

PEDAGOGY

Eye-Opening Experiences: Physical Education Teacher Candidates' Conference Attendance

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Abstract

The benefits of professional conference attendance include acquisition of knowledge and practical ideas, establishment of professional networks, exploration of job opportunities, and staying current). Yet, to date, no study has comprehensively examined physical education teacher candidates' (TCs) conference attendance at the national level. Using occupational socialization theory, this study examined physical education TCs' perceptions of their professional conference attendance. Participants included 12 university physical education TCs attending the 2017 Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) National Convention. Data sources included photo-elicitation interviews, participants' diaries, photographs, and demographic questionnaires. Interview transcripts and diaries were analyzed utilizing open and axial coding. Photographs were analyzed using a reflexive approach combined with methods recognizing the contingency of visual meanings. Results indicated that the majority of formal conference sessions attended by TCs were activity/movement oriented and were selected based upon professor advice and learner interests. Prominent themes

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of their experience included future focused learning, relationship building, and breaking out of the comfort zone. Overall, conference attendance represents an impactful learning activity, one in which faculty play an important role in shaping TCs' professional growth. Results indicate the importance of supporting TCs' continual learning and development as they transition between phases of teacher socialization.

Teacher education programs and their faculty shoulder the primary responsibility for preparing qualified teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2003). A goal of these programs is the development of teacher candidates (TCs) into effective, reflective, and creative decision makers who adopt a lifelong learning mindset (Armour, 2010). Achievement of this goal requires a committed, qualified, and diverse faculty collaborating to prepare educational professionals for today's schools. The initial physical education teacher education standards (SHAPE America, 2017) suggest TCs participate in activities leading to professional growth and development. Similarly, SHAPE America (2009) indicated that teachers at all levels should continually engage in professional development (PD) initiatives throughout their careers. Professional activities as part of physical education teacher education (PETE) programs can improve the impact of teacher education on TCs' learning and provide opportunities to help TCs learn new information and meet more people to prepare for a career in teaching (Hickson, 2006; Kampla et al., 2008; Stroot, 2001). Therefore, it is a responsibility of teacher education programs to instill TCs with an appreciation of the benefits of lifelong learning, which is a career-long process, and help them to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be willing and able to effect change in an increasingly diverse and technologically integrated educational environment.

Effective Professional Development

Professional development (PD) refers to a variety of educational experiences designed to improve teachers' practice and students' learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). Throughout their careers, teachers experience a wide variety of PD activities with the potential to result in professional learning such as new knowledge and skills, thus improving practice and contributing to their growth as professionals. Far too often, much of the PD

offered to teachers is passive rather than active. The most commonly reported formats include school-based in-service days, structured workshops, university coursework, engagement in professional learning communities, and conference attendance (Parker & Patton, 2017).

Like the socialization process, PD is continuously shaping teachers' decisions, actions, and orientations across the teaching career (Richards et al., 2014). PD research confirms that one-size-fits-all workshops intended to meet the diverse learning needs of practicing teachers are inadequate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Scholars have suggested that effective PD, aimed at changing pedagogical practices and resulting in student achievement gains, is dramatically different. Parker and Patton (2017) described effective PD to be social and active and involve collaborative learning. They noted, however, that there have been few major changes over the past three decades in the way that much physical education PD is conducted (Parker & Patton, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to work toward new and alternative PD formats throughout all phases of a teacher's careers from teacher education programs to late career.

As part of their preparation, TCs are frequently exposed to PD opportunities and are encouraged to engage in continued professional growth. Such activities often stressed in teacher education programs include joining professional organizations and attending conferences (Graber, 1996; SHAPE America, 2017). Anecdotal benefits of professional conference attendance include acquiring new knowledge about strategies and practical teaching ideas, discussing best practices in teaching, and finding resources for current or future physical education programs (Darden et al., 2005; Stroot, 2001). In addition, studies have identified professional conferences as a major vehicle for keeping teachers updated and current (Napper-Owen et al., 2008), establishing professional networks, and gaining exposure to job opportunities (Kampla et al., 2008; Stroot, 2001).

