

SOCIAL STATUS OF QUALIFIED PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN CYPRUS

Abstract of PhD Thesis

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1. Introduction

The social standing of Physical Education teachers has been the focus of many research works in the past few years. PE teachers are often perceived by the wider public as supervisors of a playful entertainment. Their work as PE teachers is not fully appreciated and their occupational prestige is often considered “low”. The social prestige of teachers as a social group depends on the cultural, historical, and political traditions of their respective country. It has to be emphasized that the role of a PE teacher is not limited to school teaching but additionally it includes the aspect of promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Although theoretically there is a consensus that sport and PE makes a significant contribution to the total growth and education of human beings, PE is frequently marginalized and is suffering from low status esteem. PE classes in schools are often abandoned when time is required for other academic subjects. Physical education is learned in a socialization process and it is very important to be taught properly by a specialized professional PE teacher. The knowledge and attitude of the teacher who teaches the subject of PE in schools often plays a major role in what is included in the programme and how effective the teaching can be. In many countries PE in primary schools is taught by elementary teachers instead of qualified PE teachers who are specialized in that particular field. This phenomenon occurs in Cyprus as well and this might lead to another problem; that is the unemployment of qualified Cypriot PE teachers and/or their limited job opportunities.

In addition, it has to be emphasized that the labour market of Cyprus encounters the phenomenon of being provided with higher supply levels in comparison to demand levels in the field of PE teaching. Therefore, PE graduates are registered by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC)* on a so called waiting list and they eventually get assigned to schools according to their ranking on that certain governmental list. *The aforesaid social problems have not been studied from a sociological perspective by anyone in Cyprus* and that was the reason for selecting this subject matter for this thesis. The scientifically based information of the social

* The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) is responsible for formulating and implementing the cultural policy of the Government through its cultural services. It also formulates the educational policies which are approved by the Council of Ministers.

status of qualified PE teachers might make modest contribution to sport science and education in Cyprus.

2. Objectives

This thesis aims to provide an insight regarding the following objectives: to analyze the status of PE in Cypriot schools; to discover the social status of qualified PE teachers in Cyprus; to find out what kind of sport-related jobs they are employed in and which other sectors they work in; to discuss if the PE degree holders' status can be characterized by consistency; to find out if they are satisfied with their job and position in the Cypriot labour market; to discover their opinions on social capital influencing their job opportunities and their opinions about the official governmental employment policy; and to investigate their attitudes towards PE and health awareness.

2.1 Hypotheses

In order to realize the objectives of this research the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H₁ The subject of PE is not considered as a “real discipline” at Cypriot schools.

H₂ The majority of qualified PE teachers who are not employed in public schools have jobs that are unrelated to sports and that only few have the opportunity to work as PE teachers in private schools and/or in sport related jobs.

H₃ Mainly qualified PE teachers who are employed at public schools and/or in the governmental sector are satisfied with their job and position in the labour market and their status is crystallized.

H₄ Social capital is mostly involved in qualified PE teachers' employment in the Cyprus Sport Organization (CSO)* and the majority of the subjects believe that the governmental employment policy is also unfair in a certain respect.

* The Cyprus Sport Organisation is a semi-governmental organisation enacted by the 1969 – 1996 laws upon the CSO acting as the Supreme Authority in the Republic of Cyprus.

H₅ The qualified PE teachers' attitudes towards PE and healthy lifestyle depend on their actual job.

3. Methods

The basic method of this research was the survey method which was complemented by in-depth interviews and the analysis of documents. The survey was designed to the entire population of qualified Cypriot PE teachers (N=1880) regardless of their actual job. All subjects were aged 20 - 65 years, graduated before 2007 and were licensed as teachers by the MoEC. The reason to choose this age group is that the youngest individuals that may have a PE degree are 20 years old and those who are over 65 years are retired in Cyprus and they were not involved in this research.

