

Pre-Service Physical Education Teacher's Perceptions of Teaching Before and After a Semester Long Elementary Physical Education Practicum Experience

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Abstract

This study investigated perceptions of teaching by four-year college pre-service teachers (N=20) before and after participation in a semester long practicum in elementary physical education classes. A survey consisting of 13 open-ended questions was prepared and administered to male (n = 11) and female (n = 9) pre-service teachers. Qualitative data analyses were used to interpret pre- and post-practicum survey responses. A qualitative, thematic content analysis was performed on transcribed interviews to identify relative themes supporting each open-ended question. Findings suggest a comprehensive teaching perspective by those educators preparing four-year college pre-service physical education teachers, particularly focusing on classroom.

Placek and Silverman (1983) felt if teacher education programs wished to introduce prospective teachers to the profession it seemed vital for students to begin the "real work" of teachers, that is, teaching. Student teaching in an elementary or secondary school setting may be more than desirable, it may be essential. The intended purpose of a physical education teacher education (PETE) program is to prepare prospective teachers to effectively teach in schools. For this to be accomplished PETE programs should create a foundation that will prepare students for their first years of teaching. One pre-service program component

that can help create a strong foundation is the practicum experience (PE). A practicum experience is defined as any situation where the pre-service teacher has actual contact with pupils in a natural setting with the possibility of manipulating instructional variables (Sieforth & Samuel, 1978),

When placing a pre-service teacher (PST), certain factors need to be addressed. One such factor is placing PST in classes with large numbers of students (Placek & Silverman, 1983). Another is the placement of PST with competent classroom teachers who can serve as proper examples of good physical education teaching (Behets, 1990). With proper pre-practicum planning the pre-service teacher will obtain quality experience with children, in a "real-world" setting (Placek & Silverman, 1983), thus having a stronger likelihood for success during their student teaching (Curtner-Smith, 1996). The PST is going to be exposed to realistic life experiences, thus promoting well-informed decision-making regarding their career choice (Paese, 1987). It should be noted that the literature does not come out and say that the PST should have a quality practicum experience. Yet, the literature has an underlining hope that the PST will have a quality experience, thus better preparing them for their student teaching experience.

The literature has shown participation in a PE can be fulfilled in different methods. O'Sullivan

& Tsangaridou (1992) had undergraduate students participate in a two-phase practicum. The first phase was teaching 6 to 10 junior high school students in a single, short instructional unit. The second phase was to teach an intact class for one class period for 15 days. The undergraduate students felt their lessons were successful, if they ensured student learning and had efficient classroom management during their teaching. Gallego (2001) had undergraduate students participating in a practicum at the elementary school level that entailed observation of students, assisting in daily management tasks and conducting lessons. From this study, the PST considered their practicum a success if there were genuine learning activities related to the academic content during the practicum. These studies illustrate the importance of getting students out in the “real world”, before participating in the student teaching experience. The purpose of this study was to investigate PST perceptions of teaching before and after they participated in a semester long practicum in elementary physical education.

Methods

Participants & Context

Twenty pre-service physical education teaching majors (11 male & 9 female) voluntarily participated in this study. The 20 pre-service physical education majors were enrolled in a fall semester practicum class required for graduation during the 2003-2004 academic year. Eleven PST were on track to do their student teaching the following semester, while the other nine would fulfill their student teaching the following academic year. Previous to the PE the twenty PST participated in multiple classroom observations and a two actual class period team teaching experience with a master teacher in both a middle and elementary physical education methods class.

The 20 PST were placed with eight veteran elementary physical education teachers (4 male & 4 female), ranging in professional experience from 8 to 21 years. The roles of the veteran

elementary physical education teachers were to supervise and give feedback to the PST during the practicum experiences. Six of the eight veteran teachers worked with two or three PST throughout the semester. The PST was to teach one class period twice a week for 15 weeks. Elementary schools used in this study were located in an urban upper midwestern city; with an average class size that PST taught was 23 students.

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to the start of the study. All PST signed informed consent forms to voluntarily participate in this study after IRB approval. Additionally, PST was 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 & Analysis

For this study, PST were interviewed one week before they started their practicum and one week after they finished their practicum. Additional qualitative data was gathered through: 1) student observation, 2) researcher observation, and 3) teacher feedback to support pre-and post- interview data. The researchers constructed 13 open-ended interview questions. Four qualified, and experienced elementary physical education teachers reviewed the interview questions for clarity and understanding. To establish instrument reliability the researchers pilot tested interview questions with two physical education students who were not involved in the study. Based on the pilot testing results, two questions were deemed vague and were taken out as an interview question. For the pre-practicum interview, many questions began with the following stem, “As you start your practicum experience. . .” Conversely, for the post-practicum interview, the questions began with “Now that you have finished your practicum...”