Despite these recommendations, few physical education teachers are involved in professional activities such as attending conferences (Castelli & Williams, 2007; Sears et al., 2014). In one of the few studies examining conference attendance, Davis-Brezette (2009, 2010) investigated TCs' motives for, benefits of, barriers to, and overall impact of attending and presenting at a state conference. Results

indicated that participants were eager to learn new teaching activities during the conference and gained new awareness about becoming a professional. This study relied primarily on survey data, focusing largely on participants' overall satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

Occupational socialization theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. Lawson (1986) defined occupational socialization as “all kinds of socialization that initially influence persons to enter the field of physical education and that later are responsible for their perceptions and actions as teacher educators and teachers” (p. 107). Teacher socialization is recognized as a nonlinear process, generally represented along the three phases of acculturation, professional socialization, and organizational socialization (Richards et al., 2014). This study focused on the professional socialization phase (preservice) as described by occupational socialization theory, or the process through which individuals learn to be physical educators through PETE programs. Professional socialization begins when a TC enters a PETE program designed to prepare effective teachers, typically in a college or university (Ayers & Housner, 2008; Lawson, 1983a, 1983b, 1986). During this phase, prospective teachers grapple with PETE disciplinary knowledge, curricula, and student learning. Further, TCs develop the knowledge, skill, and dispositions of the profession deemed important by the faculty through a combination of learning experiences (Lawson, 1983b). For example, TCs typically complete methods and foundational courses within the department, take general education courses outside the department, and participate in early field experience and student teaching in local schools and classrooms (Graber et al., 2017). It has been advocated that PETE programs focus on supporting TCs to question and challenge initial assumptions of what it means to be a physical educator (Richards et al., 2013). Despite well-intentioned faculty and thoughtfully designed PETE programs, some scholars have suggested their limited impact on professional socialization, noting that teacher education courses often do not effectively alter the beliefs and dispositions that recruits acquire during acculturation (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

Other scholars have argued that, when done in a proactive manner, programs have successfully helped TCs to reformulate their subjective theories (Graber et al., 2017). Common features of these

programs include a shared technical culture among faculty about what candidates should learn (Curtner-Smith, 2001); integrated and reinforced essential features of teaching across the program (Graber et al., 2017); and multiple, purposeful, supervised field experiences (Richards et al., 2014).

Likewise, physical education teacher educators investment in their own professional learning and development, and the successful portrayal of that to TCs through innovative pedagogies, role modeling, and mentoring, has also been identified as an area with potential to positively affect TCs' views of learning (MacPhail et al., 2014). This investment by teacher educators holds the potential to instill the appreciation and necessity for lifelong learning as they move into teaching in schools, and perhaps combat the negative aspects of occupational socialization. Because PD does not end with initial university training, the adoption of a lifelong learning mindset and subsequent behaviors is a critical attribute that must be impressed upon TCs during the socialization process (Armour, 2010).

Socialization and Teacher Professional Learning and Development

K. Patton et al. (2015) proposed that professional socialization be considered from a new perspective, one that is no longer viewed as a reactive and linear process, but rather a dynamic, ever changing process that illustrates the changing nature of professional socialization over time. In alignment with this perspective, Kearney (2014) presented a conceptual framework exemplifying how beginning teachers advance through the induction practices of an organization and illustrated how socialization may aid in, rather than detract from, novices' progression. This work, founded on Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) framework for organizational socialization, is based on the premise that teacher induction is "the primary phase in a continuum of professional development leading to the teacher's full integration into a professional community of practice and continuing professional learning throughout their career" (Kearney, 2014, p. 5). As such, learning is viewed as central to the socialization process.

However, limited research has identified what constitutes PD opportunities within PETE programs with the potential to instill in TCs an appreciation for experiences that will contribute to lifelong learning. Proponents of a focus on lifelong learning frequently

advocate conference attendance as one PD strategy to maximize the impact of teacher education programs (Graber, 1996). The ways in which conference attendance can influence TCs' professional learning and development are important and yet needs investigation. Additionally, the role of teacher educators in TCs' adoption of a life-long learning disposition demands attention. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine physical education TCs' perceptions of their professional conference attendance. Three research questions were explored: (a) What were TCs' motives and expectations for attending a national conference? (b) What formal and informal activity and event choices did TCs make and why? (c) What was the perceived impact of conference attendance on TCs' learning and growth as future professionals? Findings hold the potential to positively inform PETE programs and shape PD opportunities for TCs.

Method

Participants

Participants included 12 physical education TCs (9 females, 3 males) attending the 2017 SHAPE America National Convention. Participants had an average age of 21.6 years (range 20–26), representing two PETE programs (one in the Western United States and one in the Northeastern United States). Their previous conference attendance included state and national conferences. The average number of conferences attended was 1.9 (range 0–6). Previously attended conferences were primarily at the state level and physical education focused. Conference attendance was highly encouraged for one program, while attendance (either state or national) was a degree requirement for the other program.