At the start of this research (April 2008); the author received two governmental lists by the MoEC. The first list consisted of all the Cypriot qualified PE teachers who are employed in the Cypriot secondary schools, and the second list (the so called "waiting list") consisted of those qualified PE teachers who did not have the opportunity to teach in public schools yet. The subjects were classified into three categories according to those two special lists: 1) T- public school teachers, 2) S – those engaged in sport-related jobs (but not teaching in public schools) and 3) O – those engaged in other jobs, making no direct use of their educational background. The first group consisted of the total population of the first governmental list, that is of those who are employed in public schools (n₁=392, the rate of responses is 68.6%). The sub-samples of the latter two categories were selected randomly from the official waiting list, every fourth person was chosen (n₂=193 and n₃=69, respectively). The main characteristics of the research population (N=531; 28.2% of the total population) reflect approximately those of the total population (according to their actual job, age, gender and the year of their graduation).

Data were collected by the same structured standardized interviews in all three groups. The questionnaire contained closed, alternative, and open-ended questions. The final version of it was prepared according to experience from a pilot study.

In-depth interviews were conducted with officials responsible for applying the governmental employment policy (n=4), experts in Cypriot curricula (n=3), and with qualified PE teachers from all three groups, that is with public school teachers (n=20),

licensed PE teachers engaged in sport related jobs (n=25) and with licensed PE teachers engaged in other jobs (n=10).

During the research the following major documents were analyzed: the list of active PE teachers registered by the MoEC, the so called waiting list of the PE teachers, PE curricula at public schools which have been issued over the last 15 years, Sport for All programs and projects for school children issued by the Cyprus Sport Organization and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

4. Results

The status of PE in Cypriot schools

There is supporting evidence that in 1892 PE was first introduced as a subject in Cypriot schools. People used to believe that PE could facilitate the achievement of moral, religious, and mental growth. Nowadays PE often finds itself in a defensive position and it is not regarded as a real discipline by the wider public. In many instances children were complaining that the only thing that they had been doing in PE classes was kicking the ball and nothing else. Apparently there are few PE teachers who have lost their enthusiasm towards teaching. Time allocation for PE classes has not been amended in any significant way in the past few years. In primary schools children attend PE classes two times per week. In the lower secondary schools three times per week, and two times in the first grade of lyceums. The second and third grades of lyceums exercise only once per week. The most critical remark crucial to be mentioned here is that no PE curriculum has existed for the gymnasiums (lower secondary). The issue of the absence of such curriculum was addressed to the officials responsible who have provided a surprising answer. PE teachers do not follow an official written curriculum to teach at gymnasiums, they just follow instructions and advice given by the inspectors of the PE. The curriculum for elementary schools describes the objectives of PE which are divided according to the different grades. It is important to note that in the current curriculum there is no chapter or paragraph that explains the evaluation process of PE. The same observable fact occurs in the third grade of lyceums, the evaluation process is not provided in writing in their curriculum, either. Last but not least, in 2003 the educational authorities of Cyprus

observed and realized that there were many severe problems and weaknesses in the education of students. Seven academics were appointed with the purpose of reshaping the highly centralized educational system. One of their proposals was to formulate new curricula which are expected to be introduced in all grades in the academic year 2014-2015. The in-depth interviews suggested that a new mentality will be developed and followed by students, teachers and parents alike, with the intention of realizing the aims of the new system. There is no intention to reduce the time allocation of PE classes. An improvement is that PE is not to be regarded as an academic subject that is inferior to others; on the contrary, the uniform approach applied is that all academic subjects are equal.

Actual occupations of qualified PE teachers

According to the results Cypriot qualified PE teachers have to deal not only with the low level of respect, but with the limited prospect of job opportunities available to them. There is more supply than demand in their sector and unavoidably PE degree holders have to wait for a considerable amount of time in order to get employed by secondary public schools. 269 of the participants of the current research are active PE teachers (T) in public secondary schools. There are 193 qualified PE teachers who are working in sport-related jobs (S) and 69 who have followed a different career not related to PE (O). Almost one fifth of the subjects having sport-related jobs are working at the CSO, which means that some of them are employed in the Sport for All (SFA) program and the rest of them contribute to the decision-making and/or organization of the various tasks and activities of the CSO. Sixty-five individuals (S - Group) are working as instructors and personal trainers in sport-health clubs. Thirty-five qualified PE teachers are engaged in coaching in various sports. The most common sports which they are involved in are swimming, soccer, basketball, volleyball and tennis. Seventeen subjects (S) are working as PE teachers in private schools and eight PE degree holders are teaching PE in Universities and colleges; apparently because of their further studies (meaning master's degree and/or PhD). The results also revealed that the majority of Group (O) are employed in the governmental sector (police and ministries). In the Cypriot society occupations which belong to the public sector offer a greater number of benefits in comparison always to the private sector. The most important benefit is the permanency of the employment whereas in

