

PEDAGOGY

Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) Majors' Perceptions of Participating in a Semester-Long High School PE Practicum

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Abstract

Many courses Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) majors take are all considered valuable and important to the PETE majors before entering the profession of teaching physical education (PE). The practicum course is probably the most important for PETE majors. The practicum course typically consists of an elementary, middle school, and high school teaching experience. This study aimed to investigate PETE majors' perceptions of teaching before (pre) and after (post) they participated in a high school PE practicum. For this study, 14 senior PETE majors were interviewed before and after participating in their high school PE practicum. It was generally found that before participating in the practicum, the PETE majors were concerned about classroom management issues and dealing with the unknown before teaching. After the practicum, the students felt that being prepared with the lessons was important for their success, and the PETE students weren't anxious regarding the student teaching ex-

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perience. These findings affirm the practicum's importance in the PETE majors' preparation to teach PE.

Introduction

A physical education teacher education (PETE) major's preparation includes classes covering Introduction to Physical Education, Physiology, Motor Learning, and Methods of Teaching PE in elementary and secondary PE. The Method of Teaching PE course has a practicum experience, usually in elementary, middle, and high school PE. The practicum experiences are provided to help students better understand teaching and their role as professional teachers working with students (Barney & Christenson, 2009).

The practicum can be considered an early field experience. The early field experience is defined as an off-campus teaching episode for preservice teachers, which involves working in the school environment with groups of students. These experiences occur prior to the final student teaching experience (Dodds, 1989). The practicum is the first experience the PETE majors have with 'real students' (Barney & Pleban, 2006). Paese (1989) has stated that the PE practicum experience provides PETE majors with seven advantages. They are (a) preservice teachers can make better career choices, (b) field experiences can bridge the gap between theory and practice, (c) courses within the curriculum become more meaningful, (d) preservice teachers gain a better understanding of children, (e) preservice teachers gain a better understanding of their responsibilities as teachers, (f) preservice teachers gain a better understanding of their ability to teach children and adolescents and have the opportunity to develop teaching skills, and (g) preservice teachers realize that there is more to teaching than telling children what to do.

When it comes to practicum placements, university professors must consider the schools and PE classrooms in which the PETE student is being placed. The school and the PE classrooms need to align with what the PETE faculty teaches and exposes their students to at the university. Curtner-Smith (1996) offers six suggestions for practicum students. They are (a) take place at schools in which PETE programmatic messages are reinforced, (b) are closely supervised by PETE faculty and trained quality PE teachers, (c) are linked tightly with on-campus methods courses, (d) focus on specific teaching

skills derived from teacher effectiveness research, and (e) are presented in a manner such that the PETE majors view the messages as practical and useful.

From the literature that the PE practicum experience has been studied, for example, Sofo and Curtner-Smith (2010) studied the effects of the PE practicum on the PETE major's value orientation. Briefly, value orientation refers to beliefs of educational priorities from which teachers engage in content selection, teaching methods adoption, learning goal conceptualization, and assessment decisions at both philosophical and implemental levels (Ennis, 1992). For this study, the participants in their practicum taught 10 lessons to middle school students. The participants from this study had coaching experience. Thus, the data sources from this study indicated that the value orientations of the participants with coaching experience were not affected by their practicum experience, not receiving beneficial experiences teaching in the schools.

A second study investigated the team of PETE majors teaching in a junior high PE early field experience (Barney & Christenson, 2009). For this study, 26 PETE majors participated in team teaching with a classmate, observing two lessons from the classroom teacher and two lessons in the school with themselves and their classmates. At the conclusion of this early field experience, the participants were interviewed about their experiences in school. From the interviews, the participants stated the importance of using a loud gym voice for the purpose of instructing students, the importance of planning with an emphasis on overplanning or having a backup plan, and using music in their lesson and how it impacted the activities they had the students participate in, with the plans of implementing music in their own teaching for increased student movement and enjoyment.

Another study dealing with PETE majors' experiences during a practicum investigated PETE majors' perceptions before and after they participated in their elementary PE practicum (Barney & Pleban, 2006). For this study, 20 PETE majors (11 males and nine females) participated in this study. Interview themes in both the before and after interviews were classroom management, classroom preparedness, specific to lesson planning, student learning, and making the PE class enjoyable. These studies highlight the importance of students having "real-world" experiences before undertaking the

student teaching experience. Thus, this study aimed to investigate PETE majors' perceptions of teaching before (pre) and after (post) they participated in a high school PE practicum.