We used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling (M. Patton, 2002) to recruit participants from the two PETE programs with a history of encouraging and facilitating TCs to attend the SHAPE America conferences. We contacted PETE faculty at those institutions and asked them to provide the contact information of TCs scheduled to attend the conference. Once potential participants were identified, we contacted them via email, informing them of the study and asking if they would participate. Procedures for obtaining appropriate informed consent were approved by institutional review board guidelines.

Data Collection

A combination of methods were utilized to capture TCs' perceptions of their attendance at the 2017 SHAPE America National Convention. These data collection techniques included (a) participant diaries of formal and informal activities and events, (b) demographic questionnaire, (c) TCs' photographs of their meaningful events and experiences using a photovoice approach, and (d) formal semistructured photo-elicitation interviews.

Participant Diaries

First, to explain and clarify study protocols, Xiaoping Fan met with the participants at the convention center on the first day of the conference. During the meeting, diaries were distributed and participants were asked to record formal sessions, informal events (conversations, meals, sightseeing), and write a brief reflection on their learning throughout the conference. To supplement the diaries, Fan asked participants to take a minimum of five pictures each day of meaningful events and experiences with their phones or cameras. During the conference, Fan sent two messages per day (morning and late afternoon) to all participants, prompting them to record in their diaries as well as to take the photographs.

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire and informed consent at this meeting. The demographic questionnaire was to gain additional context about the participants, including gender, age, university, major, classification, previous conference attendance experience, and future career goal.

Photographs

During the conference, participants took digital photographs of personally meaningful events, representations, and activities (Harper, 2002). After the conference, TCs were asked to submit to the researchers their five most meaningful photographs representing (a) learning, (b) a formal session, (c) an informal event, (d) people they met or interacted with, and (e) a place they visited. This visual ethnography approach (Pink, 2007) generated different and complementary information because of its ability to gather important evidence of TCs' personally meaningful events when and where it happened.

Photo-Elicitation Interviews

Using Wang and Burris' (1997) three-step approach of selecting, contextualizing, and codifying, TCs then analyzed their photographs. Within 2 weeks of the conference, Fan conducted formal semistructured photo-elicitation interviews with TCs focusing on their motives for conference attendance, their activity choices, and the perceived impact of conference attendance on their professional learning and growth. By prompting and shaping latent memory and reducing areas of misunderstanding, teachers' photographs served as a means of communication between Fan and the participants (Harper, 2002). Photographs provided an opportunity to evoke longer and more comprehensive accounts of TCs' experience. Through participant images, we sought to hear and understand how TCs made meaning of their conference attendance. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were conducted via FaceTime.

Data Analysis

First, analysis of attendance recorded in participants' diaries consisted of calculating frequencies and percentages for both formal sessions and informal events. Second, TCs' qualitative responses to individual interview questions and their diaries were analyzed with open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the open and axial coding phase, all interview transcripts were read individually several times, with notations made in the margins. From each transcript, significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to perceptions of conference attendance were identified. Also during this phase, analytic memos (Creswell, 2007) were written for each data source, which allowed for documentation of and enriched the interpretive process. Analytic memos consisted of questions, comments, and ideas about emerging categories. Next, categories were conceptualized and defined in terms of their properties and dimensions. Photographs were analyzed through a reflexive approach combined with methods recognizing the contingency of visual meanings (Pink, 2007). Analysis began with identification of all features (e.g., people, places, events) and examination of TCs' explanations of why they took the photographs. Then the identified features and quotes were coded and classified into categories according to similar themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through three techniques: (a) triangulation, (b) a researcher journal, and (c) an audit trail (Merriam, 2009). First, multiple investigators and multiple data sources were used in the confirmation of the findings. Data were triangulated for analytical purposes across three data sources (interviews, diaries, and photographs). Investigator triangulation occurred as Fan and two experienced qualitative researchers, Kevin Patton and Luciana Zuest, engaged in multiple debrief meetings throughout the data analysis process. Second, Fan kept a researcher journal to document personal reflections, methodological decisions, questions raised, theoretical propositions, and evolving perceptions of the study, acknowledging the researchers' beliefs, values, assumptions, and positions throughout the research process. Finally, an audit trail was maintained, allowing for a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings (M. Patton, 2002).