the private sector there is always a certain degree of uncertainty by reason of the fact that the employer might terminate the employment contract owing to financial reasons, such as decreasing costs or increasing profit. Besides, there is a great diversity in terms of the range of jobs that are preferred by the participants of the third group. Almost one third of the subjects are working in the private sector, meaning salesmen, owners of private businesses and bank employees.

Qualified PE teachers' satisfaction with their job and position and status crystallization

Occupational prestige, education (as an individual investment in social standing) and salary are the characteristics of the status that were investigated in this research. Although PE teachers should have the same occupational prestige with teachers, their profession usually is considered as a less honourable occupation. In Cyprus the profession of a PE teacher is regarded as an undemanding and effortless job with high income. According to the results, this opinion refers mainly to those who are employed at public schools in the governmental sector. It has to be noted that in the current research all the subjects graduated from universities of sport sciences which means that they all have the same degree. Obviously some of them wanted to be more educated so they did undertake further studies that were the following; another alternative degree, a master, a PhD or just an extra course. The results indicated that nowadays the participants belonging to the second and third group are more educated than the active PE teachers. As it was mentioned above, the occupations of Cypriot qualified PE teachers differ and subsequently their salary is dissimilar depending on their actual job. The results related to their salary were analysed according to the average monthly salary in Cyprus which in 2008 was €1697. Almost half of the participants had “higher” or “much higher” income than the average and 24.1% received almost the same amount as the average. Moreover the subjects were asked to evaluate the prestige of PE teachers’ profession in comparison to other occupations according to the public opinion of Cyprus. In their opinion, Cypriots attribute a greater level of respect towards the following categories of professionals: medical doctors, teachers, governmental employees and then for PE teachers. Decorators, bartenders, sales-men and taxi drivers perceive a lower honour than PE teachers. Finally according to the results the majority of active PE teachers (T) have high status and

high salary. The income of the educators who teach in elementary and secondary schools of Cyprus is high, almost two times more than the average salary. Almost half of the PE degree holders, who have different careers, seem to have high status but once again they do receive a low income. It is also interesting that more than half of the participants of the second group are attributed with low status but high income. In all three groups very few qualified PE teachers have low status and low salary.

The social status of different occupations might be similar in a society; however, people having the same occupation are satisfied with their job to a different degree. The level of their satisfaction might have an impact on their quality of life in general and on the quality of their work in particular. Considering the level of job satisfaction on the part of qualified PE teachers, the results of this research indicated that almost half of the respondents were very satisfied with their job and two thirds of the sample indicated that they are either “much” or “very much” satisfied with their occupation. A crucial aspect regarding the job satisfaction is the actual salary to be paid by the employer to the employee. With respect to qualified Cypriot PE teachers, almost half of the sample had either an income which was “higher” or “much higher” than the average monthly salary in Cyprus which in 2008 was €1697. In turn, the majority of the subjects who have indicated that they are “very much” satisfied with their job are employed in public schools and their profession is that of an active PE teacher. Almost one-fourth of the respondents who are employed in other sport related jobs have also provided that they are “very much” satisfied. In total contrast to the first and second group, the lowest level of satisfaction belongs to the third group. In addition, job satisfaction was analysed according to age as well. The results revealed that job satisfaction was high at the beginning of PE teacher’s career and consequently over the years the satisfaction level decreases, but starts to increase again towards the end of their career. Furthermore, qualified Cypriot PE teachers were asked to evaluate their satisfaction with respect to their position in the labour market. The results indicated that PE teachers who are employed at schools are much more satisfied with their position than the subjects of the remaining two groups. It has to be stressed that the subjects of the third group (O) are involved in different professions and their position in the Cypriot labour market is probably completely different from the rest of the participants. Summing up, when the subjects of the third group (O) were asked to evaluate their satisfaction towards their job generally and towards their income; they

provided the highest ratio of negative answers in comparison with the other two groups.

