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A Case Study of Exceptional Physical Education Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to inquire into the professional and personal lives of four physical education specialist teachers and to uncover the reasons why they engage in their practice as they do. The study documents the experiences of each teacher and provides insights from both these participants and the researcher. Questions inquiring about the reasons why current physical education teachers engage in their practice(s) as they do, and how factors, during their careers as physical educators, influence their teaching were asked and investigated.

The research used case study as its method of data collection and analysis. To be precise, the current research employed a multi-case design. A combination of the descriptive and heuristic case study was used to share the findings. Semi-structured, individual interviews were completed with the four physical education teachers.

The interview data were organized into four categories and further subdivided into specific themes within each category. The categories were designated as (a) Relating to/with students, (b) Experiences gained through teaching, (c) Self-awareness, and (d) Passion about the field of physical education.

The major findings were divided into two distinct areas. Those that were grounded in previous research literature and those findings that were new and not grounded in previous research literature. The major findings that were grounded in previous research literature were: (1) Evolution and maturity, (2) Caring for students, (3) Options and variety for students, (4) Professional development and self-improvement, (5) Varied teaching styles, and (6) Reflection. The major findings that were not grounded in previous research literature were: (1) Meaning of physical education, (2) Confidence, (3) Belief and joy in teaching physical education, and (4) Personal fulfillment and commitment to the job.

Background

Physical education has long been considered an important part of a student's overall education (CAHPERD, 1998) and, as a subject area, it holds a unique position among school curricula (Fishburne & Hickson, 2001). However, it has never realized its rightful place among the core subjects and perceived "more important" courses (Hardman & Marshall, 2000). Negative stereotyping and public perception have also influenced how society views physical education (Harris, 2003).

The body of current literature related specifically to the relationships among the characteristics and practice of exceptional teachers of physical education is limited, and thus this research adds to that body. Furthermore, Harrison (1987) stated, "Perhaps researchers need to spend more effort determining *why* teachers believe and do what they do!" (p. 50). As well, Fishburne and Hickson's (2001) concern also indirectly supports my research by saying, "The notion of what is effective teaching behavior and how it supports student-learning is a relatively thin area" (p. 10).

Purpose of the Study

This study inquires into the professional and personal lives of physical education specialists to uncover their reasons for engaging in their practice as they do. I am interested in how the experiences of the participants have affected their teaching careers as these experiences specifically relate to the teaching of physical education. In this research I have focused on the current practices of four physical education teachers whom I have selected, in consultation with regional representatives and physical education consultants, as exceptional and respected professionals committed both to the education profession and, specifically, to the field of physical education. The study of their experiences and current practices has led to important findings that may benefit all physical educators currently

A Case Study of Exceptional Physical Education Teachers teaching in all school systems as well as those instructors of physical education teacher education (PETE) programs in postsecondary institutions.

Introducing the Literature

The following sections are intended to help increase the reader's understanding of research in the field of physical education, teacher development and reflection, and exceptional teaching in physical education.

Physical Education and Philosophical Discourse

When discussing the profession of teaching and, specifically, the instruction of physical education, one must consider history and its relation to the present. The debate as to why physical education teachers teach as they do has probably resulted from what has happened in the past and how the origins of sport and physical activity evolved in Canada. It is reasonable to assume that past practices and the reasons for implementing physical education in schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have had a profound and long-lasting effect on school programs and become well engrained in the value system of today's society.

From a philosophical perspective, one could argue that minimal research has been conducted on the fundamental nature of knowledge and reality as they explicitly relate to physical education instruction. The current beliefs that are valued and subsequently put into daily practice in gymnasias and fields across Canada are, arguably, based on history and teachers' personal values and beliefs.

According to Haslam (1988) physical education curricula in Canada have become more marginalized, confused, and disarrayed than ever before. It is debatable as to whether or not that these past twenty years have resulted in any significant changes among public perception towards physical education as an important and essential part of the school

A Case Study of Exceptional Physical Education Teachers program. There is a definite need to change the perception of what physical education means today for students and this re-visioning is vital for the general populace to value this much needed part of every child's education. The pace of change within society has continued to accelerate and will require a population that can live with uncertainty and change. The ability to relate to people, to communicate with others, and to understand them will be the required skills of children in the future (Pinar, 2000).