Results

Results are presented in two main sections. First, conference session attendance is described in terms of the types and frequency of conference sessions chosen by TCs. Next, TCs' perceptions of their conference attendance are presented.

Conference Session Attendance

Formal Sessions

Analysis of participants' diaries indicated that collectively, TCs attended 109 formal conference sessions (see Table 1). The most frequently reported type of formal sessions were categorized as physical education curriculum and instruction ($n = 44$). Examples included yoga, cricket, and Irish dance. This category was accountable for the highest percentage of formal sessions attended (40.4%). Other types of sessions selected by participants included those focused on physical activity with Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program ($n = 14$), conference-sponsored sessions, general sessions ($n = 9$), and adapted physical education ($n = 8$).

Table 1
Formal Sessions Participants Attended (N = 109)

Category	Example	Frequency	% of total formal sessions
Physical Education			
Curriculum and instruction	Yoga, Irish step dancing	44	40.4
Adapted physical education	APE TOY playbook	8	7.3
Technology	Fitness assessment	4	3.7
Professional preparation	Effective PE teacher	2	1.8
Subtotal		58	53.2
Physical Activity			
CSPAP	Physical activity leader training	14	13.8
Adapted physical activity	Archery and autism	2	1.8
Dance	Fun dances from around the world	1	.9
Subtotal		17	15.6
School Health Education			
Professional preparation	The edTPA	4	3.7
Curriculum and instruction	Assessment in the health education classroom	2	1.8
Subtotal		6	5.5

Table 1 (cont.)

Category	Example	Frequency	% of total formal sessions
Conference-Sponsored			
General sessions	Wednesday general session	9	8.3
Exhibition	Equipment and products	4	3.7
Student orientation	Student orientation	4	3.7
The award ceremony	The year ceremony	1	1.9
Subtotal		18	16.5
Others			
Presentation	Student research work-in-progress poster	6	5.5
Leadership development	Transitioning from student to teacher	2	1.8
Advocacy	Success stories from advocacy champions	1	1.9
Coaching	Soccer	1	1.9
Subtotal		10	9.2

Informal Events

Teacher candidates recorded a total of 55 informal events (see Table 2), which included sightseeing ($n = 17$), meeting and talking with people ($n = 11$), and having meals with professors and peers ($n = 11$). Sightseeing accounted for the highest percentage of informal events (30.9%). For examples of formal and informal event diary entries, see Figure 1.

Table 2

Informal Events Participants Attended (N = 55)

Category	Example	Frequency	% of total formal sessions
Sightseeing	Fenway Park, Harvard	17	30.9
Meeting and talking to people	Physical education teachers	11	20
Having meals with professors and peers	Having dinner with peers	11	20
Attending sporting events	NBA basketball game	10	18.2
Attending university alumni social	University social	6	10.9

Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of Conference Attendance

Analysis of qualitative data resulted in three themes describing TCs' perceptions of their attendance: future focused learning, relationship building, and breaking out of the comfort zone.

Figure 1

Diary Entry of Formal (Andrea) and Informal (Audrey) Activities and Events

Date	3/14/17	Time	8:00am-12:00pm
Number of Session			
Title of Session	Physical Activity Leader Training		
Reflection	Why did you choose this session? My professor chose it for me during my application process for the conference and said its very good for me to attend		
	What, if anything, did you find interesting? I found it interesting that not many people are trained or have schools that participate in this		
	What, if anything, did you learn? I learned that every school should have an improvement team that advocates for the physical education program and involves making goals for the school		

Date	3-15-2017	Time	12:30-1:15pm
Place	The Pour House Restaurant		
Informal event	Lunch		
Reflection	Why did you engage in this event? I went to lunch with my classmates and professor. Got to listen to some of their sessions they had gone to.		
	What, if anything, did you find interesting? That the bar has a lot of memories posted up around the Irish bar. My classmates commented and talked about those or the pictures, poster when		
	What, if anything, did you learn? I found out that everyone is enjoying the sessions they went to. Learning more stuff on how to be creative in a classroom and getting to know connections.		

Future Focused Learning

Participants were motivated to seek new information that would help them become better teachers. Specifically, TCs wanted to expand their knowledge base and noted that they wished to learn about unfamiliar topics that they did not learn about in their PETE programs. For example, Chris shared,

I just want to learn about new stuff. I was wishing to learn about different sports because kids get bored with basic stuff...Learning new material, new ways to use technology. I was just curious about knowledge, just the new ways people teach. My intentions were to learn new content and think about ways to implement it in my classroom when I teach.