Opinions about the governmental employment policy and the role of social capital

The governmental employment policy that is applied by the MoEC for the graduated teachers of all academic disciplines is the same for PE teachers as well. PE graduates are registered on a so called waiting list and they eventually get assigned to public schools according to their rank on that certain governmental list. They belong to a group of teachers whose employment will be very sluggish due to the fact that the time allocated to PE is minimal in comparison to the other subjects taught at schools. As it was mentioned above, due to the oversupply of qualified PE teachers some of them are forced to work in different occupations. The results revealed that active PE teachers (1st Group) are those individuals who expressed a positive opinion towards the “waiting list”. The majority of the participants of the second group judged the waiting list in both ways, they regarded the given system as either “very unfair” or alternatively as “fair” and the third group was between “fair” and “neither positive nor negative”. In addition, the participants provided their opinion about the possible replacement of the “waiting list” with examinations. Almost one-fourth of the subjects expressed their wish to undertake exams instead of waiting for their order in the waiting list.

On a different perspective, according to sociologists and political scientists there are many reasons that justify the existence of favours based on personal contacts (which are otherwise referred as *social capital*). The results show that more than half of the qualified PE teachers believe that social capital has either no influence at all or a low influence with respect to the order kept in the governmental waiting list. Approximately one-fifth of them have a neutral opinion. On the other hand, approximately 20% of the participants argued via the indication “much” or “very much” that the order of the list is influenced. Moreover, the findings indicated that more than half of the participants believe that social capital has a great influence on employment at the Cyprus Sport Organization. Only two participants believe that social capital does not influence their employment at all at the organization.

Health awareness and sporting behaviour

Although this sub-topic is not in close connection with the social status of qualified PE teachers'; it is an important issue to be acquainted with their attitude towards health awareness. Many of them who are assigned to the waiting list might teach in public schools in the near future. It is vital to know to which degree they perceive a positive attitude towards sporting behaviour and health consciousness. This information might be of interest to decision makers and may contribute to the change of the special employment policy which exists in the teaching sector.

The results of this research revealed that most of the qualified PE teachers in Cyprus pay attention to their nutrition, do not smoke and they undertake physical activities in order to maintain their health. The majority of the sample of this research does not smoke but it has to be noted that those with an alternative non-sport related career are more engaged in the smoking habit than those who are involved in sport-related jobs. The majority of the subjects declared that they were conscious of their diet and maintained a healthy nutrition. No significant gender- or age-related differences were found in that respect. Only few of the respondents provided that they are not concerned about their food consumption. Most of them are active physically and the lowest activity was declared by subjects from the third group. Younger subjects declared that they were more active physically than the middle and older-aged subjects. The most frequent sporting activities the qualified PE teachers are involved in are the following: jogging or walking, attending the gym, and swimming.

Another issue which was addressed in this thesis was the issue of motivating other individuals such as schoolchildren, club members, etc. for physical activity. Almost all qualified PE teachers are trying to persuade and convince people to get involved in physical exercise and there were no significant differences between the three groups in this respect. For almost every subject of this research, it is important to work as a PE teacher. The final dimension which was analysed was the attendance or involvement of qualified PE teachers' in sport competitions and/or matches. Passive engagement in sports was high in all three groups.

5. Conclusions

In order to understand the PE teachers' status it is necessary to be familiar with the position of PE at Cypriot schools. The results highlight the necessity of supporting Physical Education as a subject in the Cypriot educational system. It seems that Cypriots are aware of the various benefits that can be gained by physical exercise, but they are not positively attributed towards PE classes in schools.

