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Starting point: Motivation for choosing a degree in education

Abstract

The motivation for choosing a particular degree is known to have an influence on the professional development of preservice teachers. As part of the quality improvement of the university training of physical education (PE) students, this study compares the motivation of PE students for choosing a degree in education (subject-specific) with the motivation of student teachers in general (non-subject-specific). Overall, this study only detected minor differences regarding individual motivational facets. Thus, the starting points identified for the facilitation of professional development can be regarded as valid across disciplines.

Keywords

teacher education program, sports students, motives for choosing a teacher education program, consulting

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Ausgangspunkt Studienwahlmotivation

Zusammenfassung

Die Studienwahlmotivation gilt als ein Einflussfaktor auf die berufsbezogene Entwicklung angehender Lehrkräfte. Im Rahmen der Qualitätsentwicklung der universitären Sportlehrausbildung soll die Studienwahlmotivation von angehenden Sportlehrkräften erfasst und mit fachunabhängigen Befunden verglichen werden. Insgesamt konnten in der vorliegenden Studie nur geringe Unterschiede bezüglich einzelner Motivfacetten gefunden werden. Die im Beitrag aufgezeigten Ansatzpunkte für die Förderung der professionellen Entwicklung gelten somit fachunspezifisch.

Schlüsselwörter

Lehramtsstudium, Sportstudierende, Studienwahlmotivation, Beratung

1 Introduction

What makes people decide to pursue a degree in education and go on to become teachers? The debate about the professional development of preservice teachers is significant for various reasons: In addition to cognitive learning and performance prerequisites, motivational aspects and especially degree-related interests play an important role in how students use the learning and development opportunities which a university education offers (DRECHSEL, 2001). The motivation for choosing a degree in education is presumed to have an influence on the extent to which students make use of formal learning opportunities, as well as on how involved they are in the learning process and how deeply they delve into the content (KUNINA-HABENICHT et al., 2013; KÜNSTING, BILLICH-KNAPP & LIPOWSKY, 2012). KÖNIG and ROTHLAND (2013) demonstrated that the motiva-

tion for choosing an occupation² affects learning and performance motivation. They also found this to be one of the most significant variables for the development of performance and skills. The motivation for choosing a degree in education not only influences professional development, but, according to WATT and RICHARDSON (2008), also affects how involved a teacher later becomes, as well as the quality of teaching.

Intrinsic motivation (e.g. interest in pedagogy and the specific subject) is regarded as a beneficial qualification for the choice of a teaching degree. The results of MAYR's longitudinal study (2009) show that intrinsic motivation helps students cope with their studies and has a positive effect on how they experience professional success later on. If extrinsic motivation (e.g. anticipation of an easy degree or desire for a lot of leisure time as a teacher) dominates, then expectations are likely to be disappointed. This can lead to a high level of unhappiness, may cause teachers to experience intense stress, and can also have a negative impact on teaching quality (KÜNSTING & LIPOWSKY, 2011; ROTHLAND, 2011). They are therefore negative motives.

Current findings indicate that university PE students have rather disadvantageous motivations. WEIß and KIEL (2010) indicate that preservice PE teachers have a lower level of interest in their subject and lower expectations of their degree compared to students with other subjects. Consequently, the aim of the present empirical study is to gather data on students' motives for starting a PE degree and to analyze to what extent differences can be confirmed by the results of non-subject-specific studies. The results serve as a starting point for the design of consultation programs for PE students as part of the quality improvement program.

² The terms "choosing an occupation" and "choosing a degree in education" are considered to be almost identical in the research on teacher training, and they are generally not differentiated (NOLLE, 2013).

2 The motivations of preservice teachers for choosing a degree

Research on the motivation of first-year students for pursuing a teaching qualification has identified various motives (POHLMANN & MÖLLER, 2010). Generally, there is a difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, i.e. the decision to pursue a teaching degree can be based on the anticipated consequences of the activity itself or of those beyond the core activity. Present studies cite “interest in work with children and young people”, “usefulness” and “subject-specific interest” as motives for choosing a teaching degree. “Expectation of success” and “ability” were also identified as motives, albeit to a lesser extent (GOTTSCHLICH & PU-DERBACH, 2013; RETELSDORF & MÖLLER, 2012). Research indicates that pedagogy-related intrinsic motivation dominates. Beyond this central statement, the findings are inconsistent due to varying operationalization (MEINHARDT, RABE & KREY, 2013; ROTHLAND, 2011).