Participants frequently sought novel content and sessions featuring hands-on learning. This affinity to select physically active sessions was corroborated by their diary entries recording which sessions they attended and why. For example, Chris shared:

I wanted to go to the seminars [sessions], but I also want to go active [sessions] where I'm actually doing something, like the Irish step dancing. I also wanted to be active and be engaged in the learning process. I feel like if you do what the students will do, it's easier for you to teach. Plus, you also know what the students are going for.

In addition to seeking active sessions, TCs sought sessions that engaged their sense of curiosity to learn new content, sports, technology, and activities. For example, Zoe expressed his excitement:

This was just incredible to me. There were all these people around these exercise balls and drumsticks, and no one really told us what to do. The presenter just came in and started drumming on an exercise ball, and we all followed, and she went about half an hour into the session without saying a word, and we got a lot of physical activity in different rhythms and beats.

See Figure 2. Similarly, Michelle shared,

For some of the stuff I didn't know, like Irish step dancing, seminars about optimism, and cricket, I wanted to get a broad idea on how to teach those, or how to understand them, or how to play the game...I wanted to learn how to convey that information to my students, to my future students.

Figure 2

Activity Session in Progress (Zoe)



In addition, some TCs chose the sessions with the topics not specifically addressed or not addressed in depth within their PETE program. As such, they chose sessions, often prompted by their professors, to fill perceived gaps in their knowledge. Maria reported,

In the physical education [teacher education] program, we don't learn much about coaching because coaching is a minor, and so I definitely want to attend that...In the physical education [teacher education] program, we do have health classes, but it's more physical education oriented and so that's why I went to more health [sessions], so I can get a lot more information about how to teach health.

Exhibit hall attendance supported participants in learning information that could be incorporated into their future teaching. Amy's photo (see Figure 3) indicated she was introduced to a variety of equipment sizes and uses:

That specific [picture] showed you all sorts of different balls that they make. And it was cool because you're just seeing like one size ball versus they had like 10 on the table...I could use this stuff for future, [I] tried to compare that to other equipment companies.

Figure 3
Variety of Equipment and Uses (Amy)



Linda also indicated that she gained new assessment ideas:

Things that are more effective for assessing women students and bringing fitness into the gym with no equipment...also learning another sport is different and it's something that you can modify in a gym to teach at a middle school or high school students...I took a lot away from the ideas behind physical education.

Relationship Building: Creating a Sense of Community

Engagement in conference preparation with peers and professors supported TCs getting to know one another and initiating meaningful conversations, resulting in confidence building. For example, Anna felt she “learned much more about one another, and opened up on deeper levels besides just having that professor–student relationship, it was more of a friend-to-friend relationship.” Further, they noted that making connections and developing relationships was a significant outcome of their attendance.

For one PETE program, conference attendance (either state or national) was a degree requirement. While encouraged (but not required) to attend, the TCs in the other program in this study were motivated by the opportunity to present with their professor as part of a research team. Zoe shared, “This was the picture of me presenting my rolling station at the session. So, basically I was able to teach other teachers about the program [underhand bowling for preschool]” (see Figure 4). This opportunity to prepare and present together provided a bonding experience. Sharing her thoughts about presenting a research poster at the conference (see Figure 5), Lauren explained,

It was just an awesome experience to show what we've been working on as a group, and people coming over to us to ask good questions. They wanted to know more about it. And this was definitely a positive impact. It was also just cool to meet people and presenting is not in my comfort zone.

Conference activities, such as presenting with professors, allowed TCs to get to know their professors and peers, resulting in the development of a sense of community. Amy shared about her experiences

Figure 4
Conference Presentation (Zoe)