Interviews were conducted in a conference room on a one-to-one basis. All interviews were video taped with audio. After all pre- and post-practicum interviews were completed each

interview was transcribed. After pre- and post interviews were transcribed, the researchers read and re-read the data until common themes became evident (O'Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992; Mueller & Skamp, 2003). A qualitative thematic content analysis was utilized to determine relevant pre- and post-practicum interview themes. Sarvela & McDermott (1993) have defined qualitative thematic content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages." Simply stated, content analysis is a strategy for studying the content of messages.

Participant Demographic Data

Twenty male and female undergraduate students participated in this study, 11 males and 9 females, respectively. In regards to age in years, mean age for men was 24.5 and mean age in years for women was 24.6. The ranges of ages in years were 21-33 years and 21-30 years for men and women, respectively.

Men and women with similar regard to academic school standing (junior and senior) and ethnicity. All but one participant was identified as holding "senior" academic school standing. One male participant was identified as holding "junior" academic school standing. All men and women self-identified their ethnicity as White, Non-Hispanic.

Pre- and Post-Practicum Video interviews

Pre- and post-practicum interviews were conducted with each student, utilizing a stationary video recorder; with audio capabilities. The researcher first transcribed pre- and postpracticum interview videos by manually typing interview data into a Microsoft Word 98 word-processing document. A thematic content analysis was then performed on the transcribed interviews.

Results

The researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts to identify key phrases to support continuous and relevant themes. Finally, phrases

were accumulated in a list format and phases from this list were chosen to support the major practicum interview themes (Tables 1 & 2). The following prominent themes came from the interviews: 1) classroom management, 2) classroom preparedness, 3) student learning, and 4) making physical education an enjoyable experience.

Classroom Management

Throughout the interviews the topic of management was a major concern. O'Sullivan & Tsangaridou (1992) found that pre-service teachers focused their attention on student control during a practicum experience. When the pre-practicum interviews took place, many of the students were concerned with controlling the students or keeping them under control. For example, a female student was concerned that students "...would try to take advantage of her?" because she was not their regular classroom teacher. One word that was continually used to describe management was "control". PST believed that if the class could be kept under control, many problem situations could be avoided. Many of the PST felt that if students were on-task during class they could be controlled. In the post-practicum interview, controlling the students was again the dominant theme. A male PST felt that if he could "put out little fires" before they got big, he would feel better about keeping his class well managed. A female PST said that her classroom management got better at the end of the PE, because "they got to know me, and I got to know them better."

Classroom Preparedness

The second theme that came from PST interviews was being prepared for class. When looking at the PST responses in the pre-practicum interviews, many students felt that if they were prepared (equipment set-up & prepared lesson plan) for their lesson it would be beneficial in managing the class. In the pre-practicum interview a female pre-service teacher expressed it in these terms, "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 focus on it (the lesson).” Many of the PST responses in the pre-practicum interview question asking if they plan to use a lesson plan had an overwhelming response of being prepared, or not wanting to be unprepared. In the post-practicum interviews a male PST felt that if he were prepared to teach his class, it would keep students on-task, thus giving the students a greater opportunity to learn. Here the student made a connection with the effects of being prepared and how it can affect the classroom-learning environment.

Student Learning

As mentioned above, if the students were on-task the PST felt that there would be student learning. Student learning was the third theme that came out from the pre-service teacher interviews. When looking at both pre- and post-practicum interview responses concerning the good characteristics of an elementary physical education teacher, the PST felt that being able to keep students active during class was very important for student learning. Some of the pre-service teachers responses dealing with student learning were “If I can keep the students on-task with the activities that I have planned, the chances of student learning would increase”, “I hope I can get their attention and keep it so that they will stay on task”, and . . . “Now that I have finished this practicum, I have a better idea of helping my students learn in physical education”.

Making Physical Education an Enjoyable Experience

The final theme that came from pre-service teachers interviews was making the physical education experience enjoyable. Previous studies have shown that when pre-service teachers participate in practicum experiences they determine their lessons to be successful by how much enjoyment students were having (O’Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992), and if students were liking

the physical education class, there would be a greater degree of student achievement (Placek & Dodd, 1988). When reviewing responses, pre-practicum interview words such as “have fun”, “want the students to be happy”, and “good time” were used. When looking at responses from the post-practicum interviews words used to describe the physical education experience were “enjoyable”, “beneficial”, “giving good instructions”, and “creating opportunities that the students will find fun and continue in the activity”. A couple of the pre-service teachers went on to explain that in order to make the students’ physical education experience enjoyable, they had to be more organized with their lesson, with the hopes that it would keep students on-task during the lesson, resulting in student learning.

