

Preservice Teachers' Field Experience Surprises: Some Things Never Change

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Abstract

This study examined what preservice teachers found surprising about their field experience. Seventy-two preservice teachers completed an open-ended questionnaire during the final field experience seminar of the academic term. Data were content analyzed using inductive coding. Four themes of surprises emerged. The preservice teachers were (a) negatively surprised about the teaching styles exhibited by cooperating teachers, (b) negatively surprised about the students' level of health-related fitness and skill, and positively surprised about students' motivation to engage in contemporary content, (c) negatively surprised by the environment in which classes were conducted and the size of the classes, and (d) positively surprised at having had a good experience teaching. The results suggest that a chasm continues to exist between the ideals taught in physical education teacher education programs and the realities of physical education teaching.

Physical education teacher education (PETE) content is driven by an objective to develop competent teachers. To this end, PETE is comprised of various combinations of coursework and field experiences (Strand, 1991). Field experiences typically provide preservice teachers the opportunity to gain practical teaching experience prior to formal student teaching through observing and assisting a cooperative teacher and teaching lessons to small groups of students (Dodds, 1989). Field experiences are regarded by teacher educators and preservice teachers as valuable for developing teaching competence (Bell, Barrett, & Allison, 1985; Dodds, 1985), and are required for national and state teaching preparation program

accreditation and teaching licensure (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2002; California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2001).

Previous research has examined various aspects of field experiences, the findings from which support their benefit. Among others, investigations have focused on preservice teachers' teaching effectiveness (O'Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992), concerns (Behets, 1990), beliefs about successful teaching (Placek & Dodds, 1988), and teaching behavior (Gusthart & Rink, 1983). Guidelines to ensure effectiveness have been gleaned from this literature. Field experiences are especially effective when they, "(a) take place at schools in which PETE programmatic messages are reinforced, (b) are closely supervised by PETE faculty and trained quality cooperative teachers, (c) are linked tightly with on-campus methods courses, and (d) focus on specific teaching skills derived from teacher effectiveness research..." (Curtner-Smith, 1996, p. 227).

Undergraduate preparation may not be the only factor influencing eventual teaching conduct because what preservice teachers learn in their program to be effective physical education teaching is susceptible to 'wash-out' during the first three years of teaching (Stroot, Faucette, & Schwager, 1993; Zeichner & Tabachnik, 1981). 'Wash out' is a phenomenon resulting from the impact a particular school culture has on the teaching practice of beginning teachers. During induction, veteran teachers convey implicit and explicit messages about what constitutes good teaching which may or may not be compatible with that identified in PETE to be good teaching. When it is incompatible, what was learned often

is 'washed out' (Mohr & Townsend, 2001; Stroot, Faucette, & Schwager, 1993; Zeichner & Tabachnik, 1981).

The induction period can be so frustrating that many teachers leave for reasons including difficulties dealing with unmotivated students and parents who are apathetic towards the subject, establishing healthy relationships with administrators and working relationships with colleagues, and of designing/implementing a full school-year of instruction (Ryan, 1986). Specific to physical education, beginning physical educators are often more isolated and have less status than most of the other teachers, and experience marginalization of the discipline and the role conflict of being both a teacher and a coach (Mohr & Townsend, 2001; O'Sullivan, 1989; Smyth, 1995; Stroot, Faucette, & Schwager, 1993). Mentoring/induction programs provide a supportive, structured and consistent venue to address the issues faced (Housner, 1996; Huling-Austin, 1992). While the research that has examined physical education induction programs is limited, results suggest that such programs address the issues/concerns expressed by beginning teachers, provide a system of support, and aid the professional development of beginning teachers (Paese, 1990; Stroot, Faucette, & Schwager, 1993).

Field experiences provide preservice teachers the opportunity to become immersed into a class environment through observing and assisting a cooperating teacher and conducting teaching. During this experience, realities of teaching physical education are encountered. Acknowledging that the induction period of teaching can be difficult because the realities often do not match the ideals espoused in PETE (Stroot & Whipple, 2003), field experiences might hold the potential to commence induction and begin to address the concerns faced, within a structure where formal support is provided. Considering and conducting undergraduate field experiences in this manner might help lessen the prevalence of wash-out since induction programs can foster the professional development of beginning teachers.

