.1 Aims	5
2	Theoretical Framework and Previous Research	6
	2.1 Physical Education: Historical Development	6
	2.2 Physical Education: Today	7
	2.3 Physical Education: National Curriculum (Lpo 94)	8
	2.4 Defining the Highly Able Student	9
	2.5 High Ability in Physical Education	11
	2.6 Talent in Educational Steer Documents	12
	2.7 Teaching Highly Able Students	13
3	Principal Questions	16
4	Research Methodology	17
	4.1 Qualitative Research: Choice of Method	17
	4.2 Interviews	17
	4.3 Sample Population	19
	4.4 Interview Implementation and Procedure	20
	4.5 Processing of Interview Data	22
	4.6 Method Evaluation	23
5	Results and Analysis of Findings	25
	5.1 Perception of Individual Experiences	25
	5.2 Importance of Learning and Experiencing	30
	5.3 Maximizing Experiences and Learning	32
6	Discussion	34
	6.1 Research Method Reflection	34
	6.2 Perception of Individual Experiences	35
	6.3 Importance of Learning and Experiencing	36
	6.4 Maximizing Experiences and Learning	37
7	Conclusions	39
8	References	40
9	Appendix	42

Introduction

How individual pupils develop and to what level they develop in physical education is an area that I've become increasingly interested in during the 11 years I've been teaching physical education in Sweden. This area of interest has partly developed due to a rather rare opportunity I've had at teaching the same children all the way through from year 1 to year 9. To follow their development in physical education and to have the opportunity to have a significant influence upon their progress has been a very stimulating aspect to my work. One of my key goals has always been for every pupil to reach their potential regardless of their level of ability.

The National Curriculum (Lpo 94) in general expresses the importance of teaching being organized to suit each individual pupil's ability and needs, with a pupils continued learning and knowledge development emphasized throughout. Further the syllabus for physical education highlights the importance of personal progression where the development of the individual's physical, psychological and social ability is a central theme.

Current physical education literature in Sweden is somewhat dominated by a focus on the individual development of less-able pupil's and gender issues within the subject. This is perhaps not so surprising as the National Curriculum (Lpo 94) pays particular attention to just these issues, as highlighted by the points below in the equivalent of education section of the document.

...the school has a special responsibility for those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for the education.(p4)

The school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender roles and should therefore provide pupils with the opportunity of developing their own abilities and interests irrespective of their sexual identity.(p4,5)

Although the development of each individual pupil is so clearly central to the curriculum a significant group of pupil is seemingly neglected in the current research available in physical education, as well as in the key education authority steer documents. These are the high performing pupils - those pupils that have exceptional talent in the subject of physical education. These pupils have particular learning requirements, just as other specific groups

with special educational demands, which a P.E teacher needs to consider in the planning and execution of their classes. As such it is perhaps surprising that this group of learners is not specifically mentioned in the central steer documents set out by the Swedish education authority. The English education authority highlighted the importance of just this issue in the 2005 White Paper, *Higher Standards: Better Schools for All* (Dfes, 2005) where their objective is for every individual pupil to have the right to reach their full potential with personalized support, including the gifted and talented. Further the Physical Education Sports Strategy and Young People (PESSYP), which is part of the U.K governments Every Child Matters; Change for Children strategy, has clear goals set down for enhancing the range and quality of teaching and learning for talented youngsters in physical education in order to boost their attainment, aspirations, motivation and self-esteem (Grout and Long 2009).

1.1 Aims

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the learning experiences of a group of highly talented year 9 physical education pupils. Further the aim is to gain an insight in to how the students feel they develop and improve and how they could maximize their experiences and learning.

After the theoretical framework and previous research section the principal questions to be examined in this study will be identified.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

2.1 Physical Education: Historical development

To gain a greater understanding of physical education, the principles it's built upon, and the changes and progress that have occurred, it's important to review the subject historically.

Ever since the emergence of a formal schooling system in the early nineteenth century the subject of physical education has endured significant changes in Sweden. Where even the name has seen alterations over the years; *Gymnastik (1842)*, *Gymnastik med lek och idrott (1919)*, *Gymnastik (1969)*, *Idrott (1980)*, *Idrott och Hälsa (1994)*.

Claes Annerstedt (1991) has charted six phases in the development of physical education which provide an insight in to the subject's progression over the last 200 years. The *establishment phase* 1813-1860 he identifies as a period where the general interest in P.E was weak, opportunities and equipment were few, and where the focus was upon rather restrictive physical therapy and military gymnastics based upon the world renowned Per Henrik Ling's theories of exercise . In the *military phase* 1860-1890 lessons are dominated by soldier training through gymnastics and exercise and Ling's theories are developed to include more precision gymnastics. Engström and Redelius (2002) note the establishment at this time of Ling-gymnastics educational merits through his son Hjalmar's development of a wide-ranging systematic movement compilation. Here ideas of good posture and controlled alternating body movements took prominence over any form of competition or performance related training. The *stabilizing phase* 1890-1912 is where Ling-gymnastics pedagogical content is heavily influential, the military importance is diluted, equipment availability improves, and P.E starts to gain legitimacy. In the *breakaway phase* 1912-1950 sport, games, and play start to take precedence over the pedagogical gymnastics. Significantly during this phase it's also the time when the name of the subject is changed to include 'sport' and 'play'. This phase in physical education tends to reflect changes occurring in wider society with acceleration in the growth of organized competitive sport, and as Engström and Redelius (2002) note mass media's increasing interest in results and winners further enhancing the competitive angle within sport. During the *physiological phase* 1950-1970 tougher physical condition training becomes central to the subject and the disciplined group gymnastics started to be replaced by more unregulated sport and games. From 1970 Annerstedt (1991) identifies an *uncertainty phase*

where physical education is increasingly decentralized, the aim of developing the individual pupil's physical, psychological, and social abilities are identified, and mixed sex classes are introduced – suggesting a break in traditional thinking that male and female bodies need to be trained differently, as well as for different outcomes. As Engström and Redelius (2002) note it is during this phase in 1980 that the name change to just 'idrott' (sport) occurs, thus indicating a significant widening of the subject's content.

These phases certainly have a tendency to reflect happenings in wider society of the same time period, with changes in physical education occurring due to changes in society. The military influence at the turn of the century in a period of increasing instability in world politics, and the establishment of sport in the curriculum in line with rapid growth of organized sport in Sweden are just two such examples. Further Engström and Redelius (2002) have suggested that it's possible throughout these different periods of physical education to see a reflection in the content of what is understood to be the right type of physical activity by those with the power to make policy and decide on the subject's content.

In summary, physical education foundations were formed by the desire to construct an aesthetically pleasing body, with military connotations and restrictive practices. Through time the rapidly growing interest for sport, competition, and human physiology took centre stage. Until the present day where the individual's developments stands in focus, the weight of sporting presentation has been toned down, and health related issues have gained greater status – not least through the subject's latest name change in Lpo 94 to *Idrott och Hälsa* (Sport and Health)

2.2 Physical Education: Today

According to Ekberg and Erberth (2000) the current situation for physical education in schools is a goal orientated subject where the focus has leaned towards the individual pupil's requirements, where the health element within physical activity has gained significant ground, and the aim of lifelong physical activity is high priority. Annerstedt *et al* (2008) see the change of name in 1994's new curriculum to include the word *health* as a clear declaration that P.E necessitates a health perspective. Although they do acknowledge that recent research suggests that many teachers find the subject excessively theoretical and lacking in the necessary level of actual physical activity.