Methods

Participants and Context

For this study, 14 senior PETE majors voluntarily participated in this study. The 14 PETE majors were enrolled in a fall semester high school PE practicum class required for graduation. The PETE majors' ages ranged from 20 to 28 years. The PETE majors were seniors in academic standing. The PETE majors self-identified their ethnicity as white, Hispanic, and Polynesian. Nine PETE majors were on track to student teach the following winter semester. The other five PETE majors would fulfill their student teaching requirements the following academic year. Before participating in this high school PE practicum, the PETE majors had participated in the elementary and middle school practicums.

The PETE majors were placed with four veteran high school female PE teachers in schools close to the university. The teaching experience of the high school PE teachers ranged from five to 30 years. The roles of the high school PE teachers were to supervise and give feedback after the PETE majors' lesson. The PETE majors were placed in groups of three or four students. Each student had the opportunity to teach four or five lessons by themselves. When one student was teaching, another student observed and eventually gave feedback to the classmates teaching. The other students were filming/recording the teaching PETE of their classmates (Barney & Beddoes, 2022).

University Institutional Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to the start of the study. All PETE majors signed informed consent to participate in this study after IRB approval. Additionally, PETE majors were assured study participation would not affect their final grade or class standing and had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, the PETE majors were interviewed a week before they began their practicum experience and interviewed again after

completing the practicum. The researchers constructed six pre-practicum interview questions and seven post-practicum interview questions. The interviews were audio recorded. Three qualified and experienced HS PE teachers reviewed the interview questions for clarity and understanding. The pre-practicum interview questions began with the following stem, “As you begin your HS practicum...” Conversely, for the post-practicum interview questions, the following stem began with, “Now that you have completed your HS practicum...” Interviews were conducted in the lead researcher’s office on a one-to-one basis. After the pre- and post-practicum interviews were completed and each interview was transcribed, the researchers read and re-read the data until common and reoccurring themes became evident (Mueller & Skamp, 2003; O’Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992). A qualitative thematic content analysis was utilized to determine relevant pre- and post-practicum interview themes. Sarvela and McDermott (1993) stated that qualitative thematic content analysis is a technique for objectively and systematically making inferences by identifying specified message characteristics. Simply put, content analysis is a strategy for studying the content of messages.

Results

The PETE majors’ interview statements regarding their high school PE practicum were divided into pre- and post-practicum responses. The researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts to identify themes.

Pre-Practicum Interview Responses

The themes that emerged from the pre-practicum interviews were: (1) connection with the students, (2) classroom management, (3) concerns dealing with the “unknowns” of the practicum, and (4) making lessons and activities applicable to students throughout their lives.

Connection With Students

The first theme that came from the interviews dealt with PETE majors connecting with the students they were to teach. A PETE major stated: “Caring for the students I will teach is important to me. I had some PE teachers that were just there and didn’t care for the students. Many of them were coaches first and PE teachers second

and so they would make sure we didn't get hurt in class. A good PE teacher is active and talks with the students. This is one thing I want to do during this practicum." A second student said, "Someone that can relate to the students but still have a level of respect as an authority figure." A third student responded by saying, "Have a good relationship with your students."

Classroom Management

The second theme from the student interview was classroom management. Student responses to this theme were typically phrases or one-word replies. For example, one student stated they were "nervous," and another used the word "concerned." One last student stated, "I am nervous about management issues because I have never taught high school students."

Dealing With the Unknown of the Practicum

The third theme from the student interviews was not knowing what to expect when teaching in their practicum. A female student stated, "I am concerned with the class time. The length. I haven't taught this long, and I want enough to do in this time. I don't want the students to be bored." A second student said, "I am afraid that if I don't have enough for the students they may get bored."

Lessons and Activities Applicable for Students Throughout Their Lives

The fourth and final theme from the pre-practicum interviews was making their lessons and activities applicable to students that could be used throughout their lives. One student stated, "Something that is applicable that they [the students] can take away from the lesson. You could teach kickball, but how much will they use kickball after high school. Your lesson needs to be applicable, so the students care about the lesson. When we went THS and the students were doing longboard and riding a bike, those things are applicable." A second student said, "A good lesson is something they will improve on and that they can use in their everyday life." A third student stated, "Teach students lifelong skills. I love football, but these students are not going to be playing football their whole life. But they will be playing pickleball, being active in fitness activities. Things they can do."

Post-Practicum Responses

The themes from the post-practicum interviews were (1) the students saw improvement in their teaching, (2) the importance of being prepared, and (3) they were less anxious regarding their upcoming student teaching.

Students Saw Improvement in Their Teaching

The first theme in the post-practicum interviews was the PETE majors seeing improvement in their teaching. A student stated, “Good because I was able to notice certain things from my lessons and make the changes for my next lesson.” A second student stated, “My first lesson wasn’t that good. But my second and third lessons were much better.” A third student said, “Gradually my lessons got better and my confidence increased.”