Based on the results it can be stated that hypothesis one is confirmed. PE is not regarded as a real discipline in the Cypriot schools. It is frequently marginalized, and many parents and students believe that it is a “waste of time”. Probably they do not realize that physical activities may prompt to their health and lifestyle in general. PE teachers have to be able to stimulate young people to participate regularly in physical activity and provide a professional education from elementary school onwards. In many countries including Cyprus, it is elementary teachers who teach the subject of PE in primary schools. It is believed that children aged six to twelve are not properly taught the subject of PE; besides there is evidence which supports that obesity in childhood has been increasing to a great extent in Cyprus. In secondary public schools the problem which is created is that the majority of active PE teachers are old and some of them had been waiting for fifteen to twenty years until their assignment to public schools. Their enthusiasm for teaching might have decreased through the years and the way they plan the lessons and the curricula might not be as effective as it should be.

According to the results, the second hypothesis of this thesis is rejected. The majority of qualified PE teachers are working in sport related jobs and/or as active PE teachers. Only few qualified PE teachers chose an occupation unrelated to their university PE degree. The phenomenon of the provision of higher supply than demand in the Cypriot labour market is not unusual. Many educated individuals have to deal with the same problem. Teachers of maths, psychology and philology need to wait for months or years until their employment in the public sector. In many cases they do further studies in order to find a better job but the results might be the opposite. If their own educational attainment is higher than the educational “requirements” of their potential job, then they are termed as “over-educated” workers. In particular over-educated PE teachers are in a more disadvantageous position since sport sciences have not developed yet in the Cypriot tertiary education. In sport and health clubs

master's degrees are not needed. Furthermore, their job opportunities are even more limited since sport clubs/gyms no longer employ properly qualified PE teachers. On the contrary, they employ individuals who have obtained diplomas issued by certain entities and these diplomas certify them to work as gym instructors; the owners of the gyms seem to prefer this option because they pay them a lower salary than the salary they would pay to qualified PE teachers. The outcome for qualified PE teachers is to work in a job that does not conform to their educational level. Of course the fact that qualified PE teachers are not able to teach in primary schools is also a significant factor which affects the whole situation in a negative way. In turn, qualified PE teachers are of the opinion that they deserve a better position. Teachers traditionally used to hold a position of respect in the community but the status of PE teachers is not treated similarly. It should be appreciated that qualified PE teachers assist individuals in improving their health and therefore they do not simply regard it as an ordinary job. It is a vocation which makes a definite contribution to society; it helps to prevent several diseases and assists in the proper development of the human body and mind.

The third hypothesis according to which, the status of qualified PE teachers who are employed in the public sector is crystallized and they are the most satisfied, is justified. Since active PE teachers are older than the other participants, and they work as governmental employees, their occupational prestige is higher and so is their salary. Obviously their income is higher in comparison to the other two groups, not only because of the beneficial nature of their work (i.e. they are governmental employees with high income) but because of the increasing years of work. Their level of education is not as high in comparison to the level of the remaining two groups but they were qualified with the PE university degree which was a stepping stone for their teaching career. PE teachers who are employed at public schools receive more respect from the public, higher income from their job, and more benefits (in general) from their professional career (since their work is governmental which has many benefits). Individuals from the second and third group (S and O) who are not employed at schools are not that satisfied with their position in the Cypriot labour market. It is especially the participants of Group 'O' who are more dissatisfied with their job and position. In other words, they feel disappointed because it seems to them that they embarked on a meaningless study and subsequently their time was not spent in a productive way and beyond that a considerable amount of money was (probably) invested by their parents, which they will never be able to repay them.

Nonetheless, the governmental employment policy might have an impact on the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with qualified PE teachers' job and position in the labour market. The participants who belong to the second and third group believe that the system is unfair. Of course this can be justified on the basis that they have a university degree which cannot be used for the particular kind of job they wished to take. Their salary is often low and the public do not respect them as coaches and instructors. Many qualified PE teachers support that the existing employment policy does not leave any room for injustice and social networking cannot be really used so as to accommodate the needs of a particular individual. They are of the opinion that if the system is altered; and is replaced with an examination procedure; social capital will play a key role towards employment. Besides, many people take a different standing on this issue. They are of the view that if an examination is set into place, the results will indicate who are the most capable and are the best suited to get employed.