Engström and Redelius (2002) note that parallel to traditional competitive sports, alternative forms of exercise have started to take an increased role in P.E teaching, which along with games and recreation have been legitimated as a way to promote life-long physical exercise to the pupils. Annerstedt *et al* (2008) note that swimming and orienteering are now the only sports mentioned in the syllabus, where the syllabus tends to refer to physical activities rather than sport, and states that

“The current professional direction in Sweden represents a shift away from traditional sports to a greater focus on the process of engagement in physical activities” (p427)

Though in reality Annerstedt *et al* (2008) acknowledge that, despite what the syllabus states, it is still sporting activities that dominate physical education lessons.

When the focus of this essay is on talented pupils it's perhaps relevant to acknowledge the current state of extra-curricular activities as a part of school sport, and particularly inter-school sport tournaments, as these are traditionally outlets for talented sporting pupils to test and further develop their skills. Annerstedt *et al* (2008) state the previous tradition of inter-school competitive sport has dwindled, to a level where only a limited amount of events are held each year. According to them this trend is not only due to a well functioning out-of-school sports club system, but also due to a rather negative standpoint regarding competitiveness in schools.

2.3 Physical Education: National Curriculum (Lpo 94)

Annerstedt *et al* (2008) identifies the Swedish national curriculum as perhaps the least detailed in the western world. Set goals to work towards and achievement requirements are highlighted, though significantly with the path chosen to meet these demands left open to the discretion of the individual teaching establishment, where even the pupils can have a certain degree of influence.

The National Curriculum (Lpo94) in general expresses the importance of teaching being organized to suit each individual pupil's ability and needs, with a pupils continued learning and knowledge development emphasized throughout. What's more this further learning should be based upon the pupil's previous experiences and knowledge. Additionally the school's role in motivating pupils to discover their own uniqueness is also highlighted.

In the syllabus the central aim of physical education and its role in education is identified;

“Sports, outdoor life and different forms of exercise and recreation are of great importance for health. Children and youth need to acquire knowledge of how the body works, and how habits, regular physical exercise and outdoor life are related to their physical and psychological well-being. The subject aims at developing pupils' physical, psychological and social abilities, as well as providing knowledge of the importance of lifestyle for health.”

“A basic aim of the subject is also to create conditions so that everyone can participate in different activities on their own terms, develop a sense of community and the ability to co-operate, as well as an understanding and respect for others.”(skolverket.se)

According to the syllabus the school in its teaching of physical education should aim to ensure that pupils develop in certain specific areas. Here are two such specific points where the each pupil should:

“ develop their physical, mental and social ability, as well as develop a positive self-image.”

“develop and strengthen their ability and desire to exercise”(skolverket.se)

It is clear from these key points taken from the physical education curriculum that the individual pupil should be given the opportunity to develop, regardless of ability level. Physical, mental and social abilities are all identified as key areas for personal progression, as well as building a firm foundation for a future healthy and active lifestyle.

2.4 Defining the Highly Able Student

What is highly able? Through an analysis of a wide range of literature it soon becomes apparent that forming an exact definition of highly able is no easy task. The term highly able and its meaning is a much debated issue and the usage of the word varies widely in different contexts. It is often a word that is inter-changed with other words like talented, gifted, special ability, and super normal, as can be seen in the review of literature in this section.

Persson (1996) identifies how terms associated with talent and ability have become rather diffuse in Swedish education as educators have a tendency to refer to ‘all’ children as *begåvad* (talented). The idea being to possess talent is to have the ability to learn, without any

reference to the level of ability to learn. He suggests in the Swedish language the use of *särbegåvad* (especially talented / highly able) is perhaps more relevant.

Persson (1997a) composed a broad definition of who may be considered highly able for the extensive research he conducted into the issue and the interviewing of 232 different teachers. He states

A highly able child, in the context of this investigation, is defined as a child who continuously surprises you as a teacher by his or her unusual ability in one or several school subjects or in any activity mainly pursued when not in school, such as is the case with, for example, much of sports and music. (p21)

Winner (1996) identifies three common characteristics as a way of referring to high ability children, which clearly differentiates them from a child of normal ability.

1. *Precocity*. Where the ‘especially talented’ child has a tendency to develop in the area of which they are gifted at an unusually young age. Their progress is rapid, as learning within their area of interest is relatively easier for these individuals.
2. *Persistency at developing at own rate*. Here the highly able child sets their own faster learning curve in their specific area of talent, where a significant amount of self-teaching occurs. They find their area of interest highly motivating and exciting, which leads them to make further progress as well as to show creativity in the methods they employ to solve problems and develop their talent.
3. *A burning desire to master*. The highly able child is highly self motivated, with rather an obsessive interest over their specific area of talent. They are able to keep a strong focus and detach themselves from possible distractions in their vicinity, with a burning desire to master skills and techniques. Their obsessive nature and ease of learning leads to high achievement.

According to Winner (1996), whilst a child of normal talent can be curious, smart, hard-working, they do not possess the precocity and rapidness of learning experienced by a child of ‘special talent’, or indeed that inner burning desire to master a domain. They require instruction, support and encouragement to make progress, and contrary to the especially talented child show little in the way of individual creativity. So in these three ways an ‘especially talented’ child is qualitatively different to a child of normal talent.

Bonnie Cramond (2004) in the article *Can We, Should We, Need We Agree on a Definition of Giftedness?* questions whether there is actually a need to arrive at a universal definition of talent or giftedness. She challenges the assumption that something has to be defined in order to begin to understand it, and how in fact it often only after significant study in to a subject is it possible to start thinking about definitions. Further she questions whether any possible definition is fixed in time and space anyway.

By breaking down 'giftedness' into three forms: intelligence, creativity, and talent, Cramond (2004) highlights how there are no universally accepted definitions of just these components, so what hope is there for a universally accepted definition of giftedness itself. Within this she highlights the difficulty in defining talent:

Even talent defies agreement in definition and measurement. The Olympic judging, which is supposed to be conducted by qualified experts of specific talents from around the world, is fraught with disagreements and errors. (p15)

This statement leads Cramond (2004) on to argue that any definition of giftedness/talent doesn't need to be fixed in time or space, as history, cultural differences, and the relative individual situation all play their part in the term's construction.

2.5 High Ability in Physical Education

As mentioned earlier in the introduction there is little in the way of research conducted in Sweden surrounding the concept of high ability in physical education. However in the United Kingdom it is possible to review a certain amount of information regarding the gifted and talented in P.E.

Fisher (1996) has highlighted P.E as a significant part of the educational process, and within this the important role that the identification and encouragement of talented pupils plays in the development of youngsters in general. He also notes the difficulty in identifying talent in P.E, defining what they possess and at what level, especially as regards youngsters when they mature at different ages and rates, and also have a tendency to show rather large fluctuations in their ability and performance. Fisher also suggests that defining a high ability pupil isn't easy when it is often this type of pupil that does something different or '*breaks the mould*', thus in line with Winner's (1996) definition of talent and the concept of creativity.

