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# Physical education and sport teachers' health : from expressed ill-being to hindrances of action

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**Abstract.** The researches that specifically analyse the working conditions of teachers are few in the ergonomic literature. Our research relates more specifically to teachers of physical education and sports in french context of college. The research project described here includes both a quantitative exploratory survey (218 respondents) and qualitative case studies (interviews and observation), using the general framework of Activity Ergonomics. The results of this exploratory work tend to emphasize the importance of collective and organizational dimensions in the experience of teachers' physical education and sports. Specifically, in a perceived context of degradation of working conditions and accumulation of constraints, the collective and local ability to negotiate the various constraints on the activity appears to be a protective factor. This power to act, these margin of manoeuvre could be a relevant topic for future research.

Keywords : Margin of manoeuvre, Health at work, Organisational constraints, Collective Work, Psychosocial Health

## 1. Introduction

The research that analyze the working conditions of teachers are few in the literature ergonomic, and specifically in the tradition of the activity ergonomics [7]. A tradition of works is concerned with the interest in occupational training of the ergonomic activity analysis [eg, 1, 2, 4, 13, 16]. The various symposia at major meetings of Ergonomics (IEA, SELF) reflect this dynamic both nationally and internationally since the 1990s. Some of these researches deal specifically with the activity of teaching in the education system [eg, 3, 5, 8-9, 11-12, 14-15, 17].

In the French educational system, the teacher of physical education and sports (EPS) performs its work in often specific (spaces, ways of mobilizing the students, collective dynamics between EPS teachers ...). Work-research on this specific population and questioning the conditions of practice are few. The common discourse emphasizes the

constraints of noise, equipment and security issues. However, the experienced trainers of young teachers visiting schools emphasize an ill-being of teachers, which does not seem to directly related to these constraints. The research project assumes that the constraints commonly identified for the EPS teachers is insufficient to understand their difficulties. It is nevertheless a requirement to improve work situations.

## 2. Method

The research project is based on two components:

- A survey conducted in December 2008 to explore the working conditions perceived as problematic and those perceived to be favorable for the construction of health. 218 EPS teachers have responded (108 men and 110 women equally distributed by age groups).

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- A qualitative approach aimed at furthering some of the results of the survey. Twenty interviews were conducted with teachers of the academy in question by a teacher trainer. Simultaneously a master's thesis of ergonomics in 2010 [16] analyzed two groups of EPS teachers. These two groups were chosen with the education academic inspectors in two different schools: one (A) where teachers would "go quite well" and the other (B) where they would "be in difficulty". This second component is currently being finalized.

### 3. Results

The quantitative survey shows first a general positive perception of their work by the PE teachers. For example, PE teachers consider themselves in good form broadly (160/218). They are convinced (85%) of the beneficial effects of EPS they teach. A large majority of them said he chose this profession by vocation (186 of 218) and many people are still heavily engaged in their work (151).

These results to general questions about the job seem contradictory to those from more specific questions. Note for example that 90% of respondents said sometimes or frequently after tiring sessions. The emphasis of problem behaviors of students (118 of 218), loss of appetite for the effort (115 of 218) or discipline (127 of 218), inattention (89 of 218) or a number of students per class is too high (64.5%). 1 / 3 of respondents expressed forms of disillusionment, weariness and stress, 64.4% of teachers consider unacceptable workloads. This includes daily loads "outside job" (participation in various councils, working groups, meetings, etc ...).

Three results more surprising given the literature have questioned:

1. Complaints about environmental conditions (cold, rain, noise ...) are not very many (25%);
2. Collective work often appears as a difficulty of the job: 58.3% of respondents thus refute the idea of a cohesive team within each school, 77.6% think that this will become worse over time and 80.3% of them consider the collective work as a factor of exhaustion;
3. Both national and local guidelines produced by the educational system and the administration of the schools are perceived as a source of additional constraints.

Qualitative analyses were then designed to understand more precisely the subjective relationship of the teacher to group of colleagues, to the institution of education and to the administration of schools. These analyses are still ongoing. Initial results highlight the tight constraints perceived around the EPS teachers and unable to act experienced in the daily work to redefine their professional practice. This could be found through the analysis of various disciplinary and interdisciplinary collective projects initiated.

Team B is investing heavily in a group work with colleagues. This allows him to construct and negotiate collective strategies in favor of a more consistent behavior and strategies of teachers and students face in front of the school administration. This seems to allow the group more flexibility in the management of activities: schedules, distribution of sports facilities, organization of training courses outside of school, participation in meetings and councils school ...). The analysis of projects conducted underlines the capacity built to derogate from the usual framework established by different sources of prescription of work in terms of security rules for physical activities, organization of stages out of the school (number of people, source of funding...). The development of "occupational activities in and by the transgression" seems to us an essential outcome.

### 4. Discussion

The accurate investigation of professional activity of EPS teachers highlights the difficulties that the general discourse of actors on the job do not usually described. For this reason, the ergonomic analysis of the activity of teachers seems essential and complementary to the quantitative surveys. Evil-being identified in the survey certainly reflects the perception of a deterioration of working conditions, where the margin of manoeuvre of teachers is decisive for their health. One can imagine that this is also a performance issue with the quality of teaching and student learning. All this does not seem directly related to noise constraints, equipments or facilities and security.

Our case study leads us to propose that the inability to act according to own collective norms may be related to fatalism found in the general discourse, which also notes a lesser performance of EPS teachers. They combine the feeling of not

having the resources for "good work" to their state of exhaustion. The "professional development in and by the transgression" seems to be a local response that works. However, and if this result would be confirmed by next researches, it is useful to consider its fragility. Indeed, collective transgression of requirements as a means of maintaining power to act exposes the teachers to various risks: liability for accidents to students, retirement from actors of administration and other teachers, invisibility of the work that must be hidden, lack of professional recognition.

Overall, these results reinforce the relevance of an approach based on collective and organizational aspects of teachers' activity. From this point of view, the specifics of discipline taught (EPS) would not constitute a central element of discussion and the results could also challenge teachers from other disciplines. Finally, these results seem characteristic of situations known as "amputation of the power to act" [6], or "unsufficient margin of manoeuvre" where frequent cleavages between the teacher and his colleagues, between group and administration, contribute to reducing the scope for action. Margin of manoeuvre is the space of regulation of the activity that allows unique adjustments to the specific work situations encountered. These adjustments favor one side of system performance (quality of learning, student engagement ...). On the other hand, the subjective mobilization of workers in this regulation of activity also supports its own development.

These results challenge the ergonomists: How to promote a change in working conditions focused on the development of collective and organizational margin of manoeuvre. It is difficult to identify a decision-maker in capacity to produce change as one might do in a private company: the institutional and political actors are many, levels of responsibility and decision are multiple, local resources are often minimal. These aspects may explain why the proposed changes in working conditions for teachers usually concern the individual level (individual knowledge, teaching techniques). However, our results suggest that this level of action ignores the collective and organizational determinants, resulting in relative effectiveness.

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