Discussion

PST voices can be very valuable to the physical education teacher educator, for the fact that they can express how they feel, or felt, about a certain teaching situation. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of pre-service teachers before and after they participated in teaching a 15-week elementary physical education practicum. Researchers found the pre- and post-interview responses to be helpful in the fact that it helped them to better understand their concerns and trepidations as the PST began their PE and eventually their own student teaching experience. These PST concerns can also be very helpful for PETE faculty in their process of preparing students as they go out and teach in the elementary physical education setting. The four themes that came out from the interviews are not insurmountable to teach and prepare students for, yet if not prepared, then the PST will go into their practicum and student teaching experiences with much concern with what lies ahead of them. As PETE faculty keep in mind the four themes that pre-service teachers voiced in their interviews throughout the process of teaching and preparing, this will only better prepare pre-service teachers for their “real work” as teachers.

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Table 1
Pre-Practicum Interview Questions and Student Responses

The Stem Began with “As you start your practicum experience . . .”

Question	Student Responses
What is your definition of classroom management?	“Order in the classroom.” “Students are on task during activities.” “Keeping the students under control and being organized as the teacher.”
What is your plan of action for a disruptive student?	“Talk to the student individually.” “Sit them out (send them to the time-out corner).” “Give them a verbal warning, or send verbal warning, or send them to the office.”
What is your biggest concern going into this practicum experience concerning classroom management?	“Getting the respect of the students.” “Being in charge of the whole class and the whole lesson.” “Disciplining students.”
What is your definition of feedback?	“Letting students know what and how they are doing in a given activity.” “Giving positive or corrective statements regarding student practice.”
Do you think it is important to use a students’ name when giving feedback?	“Yes, because the student will know that you are talking to them.” “Of course, there is no doubting where the feedback is directed.”
How quickly should students be in activity when they come to class?	“As soon as possible, within 2 minutes class starts.” “Right away.” “Immediately.”
Do you think some type of warm-up is important for elementary age-students?	“Sure can’t hurt the kids.” “It can help set a foundation for when the students get older.”
How much time should be given for warm-up activities?	“Three to 5 minutes.” “No longer then 5 minutes.”
Do you plan to make and use a lesson plan?	“It would be silly not to have one.” “If I didn’t have a lesson plan, I would be scared.” “The students would know that I wasn’t prepared.”
What are some characteristics of a successful lesson?	“Students have fun and enjoy the activity.” “Students are on-task, resulting in learning.” “Being organized.”
What is the best way to set-up and pick up equipment?	“Set-up equipment before class starts and out of the way.” “Have the students help pick up the equipment, it teaches them to be responsible of the equipment.”
How confident do you feel going into your practicum experience?	“If feel pretty good about this practicum.” “I think I will do just fine.”
What in your mind makes a good elementary physical education teacher?	“Be enthusiastic (energetic).” “Have a knowledge of the content.” “Be organized and prepared.”
What is your biggest concern going into this practicum experience?	“Managing the students.” “Be able to successfully teach the students.”

Table 2
Pre-Practicum Interview Questions and Student Responses

The Stem Began with "Now that you have finished your practicum . . ."	
Question	Student Responses
What is your definition of classroom management?	"Having control of your class." "Having the students busy with activities." "Being organized as the teacher."
What did you do with a disruptive student?	"Talk to the student individually about his/her behavior." "Put them in a time-out corner to think about what they did."
What is your biggest concern with classroom management?	"Keeping students under control and working with disruptive students." "Keeping the students on task."
What is your definition of feedback?	"Telling the student how they did or how they are doing in an activity." "Making sure the teacher uses the students name when giving feedback."
Did you use students first name when giving feedback, and what percentage of the time did you use students first names/	"I didn't use first names as much as I should have." "I sure knew the students names that misbehaved in class." 20% to 80% of the time.
Did you have warm-ups? How quickly did you get the students into activity?	"Yes. Not much time was wasted." "Most of the time. Within a couple of minutes they got to class."
Did you make and use a lesson plan when teaching?	"Yes. It was a big help to have one." "Yes. The master teacher was a big help in this area."
In your opinion, what are some characteristics of a successful lesson in elementary physical education?	"Being organized with your lesson and equipment." "Make the lesson fun for the students and make it enjoyable."
What method(s) did you use to collect equipment?	"I had the students help with this." "I would assign a couple to help with the equipment. They were always willing to help."
Do you feel confident going into your student teaching experience, after participating in this practicum experience?	"Yes, I feel pretty good about my student teaching coming up." "I feel like I can do it." "After this practicum, no sweat."
In your opinion, what makes a good elementary physical education teacher?	"Someone that is caring." "Has a passion for teaching physical education, is enthusiastic about being there at the school and teaching." "Keeps students active during the class period."
What area of your teaching are you the most concerned about?	"Classroom management." "Managing students."