In the U.K the Youth Sport Trust is a charity that aims to improve the quality and quantity of PE and sport for youngsters, and plays a key role in supporting the governments Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Their *PE and Sport Strategy for Young People* (PESSYP) has paid particular attention to the gifted and talented in P.E. They've produced a definition of gifted and talented pupils in PE, to help educators identify these pupils and provide the right level of support for these pupils to realise their potential. The PESSYP definition is related to five contexts of ability.

***Physical ability** is revealed through pupils' competence and fitness to perform a range of physical activities.*

***Social ability** is exhibited in social contexts, and is the basis of leadership, teamwork and similar concepts.*

***Personal ability** underpins an individual's capacity for self-regulation, self-belief and commitment to mastery.*

***Cognitive ability** is shown in planning and compositional settings, as well as knowledge and understanding of central physical educational concepts.*

***Creative ability** is evidenced when learners respond to challenges and tasks with fluency, originality, and sensitivity to problems. (Youthsporttrust.org)*

Pupils are regarded as gifted and talented if they show a high level of ability within all five contexts, or demonstrate the potential to so. It's suggested that one to two students per class possess these abilities. It is worth noting that all five of these contexts are also central themes in the Swedish curriculum for physical education - Lpo94.

2.6 Talent in Educational Steer Documents

As far back as 1994 the Council of Europe identified the special needs of gifted children in schools. An official recommendation was made for member countries to have mechanisms in place to provide for the needs of their most gifted children in their school systems

"Gifted children should be able to benefit from appropriate educational conditions that would allow them to develop fully their abilities, for their own benefit and for the benefit of society as a whole. No country can indeed afford to waste talents and it would be a waste of human

resources not to identify in good time any intellectual or other potentialities. Adequate tools are needed for this purpose". (Council of Europe. Recommendation 1248, 1994).

Further the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has according to Mitchell (1995) provided a definition of special educational needs to not only include those with difficulties but also those with high ability

"Special Educational needs are deemed to be those which arise from disabilities or learning difficulties or from special abilities (i.e gifted and talented students) (p26)

However Persson (1997a) notes that the Swedish National Curriculum (Lpo 94), despite implying that the teaching should match the individuals needs and that schools for all abilities should be the aim, suggests that highly able students need little in the way of special attention, that the highly able are not classed as special needs students and are more than capable of looking after their own requirements. Persson (1997a) highlights the definition of special needs in Lpo94 only encompassing those children with learning difficulties, and thus not in line with either the Council of Europe or UNESCO's recommendations as regards highly able students and their special needs.

2.7 Teaching Highly Able Students

Winner (1996) identifies three good reasons that support the argument for having some form of special education for highly able students, which could be related to PE students: the school demands too little, little demand leads to under-performance and highly able students from lower socio-economic status suffer worst from a lack of special initiatives.

Further Winner (1996) states that too few challenges in schools lead to a situation where students are not using their full potential, and thus significantly under-performing. This she sees as especially true for highly able students where the gap between their potential and effort has a tendency to be greatest.

Persson (1997a) highlights the complexity of teaching highly able students in a strong egalitarian educational system like Sweden's, where a level of ignorance can lead a teacher to view the term *highly able* as a threat to the school's well established democratic principles.

In teaching highly able students Persson (1997a) identifies the importance of the *principle of legitimacy*, which is based upon students feeling acceptance in the social setting in which they are involved. Persson states:

Highly able children must get to know and experience that their talent is acceptable and of worth, and therefore must consequently be encouraged and given the opportunity to use and develop their talents. (p.283)

Further Persson (1997a) notes that although other countries have organized their teaching of highly able pupils in a wide range of ways, whether it's in or outside the classroom, it is possible to see a connection between the different policies as they all in some way aim to increase the tempo of the teaching as well as give greater possibility for more in-depth study.

Winner (1996) sees the streaming of classes as another common procedure which is used when dealing with students of varying ability. She identifies the strong debate regarding this issue. The argument against is how lower streamed students perhaps suffer from feelings inadequacy, that they lose out on the role models provided by the more able students, that a teacher is likely to have low expectations over a low ability group which may then reflect negatively upon the students own expectations. The risk in high ability groups for elitism and arrogance is also noted. The argument in favour is based upon that without special teaching for high ability students the level of learning will be set too low and not meet the needs of the most talented pupils, which may be of particular importance for those highly able students with a lower socio-economic status.

Persson (1997a) notes how experienced high ability researchers Karen Rogers and Pieter Span have taken an even greater, and somewhat controversial, step in favour of streamed classes, based upon significant research in to how the highly able conduct themselves in the school environment. This is that high ability students should spend the majority of the day mixing with other high ability students, and that group work between high and low ability students should be avoided, unless it's for social reasons.

Alternatively Jeannie Oakes, former professor of education at UCLA, has carried out significant case-study research which challenges Rogers and Spans views of ability groupings. Oakes (2005) suggests that grouping students by ability in schools is just a way of strengthening the class and racial inequalities that already exist in wider society. She has shown how students in lower streams have a tendency to feel discriminated against, as well as

labeled as stupid by both their peers and their teachers. Further, Oakes notes that all too often lower streamed groups are rarely challenged by both the educational material they use and their teachers, leading to little in the way of learning and poor self-esteem.

Principal Questions

The literature review has highlighted the breadth of the subject of physical education, and in particular the significance of health in the syllabus. Due to the complexity in defining talent in both sport and health, the breadth of the subject, and time considerations it was decided to break down the subject to focus on specific areas within PE. Therefore the focus will be on high ability in the physical and social elements within the subject.

The literature review has also shown the wide-range of different terms used to categorise children who are talented. To reduce the risk for confusion and misinterpretation, this study will use only one term to define these children, which will be *highly able*

Following the literature review it is now possible to identify three principal questions that are central to the aims of this study.

Focusing upon the physical and social elements of PE, how do highly able PE students perceive their individual experiences and learning in the subject?

What do highly able PE students perceive as important to learn and experience in the subject?

What do highly able students feel they require to maximize their experiences and learning within PE?

Research Methodology

In this section I will explain the type of research I've conducted, and justify the type of research method I've chosen in relation to the aims of my study. Then I will describe the sample population, selection method, and ethical aspects. Further to this I will detail my method of data collection, the implementation and procedure involved in gathering the data, and not least the subsequent processing of the information. Lastly I will discuss issues of validity, reliability, and generalization in relation to the empirical research I've conducted.

4.1 Qualitative Research: Choice of Method

As my aim for this study is to gain an insight in to the thoughts and experiences of highly able physical education pupils regarding the subject and their own potential to develop it is appropriate to do a qualitative investigation. Bell (2005) notes how using a qualitative approach allows the researcher to concentrate on how individuals perceive the world around them, where insights are sort and not, as prevalent in quantitative studies, generalizations based upon a statistical view of the world. Further Trost (2001) highlights the importance of a qualitative study when an individual's feelings, experiences, and attitudes are to be analyzed. This is highly relevant as my research is focused upon an in depth investigation into the experiences of gifted PE pupils in one large state school, where the focus is not upon trying to make generalizations but instead upon providing a good example of how the situation can be for gifted pupils in PE, and thus providing a platform for future studies in what is largely an untouched area of research.