In order to utilize field experiences as a means to address induction issues, information needs to be gleaned about what during field experiences is unexpected or represents teaching unlike that advocated in PETE. Limited research has investigated this aspect of field experiences. The purpose of this investigation was to learn what preservice teachers found surprising during their field experience. The underlying premise is that by identifying surprises, undergraduate programs can better prepare teachers for what may be encountered such that teaching effectiveness is optimized.

Methods

Participants and Study Framework

The investigation included 72 preservice teachers enrolled in a state university's PETE field experience course. The university is located in an urban metropolis on the west coast of the United States. Forty-eight preservice teachers were male and 24 were female. Fifty-four percent were Hispanic, 21% were Caucasian, 20% were Asian, and 5% were African American. This course was the second phase of field experience required for the physical education teaching-option degree. The 60-hour field experience was conducted at a secondary school site, either a junior high school or a senior high school (the preceding field experience occurred at an elementary school site). While the field experience was the capstone to the degree, it was not student teaching. Teacher licensure requires a fifth year of post baccalaureate study, which includes student teaching. School districts, however, can hire candidates who have earned a bachelor's degree in the field they intend to teach. This influenced the focus of this field experience: conduct small group and full class teaching. These expectations were expressed to the cooperating teachers and the preservice teachers.

The field experience coordinator, a professor in the department, obtained permission for the

students to complete their field experience at several schools geographically convenient to the University. This process also included establishing each school's cooperating teacher. The schools utilized were located within 30 miles of the university. This provided field experiences with schools in six different school districts. A total of 9 high schools and 14 middle schools were used. The cooperating teachers held degrees from a variety of institutions and had varying years both of teaching experience and experience supervising preservice teachers. Each cooperating teacher was fully licensed.

The coordinator assigned the preservice teachers to schools at the beginning of the academic term. The preservice teachers contacted their schools (and cooperating teachers) to establish their schedules. The preservice teacher and cooperating teacher developed a mutually agreeable schedule to complete the experience. Consistency was required once the schedule was established. During the academic term, the preservice teachers also attended weekly seminars that covered topics presented by the coordinator relevant to effective physical education teaching (e.g., class management, skill task progressions, etc.). The seminars also included time for the preservice teachers to discuss their experiences. In addition, the preservice teachers were required to compile a portfolio, in part, with artifacts from the field experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected using an open-ended written reflective questionnaire which was piloted with a graduate physical education pedagogy class. The pilot data underwent content analysis using qualitative data analysis techniques (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The questionnaire was determined to effectively answer the inquiry related to the investigation, but additional probes were added to encourage responses of greater depth.

The coordinator administered the questionnaire to the field experience students during the final seminar of the academic term. It was explained

that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and would not affect the final grade for the course. Students completed the questionnaire and placed it in a collection box located in the classroom. It was determined that each student participated because there were as many completed questionnaires as students in the class.

Data Analysis

Data were content analyzed using analytic induction methods (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Content analysis resulted in the determination of emergent themes of responses. The data first were read, then re-read to determine the main point of each written response. Each main point was transcribed onto a 3 x 5 card, and each 3 x 5 card was assigned a number that corresponded to its questionnaire. The purpose of this was to reduce the data in order to determine themes, and provide a means by which the rich information from the questionnaires could be retrieved for inclusion in the results. Using constant comparison, the main points identified on the 3 x 5 cards were inductively grouped into common themes.

Several strategies were used during data analysis to ensure trustworthiness. A peer reviewer, a colleague of the investigator's, corroborated data reduction and the inductive determination of themes. The peer reviewer read the responses to determine the expressed main points and the investigator and peer reviewer met to compare what each had determined. There were four instances where the peer reviewer and investigator disagreed on the main point. A discussion ensued and for each, agreement was reached. The peer reviewer also reviewed the groupings of themes determined by the investigator. The groupings were uncontested by the peer reviewer.

Results

Four themes of surprises emerged; surprises about cooperating teachers, students, the school, and of the preservice teachers themselves as teachers. From most to least, this order also indicates frequency. While a few expressed

positive surprises, the overwhelming majority of responses indicated a negative surprise. Each theme will be discussed, and for each the scope of responses will be expressed. Direct quotes from the data will illuminate the results.