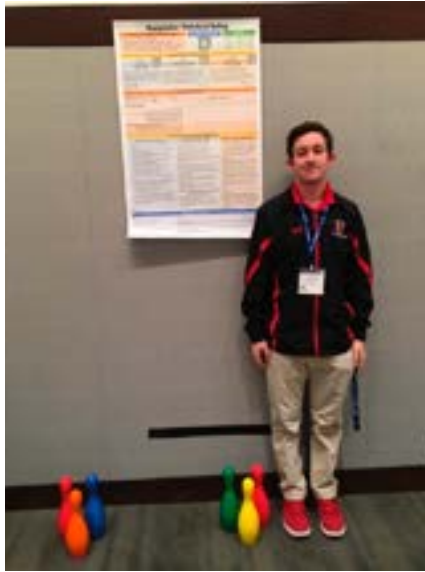
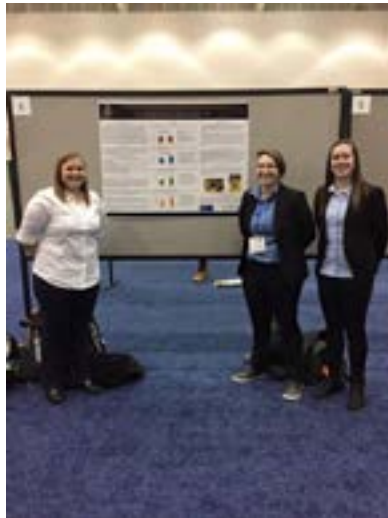


Figure 5
*Research Poster Sessions With
Co-Presenters (Linda)*



with others, including touring Harvard University with her peers and professors. She also indicated that connecting with others made conference attendance meaningful: “It was nice connecting with our professors, or with just the girls. It was really nice because we got to know each other a lot better” (see Figure 6). Because of the trust and relationships developed, PETE faculty played an important role not only by encouraging TCs to attend the conference, but also in influencing which sessions TCs selected. For example, Chris shared, “all of our teachers were talking about it this year...So it was mainly from my teachers, but also from a couple of students, other peers.” Maria added,

Our professors had gone to conferences all over the country, and they were so supportive in going to this [conference]. There were even people from last year who went to the conference in Minnesota who encouraged us to go. They would tell us about all the events they attended, and how much fun it was, and how much they gained, and the people that they met and the connections they made.

Figure 6
Together With Classmates (Amy)



Advice from professors was the most frequently cited stimulus for session selection. They provided general advice and encouraged interactions with other participants. Raven indicated,

[The professor] told us to go to sessions that weren't necessarily our strengths, things we wish to work on, and she told us to basically go to those instead of going to all the sessions you were confident in or were more interested in, go to ones that you weren't sure about.

Andrea shared advice that she received from her professor about meeting others:

One professor was just saying to, like, make the most of it, see as much as you can, meet as many people as you can, go around and try to go to sessions that aren't necessarily what you would pick out right away but are the things you could work on.

In addition to strengthening bonds with peers and professors, participants also met and connected with people at the conference including students, teachers, and professors. These other people shared their experiences and information about teaching, research, job opportunities, and graduate school. Edward shared that he got to meet people from the United States and internationally:

I got to meet people from the East Coast; they shared their experiences and ways to get students motivated, so I can use that in my future teaching...I talked to some of the students, I talked to a couple of teachers...I got to meet a few people from Ireland and a lot of people from different states.

Interactions with others during the conference also helped to confirm their career choice. Andrea shared her excitement of meeting new people and information that would help her in her future teaching: "I got excitement into entering the field because of just how the teachers there and professors there. I was surrounded by how invested they were in learning new things, how excited they got off of it." Karen indicated a shared motivation to become a better physical educator:

We were all there for the same reasons: to become more knowledgeable, creating networks, sharing ideas, learning new things and new activities we can teach later ...[I] saw hundreds of teachers there keeping up with their professional development, and gaining new ideas, and hoping to find something that they can add or incorporate into their classroom. So, when I become a future professional I need to do the same.

Participants also received the contact information from teachers so they could request teaching resources, ask questions about teaching, and inquire about job prospects. Cathy shared,

I got [the teachers'] school email. So they told me if I had questions, wanted to go over ideas with them and that I could contact them, which is awesome...Sometimes it's nice to have those contacts to say this is what I'm thinking, do you have any resources for it?

Raven added these contacts could result in future employment opportunities after graduation:

I got to meet people who were like "oh, here's a business card, my school is hiring next year," or even people talking about my different graduate schools. Actually, I met a guy in a session who said that he used to be a professor at the university that I'm looking at [for graduate school]. It was just accidental, but that sounds like an awesome opportunity. So it was great just networking and seeing the different opportunities out there.

Several participants shared that their previous positive conference experience was impactful, identifying making connections with others and relationship building as a motivating factor in their attendance. Chris reported the benefits of attending a state conference:

I feel like at state conference, you can create connections better in your state because we talked to one of the top people in Seattle who are hiring, and also teachers just from local districts very close to home.