4.2 Interviews

Stukat (2005) highlights the importance of how the research problem should dictate the choice of method used in a study. He notes the tendency to choose interviews as a method in qualitative research, without thoroughly considering relevant alternatives. Observation was considered as a possible research method for the study I've conducted for a number of reasons. Firstly as a PE teacher one's everyday teaching is based around observation, and most notably analysis and evaluation through observation. Therefore after 11 years practicing

as a PE teacher I feel comfortable and experienced in the role as an observer, which would almost certainly have a positive impact upon the quality of the analysis and not least the objectivity. Secondly observation gives a clearer insight into what a person actually does, rather than what they say they do, as information is obtained directly from the situation under investigation and it is the researcher himself, through looking and listening, who acts as the measuring instrument. Due to this Stukat (2005) suggests in many circumstances observation can give a more reliable picture of what's occurring, especially when one can never be sure just how truthful a respondent's answers are in an interview or questionnaire.

However after careful consideration it became apparent that interviews would be more suited as a research method in this particular study. The central issues in this study revolve around the pupil's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. Dalen (2007) identifies just these factors concerning individual experiences as particularly suited to qualitative interviews. These are all factors which are much harder to see through observation, especially in a small study with a limited time frame, even if physical education is a subject that encourages observation. A more in depth study with a much longer time frame could perhaps combine the two methods of observation and interviews to gain knowledge not only over how a talented pupil perceives their development in PE but also how they actually develop in the subject from what is perhaps a more objective standpoint.

The interviews were planned to be semi-structured. Bell (2006) notes the value of giving the respondent the necessary freedom to talk about what they view as important; whilst at the same time providing a structure to the interview so all key themes are covered. As the respondents were relatively young and they may feel uncomfortable or unaccustomed in an interview situation it was felt there needed to be a degree of structure to the interviews as a way of guaranteeing responses. A base set of questions were constructed, which directly linked back to the principal questions, but that also allowed for further explanation and freedom.

4.3 Sample Population

A large state school for pupils from year 7-9 was chosen for the study. The school has around 800 pupils and notably nine parallel classes of around 270 students in year 9 – the final year of compulsory school in Sweden. The school is situated in an area well known for its youth sports development.

The fact that there are nine parallel year 9 classes at this school made it an ideal choice for my study. My study is focused upon just year 9 students, so to find such a large number in one school means the chance of finding sufficient talented sports pupils is significantly increased. As noted in the literature review the *PE and Sport Strategy for Young People* (PESSYP) says on average in each class perhaps one or two pupils are exceptionally sports talented, so based upon this and the qualitative nature of my study it was decided that I would aim to interview ten year 9 students.

Selection method

The selection of the actual pupils to be interviewed was based upon the definition of gifted and talented outlined by the *PE and Sport Strategy for Young People* (PESSYP) which is used throughout British schools. This was previously discussed in the literature review section of this work and concerns the student's physical, social, personal, cognitive, and creative abilities.

Bell (2006) notes the importance of the sample population being as representative as possible in relation to the study's aims and objectives. Therefore the physical education teachers at the selected school were asked to look at the PESSYP definition and then choose the 10 pupils which they felt most fulfilled these criteria. After some consideration they felt 12 of their year 9 pupils fulfilled these criteria, and thus it was decided to interview all of these pupils, especially considering the chance that a pupil may refuse to be interviewed or be absent from school at the time of interview. Though it was stressed that the teachers could select any students they wished regardless of whether they were male or female, the final list included six boys and six girls.

Ethical issues

Stukát (2005) states the importance of both gaining parental permission when interviewing youngsters and making sure the individual knows they are totally free to decide whether or not they participate in the investigation. As all the respondents were 15 or 16 years old a letter

asking for parental permission for their child's participation in the interviews was sent home to each selected student (see appendix). Both the students and the parents were informed about the nature of the study, that the interviews would be recorded, and taking part was voluntary with the possibility to stop the interview at any time. The parents were also informed that their child and school would not be identified by name in the study. There were no objections from parents, so all selected students could take part in the interviews.

4.4 Interview Implementation and Procedure

The interviews were organized to take place during the normal school day. The physical education teachers helped find appropriate times when the students could be interviewed. Due to the demanding daily schedule of the year 9 pupils and my own time constraints as a full-time PE teacher it quickly became apparent that finding enough time to do individual interviews would not be possible. Coupled with this the question arose surrounding the youngster's ability to feel comfortable and provide in depth answers in an individual interview. Based upon this it was decided that the interviews would be group based, around 45 minutes long, where the students would be paired together, resulting in 6 separate interviews but still with answers from 12 different students. This format was appreciated by the PE teachers who had worked hard to find appropriate times for the interviews. All of the selected students took part in the interviews.

Stukát (2005) identifies group interviews as a way of gaining information from individuals with something in common, that can be used when perhaps there exists insufficient time available for individual interviews. He notes the importance of being particularly observant to peer pressure in such situations, when individual answers are the desired outcome.

A conference room was booked at the school so the pupils could be interviewed in a calm environment, and one suited to the recording of the conversation. The interviews were recorded for a number of different reasons. As Bell (2006) confirms, it allows me to concentrate on the verbal conversation with the students, instead of spending lots of time writing and disrupting the flow of the interview. Secondly the reliability and ease of processing the interviews is significantly improved, especially when the interviews are semi-open and group based.

There is a risk with pair interviews that it is difficult to hear the difference between the two respondents on the tape when the time comes to process the results. I realized this could be a problem so I organized to use a high quality recording machine during the interviews in order to gain a much clearer sound. This I feel was successful as it was relatively easy to hear the differences when playing back the recordings.

Data collection method: Interview questions

As stated previously the interviews were semi-structured and a set of questions were formulated which directly linked back to the three principal questions identified as important in this work (see appendix). This was planned in order to make the analysis of the interviews easier to summarize and relate back to my aims for the study. The questions were however structured in a way for the individual respondents go in to more depth, and follow their own line of thought, as well as provide an opportunity for discussion in pairs.

The first few interview questions were structured to make the students feel at ease and gave them the opportunity to describe a little about themselves. Whilst these questions perhaps didn't relate directly to the aims of the study, they played an important role in allowing the students to relax and ease in to the role as a respondent, so that they would feel more comfortable when answering the subsequent more relevant questions for the study.

I constantly remained interested and inquisitive as regards the student's responses, both helping to provide a positive atmosphere but also to encourage the pupils to further develop their answers and fully explain what they mean. I structured the interviews so that I would be able to add comments like "*can you further explain this?*", "*why do you think this is?*", which worked well in the actual interviews in order to gain the in depth information from the respondents.

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted in order to test the interview questions as well as the interview procedure. I used two of my own most talented year 9 sports students for this pilot study, both of which qualified under the selection criteria outlined by PESSYP. It was important to test my questions on other talented sports students, to see whether they would work and importantly whether they would be successful as regards the central aims of my study. I conducted a pair interview, to also check that this method would be successful in the actual interviews.