Importance of Being Prepared

The second theme from the student interviews was the importance of being prepared. One student said, “Be prepared for your lesson and be prepared when things don’t go as expected. Students come up and say they are sick, or they don’t want to do the activity. So, you will have to do some adjustments.” A second student said, “I learned to be prepared. There were times when the lesson was going along as I had planned, and an activity went longer or shorter I had to make adjustments in the lesson. It was nice to know that I could adjust either way because I was prepared.” A third student stated, “Taking the time to prepare allowed me to go ahead and teach and enjoy myself as I taught my lesson.”

PETE Majors Less Anxious Going into Their Student Teaching

The final theme from the post-practicum interviews dealt with the PETE majors being less anxious going into their student teaching experience. One student stated, “If I didn’t do this practicum, I would be going into my student teaching blind. I now have a better sense of the high school dynamic. It isn’t as complex as teaching elementary PE.” A second student said, “It gave me real-life experience. It was a good preview. I better understand this age group. I also better understand the skill level of the high school students.” Finally, a third student stated, “I am excited for student teaching now. I am

ready to jump in. At the beginning of the practicum, I was scared to teach. I feel a lot better now.”

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate PETE majors’ perceptions of teaching before (pre) and after (post) they participated in a high school PE practicum. The study’s results generally found the high school PE practicum to be a beneficial experience in preparation for the student teaching experience. From the pre-practicum data, one of the themes from the pre-practicum interviews was the PETE majors being concerned with classroom management. O’Sullivan and Tsangaridou (1992) also found that PE practicum students were more concerned with controlling students than student learning. From this study, classroom management was also a concern for the PETE majors going into their practicum. Students stated they were ‘concerned’ and ‘nervous’ about classroom management with high school students. Another student stated, “I am nervous about management issues because I have never taught high school students.” A second theme from the pre-practicum interviews was connecting with the students they would teach. LaMaster (2001) studied the practicum experience as a service-learning component for PETE majors. One of the participants in the study stated, “the experience [the practicum] was good for students because they got more attention from us.” From this study, one of the PETE majors stated, “Being involved with the students so the students can feel safe in class and in the activities.” A second student stated, “Someone that can relate to the students, but still have a level of respect as an authority figure.” From the post-practicum interviews, the PETE majors discussed the importance of being prepared for their lessons. Barney and Pleban (2006) were interested in PETE majors’ experiences in a semester-long elementary PE practicum. For this study, the PETE majors felt that being prepared for their lessons was important. One student stated, “If I am prepared for my lesson (equipment set out and lesson plan in hand) that is one less thing that I have to worry about. Then, if there is a management problem, I can address the situation, without it negatively affecting the lesson.” Another student stated, “Taking the time to prepare allowed me to go ahead and teach and enjoy myself as I taught my lesson.” A second theme from the post-practicum interviews was that the PETE majors were less anxious going into

their student teaching experience. Barney and Christenson (2009) investigated the early field experience of PETE majors team teaching in a junior high school PE context. Many students stated that teaching ‘real students’ was beneficial for them before they began their student teaching. Another student stated, “It gave me real-life experience. It was a good preview. I better understand this age group. I also better understand the skill level of the high school students.” These pre- and post-practicum themes help shed light on concerns and benefits that can be gained from PETE majors as they participate in their high school practicum experience.

Implications of This Study

After analyzing the pre- and post-practicum interviews, the researchers feel that the high school PE practicum is a beneficial method to better prepare PETE majors for their student teaching experience and their “real work” as PE teachers (Barney & Pleban, 2006). The high school practicum experience is the final opportunity for the PETE majors to implement what has been taught in the PE courses and the elementary and middle school practicums. One student explained it this way: “The practicum in the elementary school was tough, but my teaching in the middle school got better, and this high school practicum went so well.” PETE faculty need to know that the practicum experience for their PETE majors will help build confidence going into their student teaching.

A second implication of this study was a better understanding of what the students learn during the high school PE practicum. From this study, the actual face-to-face teaching that the PETE majors experienced from the practicum and all that it includes putting them in a position to see the working of HS PE context. For example, the importance of being prepared and exposed to the unexpected that the PETE majors would face. This study once again reinforces the value that the high school PE practicum can play in a PETE major’s preparation before their student teaching and eventually teaching their classes.

Limitations

There are two main limitations of this study. First, the PETE majors came from one university. Second, the research study was conducted at a private university. These factors may not be a repre-

sentative sample of participants from other colleges and universities, public or private, or of various geographical regions, which may limit the findings' generalizability. The conclusions and implications are limited and perhaps most applicable to those participants' demographics. Thus, further research with a broader demographic would give a richer data set to ascertain the generalizability of the conclusions and implications found in the study.

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