Teacher Development and one's Personal Philosophy

A personal philosophy about physical education needs to address the portion of a child's overall education that is accomplished through participation in physical movement (Rink, 1985). It is an education about, and involving, movement and learning through all three domains of learning: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. High-quality programs that are based on developmental goals with demonstrable outcomes in all three domains will generally be most effective.

Fuller's model of teacher development, based on an analysis of teachers' concerns, posits a three-stage model of teacher development moving from (1) concerns about self, to (2) concerns about tasks, to (3) concerns about students and the impact of teaching (Fuller, 1969).

Lortie's (1975) apprenticeship-of-observation model discusses how students in a physical education context often "see" and "experience" their teachers from a front-and-center perspective. Rarely, if ever, are they aware of a teacher's private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events. Students' knowledge of teaching, gained from a limited vantage point and relying heavily on imagination, is not like that of an apprentice and does not represent acquisition of the occupation's technical knowledge. It is more a matter of imitation, which, generalized across individuals, becomes tradition. Furthermore,

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Lortie (1975) stated “teaching does not require as much preparation as some professions and that it [teaching] is relatively high on general schooling and somewhat low on specialized schooling” (p. 60).

More recently, Graber (2001), in her review *Research on Teaching in Physical Education*, outlined a framework for organizing the literature that pertains to the study of teaching physical education. Her model consists of nine separate categories organized around the logical operations of teaching. She has extended the understanding of teaching in physical education beyond simply the technical aspects of teaching and learning. She focused equally on those characteristics and competencies of the teacher and the student, as well as on the learning environment or the “ecology of the gym” (p. 492). It is clear that in her work she established a wide spectrum of categories to consider in researching the area of physical education instruction and that she has presented numerous informative insights.

Reflective Practice

Experience and meaningful reflection also play significant roles in shaping and helping most teachers to develop further, including those individuals specifically coveting a career as a physical education teacher. Schon (1991) stated that, in his experience of studying teachers’ belief systems and their attitudes towards reflection, “teachers learn to teach by teaching” (p. 183). Perhaps this could be the reason that many preservice education students comment on how wonderful their practica experiences are compared to the campus-based courses required beforehand.

Reflection is possible in those moments when we are able to think about our experiences, about what we did or should have done, about why things happened as they did, or about what we might do next. Reflection is a fundamental concept in educational theory, and at a very basic level reflection is another word for *thinking*. Reflection in the

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field of education carries the connotation of deliberation, making choices, coming to decisions about alternative courses of action. It occurs in such phrases as *reflective teaching*, *critical reflective practice*, and *reflection in action* (Van Manen, 1991).

Exceptional Teaching of Physical Education

What is an “exceptional” or “expert” teacher? According to Corbin (1993), “Expertise in the discipline is not, by itself, sufficient qualification to be considered a quality practitioner” (p. 86). This important statement causes one to ponder the merits of exceptional teaching and the label *exceptional*. What are the characteristics of such an individual who teaches in the area of physical education? The challenge of describing the difference between an effective teacher and an exceptional or ‘expert’ teacher is difficult, and it evokes interest and creates passionate discussion among educators and students alike. However, certain teachers are generally perceived as being “above the rest” because of their ability to convey a superior knowledge in a specific subject area, possess numerous qualities of an *effective* educator, and perhaps most importantly of all, are able to create student learning opportunities and instill a passion for learning within all students.

Expertise can be thought of as an extension of effective teaching and represents a level beyond it. Effectiveness combines superior teaching skills with an extensive understanding of the subject matter (Siedentop & Eldar, 1994). Defining expertise is difficult, but it relies on factors such as years of experience, evaluation by school authorities, reputation, and knowledge of the subject matter (Pieron & Carreiro da Costa, 1996). According to Manross and Templeton (1997), “Expertise is developed through experience, practice, and knowledge. Only through classroom experience do teachers have the opportunity to practice different and effective teaching methods” (p. 33). Simply knowing the characteristics and qualities of an expert cannot make one an expert. As well,

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there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that expertise in one dimension does not generalize readily to other domains (Glaser & Chi, 1988).