The pilot interview was a valuable preparation exercise for the actual interviews. I was able to fine tune some of the wording of my interview questions when the pilot respondents highlighted difficulty in interpreting the questions. I also gained a worthwhile experience in the role as the interviewer, and an opportunity to reflect upon what this position involves. The pair interviews worked well with the pilot students, with a good level of flow in the discussions without any of the individuals dominating.

4.5 Processing of Interview Data

The interviews all took place within a week. Short notes were made directly after the conducted interviews, where key themes were identified which might be of help in the future analysis of the recorded information. The interview recordings were transcribed on the weekend directly after all the interviews were completed. I felt it important to transcribe the interviews as soon as possible whilst the information was fresh in my mind. The transcribing of the interviews was extremely time-consuming, taking around 3 hours per interview. Despite the good quality of the recordings it was necessary to play back parts of the interview on numerous occasions to fully understand what was said.

During the transcription process I renamed the individual students, so that they could not be identified in the study. Any other persons that were named in the recording were also given another identity, and in the case of an individual teacher they were not renamed but instead referred to just as 'the teacher'. Through transcribing the interviews there is the risk that I can influence, consciously or not, the translation from spoken word to written word. To limit the impact of this I kept this possibility close to mind and tried to reproduce what was said in the interviews in written form in as much detail as possible, including pauses and emotional expressions like laughter. This was especially important as I was also translating the Swedish spoken word in to the English written word. During the transcription process I analyzed the data in such a way so that the responses could be organized in to different groups, that related back to the three principal questions of the study.

4.6 Method Evaluation

Reliability

When conducting six different in depth interviews, which will be analyzed together and compared, the reliability of the study needs to be considered. The interview questions were structured so that the same questions would be asked to all respondents in the same order, thus creating a high level of consistency as a means for providing a platform for good reliability within the study. The questions were tested during the pilot study to avoid possible misunderstandings. The interviews were also recorded so important details were not missed.

Validity

How valid is my research as a means of answering the central questions of the study was an important area to consider. By structuring the interview questions to directly link with the central questions of the study goes some way to providing the study with good validity. However within semi-structured interviews it must be realized due to the possibility for the respondent to have some power over which areas become the focus for more discussion, which may not always be relevant to the study, that the course of each individual interview can be quite different and sometimes off topic, and thus could be argued to affect the validity of the study. I attempted to limit this affect when I felt the interview was diverging away from the central questions under investigation by steering the interview back by repeating the original question or by asking the next question on the schedule. Coupled with this, as Stukát (2005) highlighted, is the question over whether during a pair interview both sets of respondents get equal opportunity to answer the questions, that they may interrupt each other, and also whether the two respondents can affect each other's responses. With validity in mind I reminded the respondents before the interview that I'd like answers from all of them on each question, that they should provide as truthful answers as possible, not be afraid to disagree with each other, and that they would not be identified in the study. During the interviews when I felt one respondent was starting to dominate the interview I consciously attempted to get the other respondent to give me their thoughts by asking them directly.

Generalization

As stated earlier in the choice of method section the focus of this study is not upon trying to make generalizations but instead upon providing a good example of how the situation can be for gifted pupils in PE, and thus providing a platform for future studies in what is largely an untouched area of research.

Results & Analysis of Findings

In the presentation of the results from the interviews they've been divided up in relation to the three principal questions under investigation. As such the results are presented according to the respondent's thoughts surrounding their perceived individual experiences and learning in PE, the importance of learning and experiencing in PE, and their thoughts on maximizing their learning and experiences within PE.

Within the three categories the large amount of processed data has been broken down and analyzed to find similarities, differences, and patterns, as a way of presenting the results and finding the most important information relevant to the study. When appropriate, quotations from individual respondents have been stated.

5.1 Perception of Individual Experiences and Learning

This section is split up in to four main sections based on the student's responses.

- Particular areas enjoyed and not enjoyed about PE
- The feeling of being talented
- Aims and motivational factors within PE
- View of personal progression within PE

Particular areas enjoyed and not enjoyed about PE

All 12 of the respondents identified ball sports as one of the most enjoyable parts of PE. Football and handball were viewed as particularly fun activities. Eight of the respondents also noted competitive team games as particularly enjoyable activities. Five students identified track and field athletics as something they looked forward to in sports classes

All the students felt ball sports and competitive team games were most enjoyable because they felt they were particularly strong in those activities and that they liked the fact they had to work as a team:

These type of sports are just fun,... you know most of us can play these sports pretty good, so the games can get real competitive and you feel like you've had a real training...you know you get to sweat and its good for the class as a group (Jamie)

Track and field athletics was viewed as particularly fun:

In athletics you know your level straight away, a time or distance or something. I like that; it pushes me to beat it next time....it gives extra motivation, and the teacher sees that too (Lisa)

Six of the respondents noted that getting away from the normal school routine, out of the classroom with more freedom, was something they liked about PE. Elliot and Nils both said it gave them an opportunity to shine, when they weren't so great in other areas of school. Marta stated that getting away from the normal classroom gave the opportunity for more social contact and teamwork, which they didn't really experience in other subjects.

When the students talked about activities they most disliked dance was mentioned by ten of the respondents.

We do dance like all the time, it's pretty boring, I think we should be doing sports instead....you know why can't we do things we think are fun (Stefan)

Dance takes up too many lessons...shouldn't it be like part of music or something. I mean it's not a sport is it. (Karin)

The students had difficulty thinking of anything else they didn't enjoy, most of PE they thought was fun. Two students enjoyed everything in PE. Karin stressed that often what you're good at is what you like, she felt she was good at most things so enjoyed nearly all PE lessons.

Three of the students questioned whether so much time should be spent on theory, even though it was interesting and probably helpful for the future. They felt time could be better spent on physical activities.

Sport lessons should be tough, like physical...where you work your fitness and push your body. I mean every other class we sit in the classroom...theory is alright, ok quite useful, but not maybe what PE should be about (John)

The feeling of being talented

All the students interviewed felt they were good at PE, and certainly in the top few in their classes. They had differing views of their feelings of being talented. Five students noted it gave them a lot of self-confidence knowing they were one of the best. Two students thought it was good because they could help weaker students, and they appreciated that. Three students said sometimes they felt extra pressure because they were good, they felt pressure from others and from themselves when they performed

It feels better in sport than say in Math; I know I'm good at sports so I've got lots of confidence but when it comes to Math it's not the same feeling at all (Stefan)

I know I'm good, but then I know I've got to do well in the class, there's pressure ...especially when like showing the same level as I've done before, or even better. It can be stressful to be good, in handball everyone expects a lot from me. (Ellie)

Aims and motivational factors within PE

The students provided a range of different responses in this section of the interviews.