In this respect; *the fourth hypothesis is also justified*. According to the results, social capital is mostly mobilized and influences the employment of qualified PE teachers at the Cyprus Sport Organization. On the one hand, most of the participants believe that social capital is mostly implicated in that specific employment field whereas they have taken the opposite view that social capital does not exert such influence with respect to the waiting list.

Although qualified PE teachers expressed their low esteem on the status of their profession it seems that their feelings towards PE are positive. More than nine tenths of PE degree holders revealed that it is very important for them to work as PE teachers. More than half of them used to be athletes in the past which gives an explanation of their commitment to sporting activities.

The last hypothesis of this thesis is also approved. There are great differences regarding the attitudes towards physical education, healthy lifestyle and sporting activities between the different groups of qualified PE teachers. PE teachers are less active than those who work in sport-related jobs, but PE degree holders who work in different professions career are much more inactive. It is a positive result that almost all qualified PE teachers take care of their nutrition since they have all graduated from PE universities and know the significance of a healthy diet very well. They also believe that physical activity throughout life is vital for everyone, so they always try to motivate people to get involved and undertake physical exercise. Finally almost every qualified PE teacher is committed to sport in general and that is the reason why

they may watch different matches or competitions in order to be more informed (educated) about new scores, talents, techniques and strategies or simply for entertainment purposes. For the latter, PE teachers should be credible in the pupils' eyes, it is only then that they will become role models and will be followed by the pupils. However, if their behaviour does not reflect the knowledge they impart, e.g. speaking about the harmfulness of smoking while actually smoking, or speaking about proper nutrition while being overweight, they cannot become role models to be followed by the youth.

The social problems that have been discussed in this thesis are influencing many individuals' lives and the consequences are dramatic. The evidence from this research seems to indicate that there is a gap between what the subject of PE should provide to children with and what is actually taking place in the Cypriot schools (in relation to PE). Besides, the social status of qualified PE teachers is affected by the specific employment policy, by the low occupational prestige they receive, by the limited job opportunities related to their studies and by the fact that they have not been provided with the opportunity to teach PE in elementary schools. Cypriot children do not remain unaffected. On the contrary, Cypriot children are also affected by these problems because they do not receive the most effective teaching in terms of PE from the elementary school teachers. Physical Education teachers are not only responsible to communicate their knowledge and various skills to the kids. They have to persuade children in a positive way to love sporting activities; to convince them that they have to take on board a certain sporting activity and continue practising it throughout their lives. It should be emphasized that those children whose experience in PE is not so good can be "turned off" for life.

It is recommended that the government and more specifically the officials of the MoEC should reconsider the immense importance of PE in terms of the significant benefits which can be gained by children. Officials who are responsible for implementing an educational program should recognize that quality teaching makes a difference to pupil learning. High quality professional learning for teachers is a central factor in determining the quality of teaching; therefore, it is a key issue to make the right choice as to who of those teachers will be teaching at schools. They should employ qualified PE teachers according to their knowledge and commitment and not according to their rank on the waiting list. It would also be essential if qualified PE teachers could teach PE in primary schools as well.

As a concluding remark, it is evident from the overall results of this thesis that the future of qualified PE teachers who have either graduated 10 years ago or recently or in the years to come will be extremely challenging in view of the fact that their job opportunities are minimal. It seems unlikely that the employment policy applied by the MoEC will change any time soon and therefore this will preserve the situation as it is. However, what should be stressed is that Cypriot society, like other societies, encounters an economic crisis which has had an effect in the way that people consider their future. It is not farfetched to argue that over the years to come the number of people choosing to enrol in a PE degree course will diminish even though this is the subject matter that they would prefer to follow as a professional career. Probably PE will be chosen simply as a hobby and not as a career since it is evident that it will not assist individuals in retaining a satisfactory level of living in a society in which insecurity is experienced by a growing number of people. Therefore, in view of the above, all the decision-makers would have to take drastic measures if they wish to ensure that the PE course would have a vital role in the future. A society from which PE disappears would be a society in which its people would encounter severe health problems and their quality of living would be poor and at risk since PE would not serve any longer as a means of spiritual enhancement.

List of publications by the author

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