Research Methods and Procedure

Methods

As the authors of other case studies (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) have indicated, numerous forms of data collection can be implemented within a case study. For the purposes of this study, I employed a process that combined interviews with observations of four participants. The major source of data was these interviews.

Data Analysis

In qualitative case studies obtaining an understanding of the case(s) is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data (Merriam, 1998). For my research analysis, I employed Merriam's series of four phases: Phase 1, I gathered the raw data from each individual case and organized and coded the transcribed interview(s) and informal field notes so that the data from each case would be easily retrievable. Yin (2003) called this organized material the case study database. Phase 2 is described as within-case analysis. Here, I treated each separate case as a comprehensive case in and of itself, scrutinized the data that I had gathered, and learned as much as possible about the contextual variables (the micro-themes) that might have a bearing on the case. In phase 3, or cross-case analysis, I attempted to build a general explanation that fit across each individual case, even though the cases varied in their details, and to gain an understanding of how local conditions had qualified each case; therefore, I developed more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations (macro-themes) than I had previously. Last, in phase 4, I pondered and then scrutinized the micro-themes that emerged from each specific case. I considered macro-themes across each case and ultimately presented them in a holistic and comprehensive descriptive manner.

Procedures

The process of selecting the participants spanned approximately six months. At the conclusion of my selection, I identified two female and two male physical education teachers who varied in their experience of teaching physical education from 5 years to 25 years. As well, two teachers were employed by the separate school system, and the remaining two were employees of the public school system. Of the four teachers, only two had attended the same postsecondary institution for their PETE program.

Results

In this study I explored the professional lives of four physical education specialists and sought to discover why they engage in their practices as they do. I listened to and engaged in conversations with all of these professionals and came to understand how they have developed into the type of educators that they are. The analysis was influenced by my readings of authors such as Yin (2003), Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995).

My organization of the data followed a scheme in which I gleaned themes from all of the transcripts and then organized these themes into four categories. A *category*, as defined in this study and in this paper, is a group or collection of related findings with shared characteristics. Within each of the four categories, I identified specific themes that related to the category and had an impact on the research question of why current physical education specialists engage in their practice as they do. The categories were designated as (a) relating to/with students, (b) experiences gained through teaching, (c) self-awareness, and (d) passion for the field of physical education.

Relating To/With Students

This category emerged from the data as the most important because each participant identified several related phrases, and in the final analysis this category included the largest number of themes: (a) caring for students, (b) student input, (c) honesty with students, (d) creating student enjoyment, (e) respecting students, and (f) options and variety for students. In my Doctoral Dissertation each of these six themes is represented by the participants' quotations to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experience of teaching. Below is an example of a particular quote from Participant C when he was asked how he has changed in terms of his style of teaching, he stated:

I think now I look at the bigger picture more. I am now much more concerned with my students' needs and not so much my needs. If I need to adjust my lesson I will, and my personal needs are no longer as important as my students' needs. It's no longer about me anymore, but rather my students. (Transcript Quote, pp.6-7)

Experiences Gained Through Teaching

All participants in this study reported that experience had a major influence on their practice as teachers of physical education. Experience is the single most important factor that causes physical education teachers to rethink their philosophies regarding teaching and planning.

This category contained six themes that related to the experiences gained through teaching: (a) external influences, (b) professional development, (c) content knowledge, (d) meaning of physical education, (e) evolution and maturity, and (f) varied teaching styles.

In his comments, Participant A was open and honest about his growth and maturity. For example he explained:

I think that looking back I probably focused much more time on the program. With experience you realize that although the program is important and you have to try and stay focused on the end of the line, you are dealing with people and whole bunch of different expectations. (Transcript Quote, p.4)

Self-Awareness

The category of self-awareness represented five themes that emerged in my interviews with the participants: (a) early success, (b) reflection, (c) self-improvement, (d) confidence, and (e) organization and planning.

The participants are well aware of who they are as professionals and recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and they explained to me their belief in reflection: that, from a young age, physical education had always been a generally enjoyable and positive experience for them, and that, as professionals, they utilize and value reflection in their daily practice.