Half of the students saw getting an MVG grade as a main aim and a motivational factor. Alternatively the other half of students didn't see grades as a central goal or something to motivate them. Two of these students said getting the grade was quite easy so it wasn't something they thought so much about. They mentioned that if there was a wider a span of grades, with the criteria for the top grade being more challenging, they would see this as more of a motivational factor and thus something to aim towards. Instead eight of the students identified *winning* as a big motivational factor when actually taking part in PE;

I get a real kick when it gets competitive in the class, like if we're playing football and it's a real close game. Of course I want to win,...that's what motivates me (Jamie)

Improving your own physical fitness and skills was seen as something important to aim for by five of the students

I aim to push myself hard in PE class,...I want to be better, you know get better fitness and improve my level in everything else, and of course it's motivating when you're good at it and its fun. (John)

Four of the students identified the importance of self-motivation as being a key factor to performing at a high level in PE. All of these four felt PE was something they really liked so

it was easy for them to motivate themselves. Two of them stated if it wasn't something they liked it would be hard to be self-motivated, and then it would be hard to progress in the subject. One of them gave an example of dance where they lacked self-motivation, and thus it wasn't surprising this was the area where they were weakest

I motivate myself; it's pretty easy when you're good at sport,...it's fun and you just push yourself to get better...Though in dance I'm bad, but then I don't try... I need more motivation...I guess that's the problem for others that don't like sport and stuff, they maybe can't motivate themselves when it's not fun for them (Sebastian)

View of personal progression within PE

The students reflected upon the progression they've made in PE since the start of Year 8. As part of this reflection the students were asked to rate their progression on a scale 1 – 10 (with 10 being fantastic!). The results are shown below

*4 = one student
5 = five students
6 = three students
7 = one student
8 = two students*

These were interesting results with no student rating above 8, and half of the students rating at 5 or under. The three students that rated 7 or 8 were generally happy with their progress, whereas the other pupils were more negative about their development.

The three students that were generally happy with their progress identified a series of factors that explained their satisfaction; good teachers, improved fitness, a good class, high grades, improved leadership.

Nine of the students said their progression was effected by being under-stimulated in some of the activities. They felt that some of the activities in PE were organized at too low a level, which meant it wasn't very challenging, and thus was detrimental to their own individual progression. The teacher and the ability structure of the class were seen as contributing factors.

It can be pretty boring when you have to do exercises that are easy because of everyone else, it doesn't feel like a challenge and it means I'm not getting any real physical training either. The teacher could think more about our needs. (Nils)

A lot of the things we do are the same as we've done before,...you know like in class 7...I want it to be harder so it pushes me more, the teacher says though she's got to think of the weaker students in the class...but what about us?(Becky)

Six of the students suggested that they often had to adapt to the level of others in the class, often the weaker students, and this held their progression back. It was hard for their individual needs to be catered for in a class of mixed ability in PE.

The teachers says we have to take it easier, so the others get a chance, you know like in football...but that doesn't really help me when I can't do my best...Its good I guess we help the others but I don't think it's helping my progress (John)

In sport I have to go down a level to fit with the others, then it can be boring...I mean in say math you get a harder book to do if you're good, in PE you have to go down a level if you're good... it's the opposite, that's a problem for me (Jamie)

Three of the students identified the breadth of the subject as a problem area. It was suggested that due to so many activities during the year it was nearly impossible to make any real progress in any of them

It's hard to really develop when you maybe only do the activity a few times,...it doesn't really give me the chance to improve my weaker areas but also show what I can do in something I'm good at like say handball (Karin)

Two of the students identified being over-challenged as a factor that impacted upon their development. Both of these students felt the level they were required to achieve in gymnastics was too high, and they along with all their classmates had struggled to barely pass. Both these students suggested that the teacher had set unrealistic goals for them.

Summary

The students generally had a good enjoyment level of physical education. Popular activities identified by the students were ball sports and competitive team games. Dance was the only activity that was mentioned by the majority of respondents to be one they really didn't enjoy.

The fact that PE broke up the everyday school routine was seen as positive by many respondents. There were divided views regarding their feelings of being talented, with some noting significant boosts in self-confidence and others mentioning the feeling of being under-pressure and stressed. There were mixed feelings over whether an MVG grade was a motivating factor and something that was really aimed for, though the aim of winning and skill improvement was mentioned by the majority as a key motivational factor. Three students were generally satisfied with their progress in PE, with the rest feeling their progress was affected by instances of under-stimulation during classes. Three-quarters of the students rated their progress at 6 or under in the 1-10 progress rating scale.

5.2 Importance of Learning and Experiencing

This section is split into two sections based on the student's responses

- The importance of PE as a school subject
- View of what is important to learn and experience in PE

The importance of PE as a school subject

The students all see PE as an important school subject for them for a range of reasons, such as: training and health benefits, doing something away from the classroom, opportunity to socialize with classmates, learning new sports/activities, able to focus better on other subjects after PE, and the opportunity to practice leadership skills. Interestingly however seven of them all suggest that it may be even more important for the weaker ones. The reason being that the PE class may be the only time those students are active during the week.

A lot of the others in the class would never run or do anything active if they didn't have PE. They really need the chance to get in shape .(Marta)

However compared to other school subjects the general consensus was that the subjects of English, Swedish, and Math were more important than PE in school, due to their greater relevance in further and higher education. Two of students noted that as they already had MVG level in PE so other subjects naturally became more important as they still had a chance to improve in those.

View of what is important to learn and experience in PE

When the students were asked to reflect upon the various things they felt important to learn and experience in PE a diverse range of points were highlighted. Below these points are stated, with the associated number of students that mentioned them.

Competitive sports (8 students)

Opportunity to develop leadership skills (6 students)

New techniques / skills (5 students)

Good team work (5 students)

Strength / weight training (4 students)

Training theory (inc. planning training) (3 students)

Human physiology (2 students)

A wide range of games /sports (1 student)

Nutrition (1 student)

Stretching (1 student)

Football (1 student)

Learning and experiencing competitive sports were seen as particularly important within PE. Within this category the students named a wide spread of sports from popular ball sports to competitive individual sports like athletics and swimming.

From the above results it can be seen that developing leadership skills is seen by half the students as an important part of PE in school. Becky explained her reasoning behind this;

Improving as a leader is important, it gives you confidence and you get respect from the others in the class. It's a good skill to have say if I want to be a trainer for kids...but I think it helps in other areas like in school or maybe at work in the future, you know say if you're a manager or something (Becky)

Summary

PE is seen as an important school subject for a variety of reasons, though not at the same level as Math, English, and Swedish. The fact that PE might be more important for weaker students was highlighted. Many different areas of PE were viewed as valuable to learn and experience, with competitive sports and leadership seen as particularly important by many.

5.3 Maximizing Experiences and Learning

This section is focused upon the student's thoughts regarding reaching their potential in PE.

The students view of their own progress in PE through the rating system outlined earlier tended to show a more negative trend, and thus suggested there was plenty of room for improvement. Based upon this the highly able students reflected upon what their needs were in PE and how they could maximize their experiences and learning within the subject.

An improved grading system was identified by 5 of the students. It was generally felt that it was too easy to achieve MVG. The opportunity to get an even higher grade than MVG was seen as something that would improve motivation and their individual development.

