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Physical Education Teacher Education in Canada

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Canada places a high premium on education. Many people assume that Canada's educational system is the same as their American neighbors because a majority of the Canadian population lives in close proximity to the American border. Although there are many similarities between the educational systems of both countries, there are some subtle yet important differences. This article explains elements of the Canadian educational system. It addresses three goals: (1) to provide a global perspective of physical education teacher education (PETE) programs in Canada; (2) to outline the basics of PETE programs in the province of Québec, where our university is situated; and (3) to describe the unique nature of the McGill University teacher education program, including its rich and distinguished history.

A Canadian Synopsis

Approximately 35 Canadian universities offer PETE programs; others, as well as some of these, provide complementary programs such as kinesiology, exercise science, or human kinetics (www.ccupeka.ca). Because education is a provincial responsibility, PETE programs vary across the 10 provinces, and provincial regulations also allow some individualization within the provinces to accommodate philosophies and policies of the various institutions. However, standards across the country are fairly consistent.

Provincial curriculum documents for K–12 education all emphasize healthy active living derived from a combination of physical activity skill development, health-related issues including nutrition, and experiences that promote young people's ability to make appropriate lifestyle choices. PETE programs support these goals as they prepare young adults to teach physical education. Differences between the programs occur in terms of program sequencing (consecutive, concurrent), program length, certification levels, admission requirements, and program curriculum, especially in terms of pedagogy and activity courses and field experiences.

Consecutive PETE programs dominate in most provinces, particularly in Ontario, the largest province of Canada in terms of population and number of universities. Consecutive B.Ed. (PE) programs vary in length from 8 to 24 months following completion of a bachelor's degree, which may or may not be related to physical education.

A modification of this pattern occurs when students follow 3 years of general studies with 1 or 2 years of education courses under the same program. In these cases students may receive dual degrees, such as B.Ed./B.Sc. or B.Ed./B.A. Concurrent or integrated degrees, which blend education theory and experiences with other academic pursuits throughout a 4- to 5-year program, are less common. All PETE programs in Québec are concurrent in design and 4 years in length, leading to a B.Ed. (Physical Education and Health).

In all provinces except Québec, graduates of PETE programs are certified to teach at a specified educational level: elementary, middle, secondary, elementary/intermediate, or intermediate/secondary. In Québec, PETE training and certification are for both elementary and secondary levels, K–11. Only 3 of the 10 provinces in Canada have mandated physical education specialists across all grades: Québec, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick (francophone division).

In most of Canada, elementary and frequently middle school teachers are generalists rather than physical education specialists, and usually there are no physical education requirements for entry into the elementary teacher certification program. Students applying for entrance to a secondary or middle/secondary PETE program in Canada may need a degree or specific courses in a related discipline for admittance, although many universities do not have this requirement. Some universities also require evidence of additional experiences such as activity/skill courses, coaching experience, or athletic/sport participation.

In provinces where elementary classroom teachers are responsible for physical education, teacher certification programs include little if any required physical education content and practice. In contrast, programs that certify elementary school specialists normally require theoretical and practical preparation courses and field experiences geared to the elementary physical education environment.

Throughout most of Canada, secondary physical education specialists must also be certified to teach a classroom subject, which demands that part of the teacher preparation program be devoted to this content and pedagogy. Graduates of Québec PETE programs are certified only for K–11 physical education, and most programs other than McGill's do not have the flexibility for students to acquire an extensive concentration in an additional academic area.

Of necessity, 1-year consecutive PETE programs may limit physical education pedagogy to a single academic course and minimal practical experience, perhaps with no time allotted to physical education, even at the secondary level.

Concurrent and longer consecutive programs generally provide more opportunities for in-depth purusal of theory, involvement in activity/skills courses, and extensive field experiences. However, even in longer programs, methods courses may reflect general rather than content-specific pedagogy, and activity courses and field experiences may or may not include opportunities for learning to teach physical education. Field experiences occur in blocks of time as short as 1 week and as long as entire semesters, with total in-school experiences during the program ranging from 10 to 24 weeks.

PETE in Québec

Québec's education system is unique in some important ways. First of all, it features a required K–11 elementary and secondary curriculum followed by 2 years of study at the college level for students aspiring to attend university. Second, Québec is the only province that requires students to take physical education across all grades. Most of the other provinces have only one physical education course at the secondary level.

Three universities, including McGill, are mandated to prepare teachers for the English school system of Québec, complementing six French language institutions. Teacher certification in all academic disciplines requires 4 years of university study, and students are required to meet subject-specific teacher education exit profiles.

The PETE degree in Québec is based on 12 professional competencies that prepare graduates to teach physical education and
health at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels. The competencies are grouped into 4 categories: foundational competencies, teaching competencies, competencies related to social and school contexts, and competencies related to professional identity. Universities, schools, and preservice teachers are expected to develop an integrated education process with emphasis on a constructivist approach to teaching, reflective practice, ethical conduct, team building, and the recent educational reform of the elementary and secondary curricula.

Students in PETE programs, as in the other teacher education programs, must formally demonstrate competency in the language of instruction and successfully complete a minimum of 700 hours of supervised teaching in schools, approximately 20 weeks spread throughout the 4 years. For students in PETE programs who will be certified to teach Grades K–11, field experiences occur in both elementary and secondary schools.