TCs also noted the value in making connections, gaining different teaching ideas, and confirming that the content in their own PETE programs was current and relevant. The positive previous conference experience motivated TCs to attend this national conference: “I’ve gone to the state conferences, I’ve been to the last two years, and I really like those. So I thought that this would be just another cool experience to be able to meet more people” (Linda).

Breaking Out of the Comfort Zone

Participants indicated that conference attendance helped to break them out of their comfort zones, providing new perspectives on career and lifelong learning. Andrea shared, “[The conference] definitely opened my eyes to different perspectives, and how to kind of pull apart certain things and now I might just think about them differently.” Chris noted, “It was a very good eye-opening experience...I would do it again in a heartbeat. It was an amazing conference and there’s a lot to learn.”

In addition to providing new perspectives on teaching, the conference supported TCs transition from student to teacher. For example, Karen, in her diary entry, shared,

[I chose] transition from students to teachers [formal session] because in the fall I’ll be doing my student teaching. So I really wanted to gain more knowledge on how I can actually transition and be a professional other than a student.

In providing other students advice about how to navigate a conference experience, Anna stated,

Try to step out of your comfort zone. We are here for the right reasons. We are here to expand our mind, expand our experiences, learn from other people. Take it seriously. Try to get sessions because we do not know what we could walk away with, and try to avoid staying in that comfort zone, like do not to be too shy, like everyone is accepting or everyone is learning.

Similarly, Lauren shared how her attendance and interaction with others provided a different perspective on the teaching perspective,

noting that being comfortable with uncertainty is a reality of teaching:

I think going to conferences is so beneficial because you get so many different perspectives and you get to interact and network with so many different people...and again being pushed outside my comfort zone, like I feel like that's something that happens in teaching a lot, so like getting used to it now, I guess is just going to pay off eventually, like help me in the future.

Finally, participants appreciated the role of trying something new in pursuing lifelong learning. As Anna stated, "There was never enough to learn. So there will always be something new out there for me to bring into my own classroom or gymnasium one day." Overall, the experience served, often, to push TCs out of their comfort zones, allowing them to examine the transition from student to teacher and motivating them to work hard and remain engaged professionally:

[This conference] definitely has taught me a lot and has made me want to keep motivated this semester to work hard because I can see the bigger picture now, like why I am going to school, and because sometimes I just want to quit, but now it helps me see the bigger picture of what can come from and what I'm doing. (Michelle)

Discussion

While physical education scholars have argued that professional conference attendance may affect TCs' continual growth and development, limited PETE research has been conducted in this area (Richards et al., 2014). The findings in this study indicate that conference attendance plays an influential role in TCs' PD. The TCs viewed the conference as a positive experience that resulted in the attainment of new content, relevant ideas, and relationship building. Participants also perceived that their experiences, both formal and informal, resulted in new career perspectives and an appreciation of lifelong learning. Several participants shared the sentiment of having "eye-opening experiences," indicating that their experiences pushed

them out of their comfort zone and thus increased their motivation to work hard to prepare for a career in physical education teaching.

In line with occupational socialization theory, participation in professional activities and organizations such as conference attendance may complement and support quality teacher education programming. Conference attendance, as a component of a quality teacher education program (either encouraged or required), introduced TCs to learning opportunities impossible in PETE programs alone. It also supplemented perceived voids in PETE programming by allowing TCs to seek content not formally addressed in their coursework. It has been reported that PETE programs sometimes have limited impact on TCs' beliefs and dispositions during acculturation (Capel et al., 2011; McCullick et al., 2012; Srean & Curtner-Smith, 2009). This study, however, provides some initial evidence that these TCs began to change the ways they viewed themselves as professionals. For some TCs, conference attendance helped them think about their career as future teachers, positively shaping their transition from students to physical educators.

As TCs move beyond the acculturation and professional socialization phases into organizational socialization of their teaching careers, continuing to learn and develop as individuals and professionals is crucial. If teachers are to be successful, the transition between and among each phase of socialization needs to be planned in a seamless fashion (Parker & Patton, 2017). When any person adjusts to “novel circumstances” that come when beginning teaching, a change in jobs, taking on a second role, and receiving tenure, there is likely to be some surprise or reality shock involved (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). These surprises may be described as the realities or circumstances of teaching—all of which require some type of adjustment.