If you're good at sport you always want the best grade, MVG is a bit easy to get, it should be harder or even have more grades to go for. That would help us that are talented, you know to push ourselves more (Nils)

All of the students noted that the structure of the class had an impact upon their development. The vast array of different abilities within a single class was identified as a factor that made it difficult for talented students to raise their level. It was generally felt that streamed classes, with the highly able in a class together, would help them make greater progress. Though two of the students did acknowledge that being in a mixed ability class meant they could help weaker students which could be stimulating, and thus develop leadership skills and gain greater self-confidence. Three of the students thought that weaker students would also benefit from having streamed classes as they would get more of a chance in the games and activities when mixed with similar ability students

If we had more of the best ones in one class it would be great, we'd get to a much higher level,... and I reckon everyone would be really motivated too, you know because of the competitiveness (Jamie)

The weaker ones don't get much of a chance with us, if they have PE with others at the same level though then it's better for them...they'll get more chance, like in handball and other games...which is good (Marta)

Ellie made an interesting point regarding mixed ability classes and her own development. She felt that if all the students in the class were training or active outside of school it would make a significant difference to the quality of learning in PE. She states how unfortunately that isn't the case, that a lot of the class are not active and often not motivated in PE either, and that it doesn't help the atmosphere in class and those that want to develop.

Special classes with a sports profile was suggested as a way for highly able students to reach their potential in PE. One of the pupils said it would give PE greater status, and give those that are good at sport something to strive after, especially if there was a challenging criterion to get in to the special class. In line with this one of the students suggested that the highly able PE students could take an advanced level course, perhaps with a more specially educated PE teacher, which would help them learn more.

Four of the girls that were interviewed felt they gained significantly from having PE together with boys. They felt it made the class more challenging, giving them the opportunity to compete and learn together with other students that were better than them, thus helping them make better individual progress in the various areas within PE. On the other hand one of the girls interviewed felt many of the boys impeded her progress. There was a tendency for them to dominate in many sports and not give the girls much of a chance to be involved. She also felt that the boys messed around too much, and a lot of class time was wasted because of this.

Four of the students suggested they could maximize their learning and experiences of PE if the curriculum was not so broad. It was felt that perhaps being able to choose certain activities that it was possible to specialize in, or focus upon, would help their development

It would be great if we could choose those areas we wanted to focus on, it's too much what we've got now...there's no chance to make real progress in anything. When you're younger you try all different sports and stuff, but by year 9 you know what you want...or like. Even the weaker ones should choose too (Sebastian)

Summary

To maximize their individual progress in PE the need for a tougher grading system was highlighted. A general agreement over the benefits of ability streamed classes was noted, with perhaps even the need for a higher level course. Both positive and negative views over mixed gender groupings were suggested by the girls. The breadth of the subject and the subsequent lack of time spent on each area within PE called for a need to be able to specialize.

Discussion

The idea for this research was to do a qualitative study about the learning experiences of a group of highly able physical education students at the end of their compulsory schooling. The aim was to gain an insight in to how they feel they develop and improve and how they could maximize their experiences and learning in PE. The highly able PE students were chosen as a study group due to the apparent transparency in the Swedish educational steer documents and general lack of research regarding this set of learners, despite the fact that the Swedish national curriculum is becoming increasingly individualized and key international educational bodies recognize the special needs of such highly able students.

The aim of this section is to critically discuss the results of the interviews in relation to the aims of the study, the theoretical framework and previous research.

This discussion section firstly reflects over the research method. Thereafter it is structured around the three principle questions that are central to the study.

6.1 Research Method Reflection

Overall I would say that the interviews were successful as a means to attempt to answer the principle questions of the study. The students were keen to discuss their thoughts on the issue and took the interviews seriously with a mature attitude. I feel the fact that I was able to use a quiet isolated conference room for the interviews helped the students feel at ease and thus provide me with open and honest responses. In reflection, ideally I would have liked to interview the students individually if time had allowed, as without doubt the respondents influence each other due to the social setting. However I felt the students were all strong minded youngsters willing to give their personal opinions and thus I didn't feel this was enough to significantly challenge the validity of the study. Following the interviews I realized that there is a risk that students can be overly negative when discussing issues to do with school. Therefore if time had allowed it would perhaps have been beneficial to conduct some observation in the actual PE classes as a follow up to the interviews. This would certainly have added further weight to both the reliability and validity of the study.

6.2 Perception of Individual Experiences and Learning

Despite mainly displaying a positive attitude towards PE and its various components the students gave a general sense of discontent with their individual development in PE. The students highlighted that they often felt under-stimulated and that the demands upon them were set in accordance with all abilities in the class, and thus set too low for them. This is a perhaps a particularly important issue when according to Ekberg and Erberth (2000) lifelong physical activity is a high priority in the teaching of PE, and consequently maintaining the enthusiasm of the students could be seen as a serious concern. Persson (1997a) has noted the significance of the highly able realising their talent is acceptable and of value, and then subsequently the importance of being encouraged to use and develop these abilities. In line with this Winner (1996) highlights how often highly able students can feel under-stimulated, which can create large differences between a child's effort and their potential to develop. Though, with a level of contradiction, she does acknowledge in her definition of highly able children that one of their a fundamental characteristics is their ability to self teach and be self motivated, which is more in line with the current philosophy in Swedish education that high ability students are capable of taking care of themselves, as Persson (1997a) suggests in the literature review. Persson (1997b) notes the role of the teacher in this type of situation where highly able students are not being adequately stimulated. He says teachers are often not suited to deal with such students due to a lack of knowledge and information of highly able students, leaving them in a situation where they are unable to meet the student's special needs. The students in the study confirm Persson's view point by suggesting that a key contributing factor to their under-stimulation was the inability for the teaching to meet to meet their specific needs. This is despite the fact that the National Curriculum and PE syllabus as noted by Ekberg and Erberth (2000), both highlight the importance of individualized teaching. If this is the case it raises the issue over whether there needs to be special attention paid to the teaching of highly able students within physical education teacher training courses and whether the National Curriculum should acknowledge more specifically high ability students as recommended by the Council of Europe and UNESCO. This would go some way to providing the teacher with the necessary skills for dealing with high ability students, as well as build the foundations for a highly able students to gain a more stimulating learning experience.

The students had mixed views over their aims in PE and what factors motivated them. However through the analysis of the results it was possible to see certain factors that were

mentioned by many of the students – a high grade, winning, and fitness and skill improvement. It's interesting to note that half of the students didn't see a top grade as a central goal, and were far more motivated by the immediate satisfaction of winning in competitive activities as well as improving their skills and fitness. In the *Personal Ability* section of the PESSYP definition of highly able PE students this individual desire for skill development is highlighted as a key characteristic of such students, by using the term '*commitment to mastery*'. Winner (1996) has also identified the *burning desire to master* in her attempt to define high ability, where a key characteristic is shown to be through self motivation a powerful ambition to develop skills and techniques. If skill acquisition is a key motivating factor and aim for the highly able it then it may be necessary to review the place of such a factor in the current PE curriculum and syllabus, posing a question as to how well the teaching and planning of PE meets the requirements of highly able students to master skills. Further, as mentioned in the literature review Annerstedt et al (2008) noted that the current direction in Swedish physical education has been towards a greater focus on the participation in physical activities and away from the focus of individual development within traditional sports. Based upon this it could then be suggested that PE is heading in a direction that is perhaps not best suited to the requirements of highly able students as the opportunities for skill and technique development are likely to be fewer.