Within the provincial guidelines established in 2001, individual universities provide similar yet distinct PETE programs. Some offer a very limited amount of physical education pedagogy, relying on the students’ ability to transfer principles from general education pedagogy courses to the gymnasium environment. Other universities conduct their programs almost entirely in the physical education milieu.

Numbers and types of activity courses vary from program to program; in some cases there is an obvious emphasis on sports for the secondary setting. Field experiences, though reaching the same number of total hours over the 4 years, may be as short as 1 week and as long as 10 weeks, and students may get more experience in one setting (elementary, secondary) than the other. Most programs provide little opportunity for elective courses, often no more than two.

The McGill Perspective

McGill University is situated in the heart of downtown Montreal, the third largest city in Canada. McGill received university status in 1835 and ranks high as a research-intensive university, both in Canada and around the world. McGill and the University of Toronto are the only two Canadian universities to be part of the select American Association of Universities. Besides its international reputation for research excellence, McGill also prides itself on the high quality of its undergraduate and graduate teaching.

Physical education has a long history at McGill, originating in the late 1800s in the form of physical training for all students of the university (Wall, 2003). Influential members of the physical education staff in those early years were James Naismith, creator of the game of basketball, and R. Tait McKenzie, distinguished sport sculptor. Although both men eventually moved on to schools in the U.S., they maintained ties with Canada and McGill throughout their careers.

Many of McKenzie’s sculptures are housed at McGill. McKenzie is credited with advocating the importance of well-trained teachers for young people’s physical training, but the preparation of teachers for physical education at McGill began formally with the work of Ethel Cartwright. Under her guidance, the view of training physical educators changed from a military style to a process of preparing teachers through schools. Her work led to the establishment of the McGill School of Physical Education in 1911, the first of its kind in Canada.

A.S. Lamb, M.D., succeeded Cartwright as Director of the School in 1917 and led the program through the phases of 1-year (1916), 2-year (1920), and 3-year (1933) teacher education diplomas. In 1944, McGill admitted students into a 4-year physical education degree program, the second university in Canada to do so. By 1965, no less than 17 degree programs in physical education were offered in Canada (Mengher, 1965).

Dr. Lamb is also known for his tireless efforts to unite Canadian physical educators into one solid professional group. The Canadian Association of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (CAHPER) began in 1933 (Gurney, 1983). In 1994 the organization became known as CAHPERD with the addition of Dance to its title. CAHPERD is the national organization whose primary concern is to foster the healthy development of children and youth by advocating for quality, school-based physical and health education (www.caaperd.ca). It also provides support at the national level for teachers who are delivering provincially mandated health and physical education curricula.

In 1956 the School of Physical Education was incorporated into McGill’s Institute of Education, which in turn became the Faculty of Education in 1969. Today the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education is one of four departments in the Faculty, with approximately 170 B.Ed. undergraduates spread over 4 years. The Department also offers a nontheatre program in kinesiology and postgraduate studies in pedagogy, sport and exercise psychology, exercise physiology, biomechanics, and adapted physical activity.

Currently McGill is the only English language program preparing physical educators in the province. The PETE curriculum reflects extensive and ongoing interactions between department staff and in-service physical educators through student field experiences and focused school board and university gatherings.

Students in McGill’s Physical and Health Education program complete 6 general education courses (e.g., philosophy, Huer Quebec educatuonal policy) and 9 subject-specific academic courses, such as anatomy and psychology. Six professional courses addressing pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation specific to physical education are required, as are 14 activity courses in games, team sports, individual/dual sports, gymnastics, dance, fitness, and aquatics, with an emphasis on lifetime physical activities.

There are also 6 elective courses, enabling the students to acquire a concentration of courses in a second teachable subject, which may enhance their marketability when entering the teaching workforce. Finally, field experiences occur in each year of the program, in 3- and 7-week blocks, evenly divided between elementary and secondary school placements. In the first 2 years the students are normally paired with a peer for their student teaching, a pattern that the rest of the Faculty of Education at McGill has now adopted.

An integrated curriculum and reflective practice are cornerstones of McGill’s program. For example, physical activity courses are designed to develop content-specific pedagogy in addition to individual skills. Instructors of these courses are often sport-specific specialists drawn from the community at large, so a faculty member who specializes in pedagogy works with them to enhance their understanding of current theory and strategies in the context of the students’ professional courses. In many classes, students are required to develop personal resources and files and keep journals of their learning experiences.

Guided reflections of teaching experiences, educational literature, current educational issues, and the student’s personal philosophy begin in the first term and continue with increasing complexity throughout the 4 years. Prior to every field experience, students are joined by their in-service assisting teachers and university supervisors for briefing sessions about the experience. Pedagogy course assignments that require students to make direct connections between theory and
practice are completed during each of the two major field experiences.
Finally, extensive logbooks of lesson plans, evaluation techniques, personal reflections, and professional feedback are required for satisfactory completion of every field experience. These logbooks and other resource files are used as foundations for succeeding professional courses.

In conclusion, Canadian PETE programs have a rich tradition and history, much of which dates back to McGill University. Although there is variety in the curricula both across and within provinces, there is consensus over the importance of adhering to Tait McKenzie’s plea over 100 years ago regarding the need to train quality physical educators in our county.

References


Acknowledgments

Appreciation is expressed to the following colleagues for their input on earlier drafts of this article: Jane Wardle, James Mandigo, Greg Reid, Ted Wall, Christi Bardecki, and Todd Loughead.