Surprises About Cooperating and Other Observed Physical Education Teachers

The preservice teachers most frequently were negatively surprised by the programmatic ideas, teaching style, content knowledge, and lack of professionalism exhibited by their cooperating teacher or another physical educator for whom they had reason to observe.

Of the program, many preservice teachers were surprised at how vague the expressed learning outcomes were and how there was no clearly defined curriculum.

“I have done my field experience with two different teachers because of my work schedule. The first teacher is great and has a great program, but the second teacher is awful and doesn’t know anything about a program or about teaching. So what has surprised me most is how good PE can be and how bad PE can be, in the same place and at the same time!”

“There was the lack of a clearly defined curriculum. The outcomes were somewhat vague. In fact, I don’t think this teacher knew what the word outcome meant because she just looked really confused when I asked her what outcomes she was going for. Don’t all teachers know about outcomes?”

They also were surprised to experience very traditional programming, unlike more contemporary programming taught in PETE.

“It’s the same as when I was growing up. Nothing has changed. It felt like I was absent one day, but it’s been 15 years.”

“Many of the teachers and or programs do not facilitate the same types of ideas, views, philosophies, and activities that we learn here (PETE).”

“Some PE teachers did not take too kindly to our lesson plans. We chose some outdoor contemporary games to teach at the high school we were at. Some thought our activities were Hog-Wash.”

Of teaching conduct observed, many preservice teachers were surprised by the prevalence of nonteaching, the use of a ‘militant’ teaching style, and correspondingly how exercise was used as punishment for various management infractions.

“You always talk about how physical education teachers should not throw out the ball. All I have seen is the teacher throwing out the ball. And he is not very good at throwing.”

“The teaching style was very militant. They really didn’t even seem to care if the students had any in put. They used exercise as punishment for insignificant behaviors. It was all disgusting.”

“The teacher at the school I observe has too many ways of using exercise as punishment. If exercises don’t work, she just makes them run. If running doesn’t work she just calls them lazy and bad students.”

Similarly, some preservice teachers were also surprised by how little the teachers interacted with the students.

“The teachers just stood around and had very little interaction with their students. I don’t think they knew any of their names at all.”

Of content knowledge, the preservice teachers were surprised by the cooperating teachers’ seeming lack of proper certification (teaching licen-

sure), content knowledge and/or demonstration of inaccurate content knowledge.

“The teachers I saw didn’t have their credentials, and it showed. They didn’t know even part of what we have learned, but they have been teaching now for four years. The really bad thing was that they said they were in no hurry to finish their credential classes and were only taking the minimum amount of classes each year.”

“The teacher had a lack of knowledge of crucial content matter. It seems that with experience the teacher lost desire, motivation, content information and behavior support techniques that would benefit the students if the teacher just gave a damn.”

There also was expressed surprise at the lack of professionalism exhibited by teachers. These responses ranged from the teachers consistently being tardy to class to how they interacted among and between each other.

“I saw the kids always being ready to start class on-time, but then having to wait for the teacher to get there. At first I thought it was maybe just a one or two time thing, but then it happened just about every class I was there. Maybe it was a coincidence that it was just during the classes I was there, but it was totally wrong for her to always be late. I mean, the kids were pumped and ready to go but the sorry teacher couldn’t get her butt there on time.”

“I saw a lot of conflict with the same staff and co-workers on the field. Last week one of the teachers was yelling that the other teacher was using too much space and had knocked his cones down. They finished by deciding that they could not teach by each other anymore and would have the department chair make sure they were in different areas. I thought about it on the way home and I

realized they were silly and immature. I still can’t believe that they yelled at each other in front of their students, and then decided that they couldn’t be by each other anymore. It was a bad scene.”

Surprises About the Students

The preservice teachers indicated being both positively and negatively surprised about the students with whom they were working. They were positively surprised at how accepting and motivated they were to try “new” lessons and negatively surprised at the health-related fitness of the students and their expressed low regard for physical education and physical activity. “New” lessons were those presented using a teaching strategy other than the command style and/or included content that focused on objectives other than traditional programming (i.e., adventure programming, teaching personal/social responsibility programming).