6.3 Importance of Learning and Experiencing

The general feeling that PE was an important and worthwhile subject was perhaps an expected response from a group of highly able students. There is surely a natural tendency for people to rate highly an area where they have particular talent.

What the students felt was important to learn and experience in the subject provided a range of answers. The physical aspects of the subject gained significantly greater prominence over the more theoretical areas, with competitive sports and improving skills as particular important, which is in line with what Winner (1996) suggests in the previous section. Social areas like team work and leadership also gained prominence, which provides a good reflection of some of the key aims set out in the curriculum. For example the syllabus for PE highlights the importance of team work and leadership through the use of terms like "*develop a sense of community*" and "*ability to co-operate*". It is worth considering the possibility that highly

able students seek other avenues for improvement in PE, like team work and leadership, when they feel the chances to further develop their physical ability in class is limited. This could be classed as a form of *creativity*: to adapt in order to develop, as Winner (1996) implies in her talent definition.

The area of health was little mentioned when students discussed the importance of learning and experiencing in PE. This is despite the fact that since 1994 the official name for PE is *Idrott and Hälsa* (Sport and Health), and that Ekberg and Erberth (2000) have noted the increasing influence of health in PE steering documents. Although in this study I specifically decided to narrow down my research to focus on the physical and social sides of PE, and as a consequence overlook health related issues, the respondents were not told this when answering questions relating to importance of learning and experiencing. As a consequence the question arises as to whether high ability students see PE as primarily a physical and social subject, with resistance to the more theoretical aspects like health. Further to this it may be worth considering what sort of presence health has in the everyday PE class, how well in teaching it is connected with the physical elements within the PE curriculum and whether the physical elements within PE are too strong for health elements to gain ground, and whether students that are classified as high ability based upon their physical and social strengths are also high performers in the more theoretical aspects of PE like health.

6.4 Maximizing Experiences and Learning

The high ability students had a number of key ideas surrounding the area of maximizing their experiences and learning in physical education.

A more challenging grading system was suggested as way to provide an extra level of motivation in the subject. There were concerns over the current MVG level being too easy; leading to a poor development curve once that level had been achieved. It was felt a grade above MVG would push high ability students harder and improve individual development. The new grading system that is just about to be implemented in to the Swedish compulsory school tends to reflect the students wishes, with a greater number of grades and a higher level at the top end. It is questionable whether those students motivated by a higher grade can be classified as highly able according to Winner's (1996) definition. She points out the fact that the highly able are very self-motivated and find the area of interest highly motivating and

exciting in itself, suggesting no need for extrinsic motivational factors like higher grades. Though Winner could be seen to contradict her own theory by implying schools demand too little of their highly able students, and that this lack of demand leads to under performance. This suggests a need for extrinsic motivational factors like a harder grading scheme as means of raising the demands set upon the highly able.

Ability based streamed physical education classes were noted as a possible way to maximize the learning and experiences for high ability students. Even special sports classes with a higher level course to follow were suggested. This way of thinking is backed up by the views of Rogers and Span as identified by Persson (1997a), where they feel high ability students should mix together as much as possible in order to optimize their individual development. They do however acknowledge that mixing abilities can be positive for social reasons, which could be relevant in many situations in PE. On the other hand Oakes argues strongly against grouping students by ability due to the negative consequences for the weaker students, as outlined in the literature review. Persson (1997a) notes that Sweden has promoted an egalitarian approach to educating students, and as such have promoted mixed ability classes rather than groupings by ability. This various research tends to suggest that whilst high ability students may well benefit from being grouped together it could be at the expense of the weaker students, which was also identified by a couple of the respondents. Currently the National Curriculum (Lpo 94) tends to lean to the side of the weaker students needs by stating the school has a special responsibility to those students not achieving the goals, with no mention of high ability students. In my own 11 years experience of teaching PE it has on many occasions been successful to group students by ability. Weaker students have benefited significantly on many occasions from being able to do sports and activities at their level, and shown a more positive attitude with greater enjoyment, and a better skill development curve. At the same time higher ability students get the challenge they crave for more rapid progress. It would be beneficial for further research to be conducted in this area of PE.

Conclusions

This study has attempted to gain an insight in to the learning experiences of a group of highly able students in physical education at the end of compulsory schooling. Studies surrounding high ability are surprisingly lacking in Sweden, and not least in physical education. The majority of existing research both domestic and internationally points towards the highly able having special educational requirements, but the way to deal with them is much debated. Whilst my study is concerned with just 12 high ability students in a typical state school, the results provide a platform for a wider ranging study in to the special needs of these specific pupils in PE. Factors like under-stimulation, mastery of skill, teaching methods, and streaming of ability are all areas identified by the study that require further investigation. This type of research is perhaps especially relevant when the Swedish National Curriculum is becoming increasingly individualized and the fact that Sweden is one of the few countries not to recognize the special requirements of highly able students despite international educational legislation.

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Appendix

21st March 2010

Dear Parents,

I'm writing to you as the sports teacher at xxxx xxxxx.

Your child has been selected to take part in a study I'm conducting through Gothenburg University about talented pupils in physical education (*idrott & hälsa*). I'd like your child to take part in a 20 minute group interview with other talented sports pupils from the same year group.

The interviews will be recorded, and once they've been analyzed all recordings will be erased. It will only be myself and the pupils that will have knowledge of what has been said by whom at the interviews. All data will be treated anonymously, and in the final report it will not be possible to identify the pupils or the school involved in the study.

If you don't wish your child to take part in this study or you have any further questions please feel free to email me at : xxxxx@xxxxx.com or call me on tel: xxx xxxxxx

Best regards

David Jenkins

Interview – (semi-structured)

Focusing upon the physical and social elements of PE, how do talented PE students perceive their individual development in the subject?

What sport do you take part in outside of school?

- To what level?

What do you enjoy about PE?

- Why? Change over time? Any specific experiences?

What don't you enjoy about PE?

- Why? Change over time? Any specific experiences?

Do you feel especially talented in PE? How does this feel?

What to you personally have for aims in PE?

- What do you want to achieve?

What factors motivate you to do well in PE?

- MVG? Anything else apart from grades...parents, sports club, curriculum, teacher.... ?

How do you feel you are progressing in PE?

- Why? Are you challenged? Ever under-stimulated/over-challenged -affect on performance /achievement? Are there factors that impede your progress?...if so which?
- affect of sport outside school – positive/negative?

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 amazing) how do you rate your progress in PE?

What do talented PE students perceive as important to learn and experience in the subject?

How important is PE compared to other subjects at school?

- Why....explain why you think like that?

What do you see as important to learn and experience in PE?

- Why? What's not so important...why?

What do talented pupils feel they require to maximize their experiences and learning within PE?

Do you feel you're able to reach your potential in PE?

- Why / why not? On the 1 to 10 scale question earlier you rated your progress as, how could this figure for you be improved? Learning + experiences – improve?
- Importance of teacher + school, curriculum, grading...?