At present, POHLMANN and MÖLLER’s instrument “motivation for choosing teacher education questionnaire” (FEMOLA) is often used in German-speaking countries. It features six factors of motivation for choosing a degree (“educational interest”, “subject-specific interest”, “ability beliefs”, “low difficulty of the studies”, “social influences”, “utility”). POHLMANN and MÖLLER discovered that students gave more intrinsic than extrinsic reasons for choosing their degrees. The most decisive factor was the interest in teaching and in the subject itself. POHLMANN and MÖLLER (2010) found that social influences played a relatively insignificant role, and they cited the “motive of taking up a PE degree because it is thought to be easy” as the least significant factor. These findings have been supported by other studies using this survey instrument (KÜNSTING & LIPOWSKY, 2011; RETELSDORF & MÖLLER, 2012).

3 Method

3.1 Participants

As part of the project “Improving the Professional Development of Preservice PE Teachers” (ProSpo), 152 PE students were asked about their motivation for pursuing undergraduate teaching degrees. The sample consisted of first-year students at the beginning of their university studies. This ensured that the distortion of student responses was kept to a minimum by their lack of university-related experience. The survey was conducted at two German universities using a paper-pencil method. Participation was voluntary and took place in the context of university courses.

3.2 Survey Instrument and Method

Data was collected by means of FEMOLA, an empirically tested survey instrument (KÜNSTING & LIPOWSKY, 2011). The motives for the choice of degree are collected by means of a 4-point Likert Scale (from 1 = “does not apply at all” to 4 = “fully applies”) concerning the item prefix “I chose to pursue a teaching degree because ...”.

For the present study, the item wording for the scales was chosen following the modification used in the PaLea Study. Comparative data of a large current sample is thus available (KAUPER et al., 2012). For the present study, based on FIELD (2013), the reliability of the individual scales was acceptable to good, with the exception of the scale “subject-specific interest” (“subject-specific interest” $\alpha = .47$, “educational interest” $\alpha = .82$, “ability beliefs” $\alpha = .80$, “low difficulty of the study” $\alpha = .70$, “social influences” $\alpha = .76$, “utility” $\alpha = .86$). In the comparative study, the scale values ranged from $\alpha = .73$ to $\alpha = .89$.

4 Results

The analysis of the findings on the motivation for choosing a PE teaching degree reveals that the intrinsic motivation factors are more prevalent than the extrinsic ones. With regard to intrinsic motivation, “educational interest” has the highest value ($M = 3.44$, $SD = .42$). Both “ability beliefs” ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .50$) and “subject-specific interest” ($M = 3.15$, $SD = .44$) play a role in the decision to start a teaching degree as well. With regard to the extrinsic factors, “utility” has an average of 3.04 ($SD = .50$). In contrast, social factors exert less influence on the choice of a teaching degree - at any rate, this study found lower scale values ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .59$). The scale “low difficulty of the studies” had the lowest average ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .59$). Based on this instrument, the effect of social desirability cannot be completely eliminated. But due to the assurances of anonymity, the effect can be counteracted (POHLMANN & MÖLLER, 2010).

A comparison of the findings with the results of the PaLea study (KAUPER et al., 2012) clearly shows that intrinsic motivation factors are as important among PE students as among teacher trainees in others fields. However, differences in individual factors of the motivation for the choice of degree can be seen. Figure 1 shows the parameters of the choice of degree for the random survey of the present study in comparison to the results of KAUPER et al. (2012).

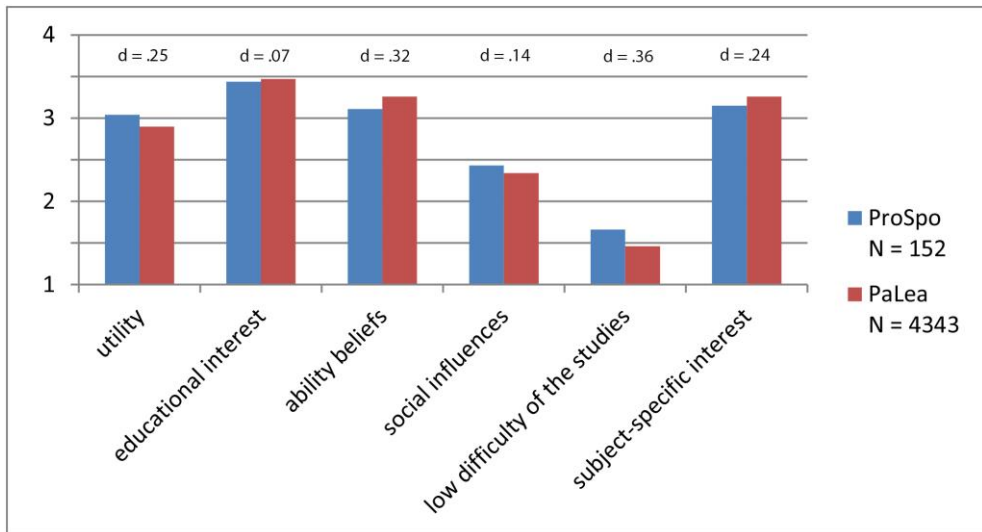


Fig. 1: Motivation for choosing teaching as a career

5 Deriving consequences for professional development support programs for preservice PE teachers

5.1 Discussion

The results show that the choice for a teaching degree is primarily based on interest, while extrinsic motives are relevant to a lesser extent. Differences were also detected in individual motivational facets between PE students and student teachers in general.