“I was surprised to see the participation levels and eagerness displayed by the students as compared to their participation with their own teacher when introduced to new games like ‘amoeba tag’ and ‘capture the flag’.”

“The acceptance of trying whatever new crazy thing we threw at them was awesome, I mean they just ate it up and told me to tell the teacher about this stuff”

Some preservice teachers were negatively surprised by the poor fitness and skill levels the students exhibited. They also were surprised at the degree to which the students were disrespectful towards the discipline of physical education and the physical education teachers. This was compounded by the preservice teachers’ observations that teachers did little to address the disrespect, overtly and covertly seeming to give the message that because it was (just) physical education the disrespect was warranted.

“They have NO coordination.”

“They are really stiff and out of shape.”

“The kids just cursed at the teacher, because they knew they could get away with it.”

“I have been shocked to see many of the PE students sitting around during class. Most of these students seem to have lost interest in any physical activity. There are also those who do not dress. When I was in high school I was very active and so were my peers. It seems as if the interest has deteriorated.”

“Most of the students don’t participate. I have noticed especially after lunch they don’t dress and sit the whole class time. There is no enthusiasm at all in doing any physical activity. What is even more surprising is that the teacher ignores these kinds of students and doesn’t say anything to them. That period is just a waste of time. It looks so boring for everyone. What a waste.”

Surprises About the School Environment

The preservice teachers were surprised by aspects related to the environment of the school they were observing, in particular, the lack of campus security, the large physical education class sizes, and how physical education seemingly is perceived in the school. Some were surprised that they were able to walk onto the campus of their school without being questioned about their identity or purpose for being there. This was reported to be disturbing in light of recent incidents of school violence in the national and local news involving nonstudents.

“There was a lack of security on the campus. No one stopped to ask you what you are doing on their campus. Security is an issue and it’s not enforced.”

Some were also surprised by the large class sizes, and noted that while certain coursework had prepared them for this reality, seeing it for the first time was shocking. They expressed concerns

about class management, and how challenging assessment and grading likely was. Some also were surprised by how often the class was interrupted during the term and what message that gave about the importance of the class.

“Our [field experience] teaching was done with about 25 people. These classes here have about 45 kids. I can’t believe how much difference 20 more students in a class makes. Teaching this many is about managing, and that is a surprise. I need to think about how I am going to do grading now.”

“I’ve been surprised by how many interruptions the teacher has had during this class.

1. Class is canceled when it rains.
2. Paint the lockers — 1 week.
3. Gym floor re-done — 1 week.
4. Broken or stuck lockers because of paint — 1 week.

I mean, what does that tell a kid. It tells him that it really doesn’t matter. The painting thing was the worst.”

Surprises About the Transition to Becoming a Physical Educator

Some preservice teachers indicated being surprised about having had a positive experience. Related, they expressed satisfaction at feeling as though they were finally able to exert themselves as teachers.

“I really enjoyed it — I was able to really teach, not just teach to the other people in my program.”

“When the kids got into what I was doing I felt like a teacher. At first they didn’t know what to think about me but when I started to teach they knew I was serious and then they were cool. Seeing them do what I wanted was cool.”

Discussion and Conclusion

This investigation examined what preservice teachers found most surprising about their field

experience. The responses revealed that mostly they were negatively surprised about aspects related to the cooperating teacher with whom they worked. Of this, they were disappointed by the cooperating teachers' lack of interest in teaching towards student learning outcomes. This included related teaching conduct that was deemed inconducive to student learning. The preservice teachers also were dismayed by the cooperating teachers' lack of a clear program vision, rigid teaching style, lack of knowledge of contemporary programming ideas, and lack of interest in interacting with students.

These noted areas of dismay include content that is core to most PETE programs, including the one with which these preservice teachers were affiliated, and express views that are contrary to the expressed ideals. Since research suggests that PETE programs clearly can develop physical educators who focus on student learning (O'Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992), it is not surprising these preservice teachers were disappointed in what they observed. These results also mirror findings of previous research that discussed preservice teachers' perceptions of the cooperating teachers and other physical educators with whom they worked, likening those who were not teaching towards student learning and achievement as "darksiders," borrowing the term from the Star Wars movie series (Curtner-Smith, 1996).