Over the past three decades, scholars have called for a revision of teacher education curricula in physical education to better prepare recruits for the realities of working in schools (Lawson, 1986; Richards et al., 2013). Teacher candidates in this study had opportunities to talk to teachers and learn about their experiences in school as well as the problems they face daily. Such opportunities helped TCs see a more realistic picture of being a physical education teacher. Participants shared that their interactions with teachers

exposed them to the difficulties and milestones they may experience as professionals and the best practices teachers had utilized when faced with challenges within the public school system. While difficult to quantify, these opportunities to interact with and ask teachers questions helped TCs to think about themselves and the profession differently.

Most often in physical education, teachers, especially beginning teachers, find the reality of school does not match what they were taught in their teacher education program (Blankenship & Coleman, 2009). Within physical education, two of the most prominent circumstances of teaching are isolation and marginalization (Stroot & Ko, 2006). In one sense, physical education teachers are physically isolated, with the gymnasium most often being on the perimeter of the school, and/or in elementary schools they are often the only physical education teacher. These circumstances often result in lack of conversations with other teachers and physical education teachers' opinions not being sought. In another sense, physical education teachers are often intellectually isolated due to conflicting views of physical education's place in schools, which results in feelings of marginalization and is often epitomized by the multitude of noninstructional functions and duties assigned to them (Stroot & Ko, 2006). In their study of inservice physical education teachers, Richards et al. (2018) reported that enhanced personal accomplishment and resilience helped to foster perceptions of mattering (i.e., feeling a meaningful part of the school curriculum), reducing physical educators' perceived isolation and marginalization. Within the results of this study, TCs viewed their attendance, especially presenting research with their professors, as a personal and professional accomplishment. Their experience also affirmed that the content in their PETE program was important, relevant, and contemporary. Further, participants described engaging with fellow students and professors as well as interacting with other teachers as a valuable experience. They indicated conferences as a venue for new teachers to be accepted, have a voice, ask questions, and be supported. With such support, young teachers may be more likely to weather the effects of washout (Blankenship & Coleman, 2009).

Current professional guidelines indicate that TCs should pursue PD opportunities that support collaboration in schools and/

or professional organizations and should continually seeking new information to stay current and improve their professional growth and professionalism (SHAPE America, 2009, 2017). Effective PD advocates have described teacher learning as “interactive and social, based in discourse and community practice” (Desimone, 2011, pp. 68–69). This brand of PD highlights formal and informal learning within communities (Parker & Patton, 2017). For the participants in this study, conference attendance represented several of these characteristics. They learned new content and gained ideas to improve their learning and professional growth and the sessions they most frequently selected to attend were active in nature. Further, TCs identified relationship building with peers and professors and conversations with current teachers as the most memorable and impactful conference experiences.

A unique finding of this study was the pivotal role PETE faculty play in influencing conference attendance and their critical role in preparing TCs to maximize opportunities to grow professionally. Teacher candidates from one university were provided opportunities to formally co-present research findings with faculty. In both programs, PETE faculty demonstrated their commitment to helping TCs get the most out of conference attendance by focusing on engagement in meaningful conversations and learning important content knowledge. For TCs, the role of faculty was prominent; faculty not only encouraged them to attend but also provided them with guidance about conference attendance either formally or informally. Importantly, faculty served as role models by demonstrating their dedication to lifelong learning. Therefore, teacher preparation programs should thoughtfully support TCs in acquiring the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions that contribute to the development of professionals who accept a lifelong responsibility for continued learning. As such, teacher educators’ investment in their own professional learning and development, and the successful portrayal of that to TCs, is crucial and holds the potential to positively affect TCs’ view of learning (MacPhail et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that conference attendance is a meaningful activity for TCs’ learning and professional growth. TCs shared that they learned new content, built relationships, and gained

more awareness of becoming a professional. Interacting with current teachers assisted them in examining the realities of teaching physical education and working in schools. Results in this study begin to scratch the surface in terms of examining the impact of conference attendance. For example, utilizing different and varied methodologies could bring additional insight into the complex process of teacher candidate professional learning and development. Future research could also document actual impact of conference attendance on TCs' positive socialization, beliefs, and teaching performance. Other studies may examine the impact of conference attendance on in-service teachers' PD and further investigate the role of PETE faculty in TCs' learning and professional growth. A deeper understanding of the impact of conference attendance and other similarly impactful learning experiences may result in more effective ways of preparing TCs. Results of this study highlight the influence of continual learning and development on TCs as they move beyond the acculturation and professional socialization phases into organizational socialization in their teaching careers. They also capture the composition of PETE programs that succeed in the socialization of TCs (Richards & Gaudreault, 2017).

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