The fact that intrinsic motivation heavily outweighs extrinsic motivation is a favorable prerequisite for starting a teaching degree. Personal job-related “ability be-

liefs” and “subject-specific interest” are less relevant to PE students than students studying to teach other subjects. However, it must be taken into account that the reliability coefficient of the scale “subject-specific interest” is below the required limit. This might be due to the homogenous sample of only PE students and their specific characteristics. For future research, the items of the scale should be reviewed as well because the reliability coefficient of the scale was similarly low in some other studies (POHLMANN & MÖLLER, 2010). Therefore, this scale will be excluded from the further discussion. The level of difficulty of their degree and their anticipation of its utility are more significant motives. Intervention measures must, however, bear in mind that all effect sizes are small. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the present study is based on a small sample and that other studies indicate differences for this particular sub-group. Therefore, these findings seem to suggest that subject-specific intervention measures are not necessary for the promotion of the professional development of prospective PE teachers. Further research in this field would be desirable. In this context, we can make the following basic observations.

With regard to their future careers, the educational interest of sport students can be a significant intrinsic reason for choosing a teaching degree; it can be a source of both gratification and frustration. Here, a question arises regarding the feasibility of the motives which PE students have for pursuing a teaching degree and subsequent teaching career, particularly with regard to the increasing heterogeneity of pupils and the selective function of schools. PE students need to recognize the limits of pedagogical activity in the course of their development and be taught how to set realistic goals for themselves. Supporting the professional development of preservice teachers means initiating a critical reflection of their naive concepts of the job while still maintaining a positive attitude towards the job. In an attempt to prevent job-related stress, they should be assisted in acquiring adequate distance from the job and in setting realistic career goals for themselves.

5.2 Practical implications

A positive outcome of a teaching-related self-assessment by the students is a good starting point for pursuing a degree. According to the Self-Enhancement Approach, the self-assessment of one's own abilities has an influence on how well students learn. With reference to empirical studies, MÖLLER and TRAUTWEIN (2009) assume that a positive self-image is advantageous both in the acquisition of ability as well as in performance situations. It cannot be ignored, however, that a high self-assessment of ability can have negative consequences for skill acquisition. People with high self-assessment may tend not to invest much effort (MÖLLER & TRAUTWEIN, 2009). Essentially, there is the question of how realistic students' concepts are. Self-assessments are often based on preconceived ideas of teaching made during their own time at school. They therefore only represent a part of the many dimensions of the teaching profession. In addition, experience as sports coaches or tutoring play an overrated role. These experiences are not relevant to the job demands of a schoolteacher on an everyday basis. For professional development to be successful, students must question their own preconceived ideas and develop an awareness of their individual progress and of the necessary competencies for coping with job demands. Practical trainings can be a starting point, but they should always be supervised because they take place in an early phase of the teaching degree and are done at a time when students view the experience from an "extended school pupil perspective" (JÄGER-FLOHR, 2012). Their initial positive teaching experiences produce the notion: "I do, therefore I can". Specific and supervised impulses are necessary to reflect upon teaching as a career and, in consequence, upon their own self-image. This is also significant in relation to the comparison with anticipated usefulness aspects. User-friendly, online-based information and advice tools can provide impulses to think about career concepts. Another approach consists of different types of research-based learning as part of university courses which focus on job demands. To promote critical analysis of their own teaching-related self-concept, students could combine methods of self-assessment of their own abilities in real situations with the assessments of others. This is, to some extent, significant, as students do not always find it easy to assess

their strengths and weaknesses – regardless of how realistic their pre-concept of teaching actually is. By comparing how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them, students have the opportunity to recognize where they might require individual assistance (MEIER, 2014) and therefore seek advice in these areas.

Another clear starting point for the support of the professional development of sports students is the anticipated low difficulty of the studies. This factor is the least significant in the choice of a degree in general, but it is more important for PE students than for students of other teaching degrees. This should be taken into account when designing the didactic concept of university courses for this target group, in particular when perceived low difficulty is linked to a low willingness to work hard in skill-acquisition situations. In addition, it would be useful to provide students with information about the demands of teaching degrees early on and give them advice on methods of self-discovery, as well as providing courses in which the students' personal ideas can be compared with real-life situations.

The specification of the starting points described here and their implementation in the university training of PE teachers – as in teacher training in general – can help reduce the deficit in the support systems relating to teacher development detected by KIEL and POLLAK (2011). The support systems constitute an important component of the quality improvement of teacher training.

6 References

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