Further, advances at the national and state levels have fostered the development of student learning outcomes, and curricular designs alternative to the "multi-activity" model have been designed and implemented within schools across the country. In light of these advances, it is reasonable to state that K-12 physical education has improved. The results of this study seem to indicate, however, the continued existence of a schism between the ideals taught in PETE and the realities of some schools. As in previous studies that have examined field experiences, preservice teachers realized that during socialization as a beginning physical educator there might exist the

temptation or coercion to "go over to the darkside" (Curtner-Smith, 1996, p. 229).

Towards this, PETE professionals might consider ways in which they can (continue) to develop effective teachers while simultaneously addressing school-based issues that negatively affect K-12 physical education. Ongoing and consistent collaboration between PETE and K-12 physical education professionals is imperative to the improvement of physical education (Siedentop & Locke, 1997). Some ideas could focus on providing professional development to veteran teachers and offering a formal induction program for new teachers. The literature indicates that professional development programs can help veteran teachers improve their conduct of teaching and that induction programs offered by PETE programs can successfully aid the socialization of new teachers (Stroot, Faucette & Schwager, 1993).

One strategy to encourage professional development might be to reorganize PETE field experiences so they are service-learning oriented. While field experiences generally focus on preservice teachers developing their teaching skills, service-learning encompasses a broader objective; utilizing preservice teachers to address the needs of the K-12 students, teachers and the school environment, while at the same time providing the opportunity for them to gain practical teaching experience in a real setting (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). This orientation is supported by current teaching preparation program standards requiring that preservice teachers be assessed for their ability to impact student learning (NASPE, 2002). Because service-learning experiences encompass a broader objective than field experience, they may provide teaching preparation programs a reliable venue to determine preservice teachers' competency to impact school environments.

One particular service-learning project involved PETE preservice teachers and a high school program that was facing challenges perhaps common to many high school programs

(unmotivated students, out-dated curriculum, etc.). The involved entities collaborated to assess programming and instructional needs, then the preservice teachers provided instruction under the direction of the cooperating teachers. On-going meetings were held to evaluate the process. The results of the project indicated that the preservice teachers acquired experience teaching and collaborating, the high school students showed evidence of enhanced motivation and the teachers began to deliver more effective teaching. The high school teachers were especially appreciative of the contemporary programming ideas provided by the preservice teachers (LaMaster, 2001). These results suggest that undergraduate service-learning experiences can foster the professional development of preservice and inservice teachers.

The results of this investigation also bring to light that PETE professionals ought to explore related concepts of school reform and school change, and how, as new teachers they might serve as catalysts in creating change for physical education program reform. The concepts of school reform and/or change are complex, and it is beyond the scope of this article to address this complexity, but there is extensive literature addressing reform and/or change that provides theoretical and practical information useful towards the enactment of change. Reflected as perhaps the most common theme throughout this literature, the fundamental construct of any change/reform effort is understanding that "change is a process, not an event" (Eullan, 1991, p. 49).

There also is physical education literature that examines the concept and process of change/reform. Some of this literature addresses the concept of change/reform as it applies specifically to program development and revision, and offers suggestions on how to enact such a process (Anderson, 1994; Wirszyła, 2002). PETE professionals could formally address the concept of change/reform by including it as topical content in existing courses or discussing it during seminars. This could prepare preservice teachers

to be change agents if they find themselves in a teaching context being socialized towards "throwing out the ball." Preparation could provide the skills necessary to enact a change process. It could also provide a means for each to be proactive if they find themselves in a frustrating teaching context. While it is documented that a change process is complex, it seems reasonable to state that physical educators who are versed in the process of change and have learned strategies to enact change might be able to avoid some of the pitfalls that characterize induction.

The results of this investigation suggest that field experiences are a valuable source of experience for preservice teachers and provide valuable information for PETE. In their immersion into teaching in a school context, preservice teachers are able to begin to experience the realities of teaching and given the structure of field experiences within PETE, have a supportive base to discuss these experiences. The preservice teachers who participated in this investigation expressed certain surprises that warrant attention. It seems these results ought to alert PETE professionals to continue to address the preparation, induction AND ongoing professional development of physical educators.

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