Having proved himself to be a very open, reflective, and generally self-critical educator, Participant A summed up his thoughts on self-improvement and reflection and the need to stay current:

I regularly look at what I am doing and challenge myself. I will always want to enjoy my job, and I always want to continue to think that, hey, I am not at the end of the road; the road always keeps going; there is another step to take. (Transcript Quote, p. 9)

Passion for the Field of Physical Education

This final category contains two very important related themes involving teachers' passion for and beliefs about the subject of physical education: Belief and Joy in Teaching, and Personal Fulfillment.

When describing their feelings about how they view teaching and how much they value it, the four participants used words such as *joy*, *love*, and *passion*. Participant C spoke about his belief in his job and in what he does daily as a teacher of young learners:

I think that my belief in the value of PE has served me well. Both my colleagues and my students know how much I value PE as a discipline and the field of study. It's

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not just game time, but we are here to learn things and experience learning. We want to have fun, but leaning is first. (Transcript Quote, p. 4)

This final theme linked three topics together within the category of passion for the field of physical education: personal fulfillment, maintaining high expectations of both oneself and others, and possessing a strong commitment to teaching physical education. Although each participant did not identify each of the three topics, they are presented because of their contributions to the theme of developing and maintaining passion for physical education.

Participant B spoke at length about her joy in teaching physical education and used a metaphor to describe her role as a physical education teacher:

I have become a lifestyle and not just a class for my students. I really was just a class before, but now I am much closer to being a lifestyle. Students' health and physical education classes should be the most important classes in school, and this is something I have truly come to believe. (Transcript Quote, p. 6)

Results: Grounded in Literature

I have identified a total of six specific themes as major influences on the current teaching practice of the four participants in this study. These themes have not been ranked but are presented as themes that emerged and are firmly grounded in previous literature. I have highlighted each theme because it contains valuable information that has helped me to improve my understanding of whom the participating teachers are and why they engage in their practice as they do. The six themes are (a) evolution and maturity, (b) caring for students, (c) options and variety for students, (d) professional development and self-improvement, (e) varied teaching styles, and (f) reflection.

Results: Not Grounded in Literature

Four significant findings from the study, although not grounded in specific research, have had a very important impact on the participants' professional lives: (a) the meaning of physical education, (b) confidence, (c) a belief and joy in teaching physical education, and (d) personal fulfillment and commitment to the job.

Discussion

The key question posed at the outset of this study was, "Why do current physical education teachers engage in their practice as they do?" I have explored the personal and professional lives of four exceptional teachers of physical education. Some of this study's findings are congruent with those in the literature reviewed, whereas other findings reveal new information that can contribute to the research on teaching physical education. I have selected the following four categories to show the interdependencies among them and to provide groupings for the specific themes.

Relating To/With Students

The personal interactions of teachers and students may be the most vital component in determining whether or not students learn and whether teachers enjoy teaching. Preservice teachers who are eager to make their mark on the teaching profession often comment on their love for teaching and their desire to connect with every student when they eventually begin teaching. In theory, these ideals are admirable; however, I believe that many of these teachers fall into a pattern of teaching to the masses and that their initial *love* for teaching eventually becomes a *liking* for teaching and a job that simply provides a satisfying life.

The four exceptional physical education teachers in this study began by loving their jobs and continue to do so. They have learned the importance and the necessity of

A Case Study of Exceptional Physical Education Teachers connecting with all learners to meet their needs, and they see the educational value in doing so. Sincere caring for students, being open and honest with students, respecting students, and valuing their input are characteristics that only a very few physical education teachers have and, more importantly, act upon in their daily teaching.

Experiences Gained Through Teaching

If relating to/with students is one of the most vital requirements for successfully teaching students, then experience is perhaps the most crucial factor for effecting positive changes in the teaching practice of physical educators. The experience of teaching is arguably the greatest “teacher” for teachers themselves. For all participants in this research study, their personal experience was the key to defining and understanding who they are. The knowledge gained by continued professional development, the support and guidance of past and current colleagues, the realization of the vital importance of having content knowledge in many areas, and the participants’ personal evolution and maturity are all directly linked to their experience in the profession. The teachers in this study believe that their experience has shaped their practice as physical education teachers. Having learned from past mistakes and seeking to build on their successes, all of these teachers continue to evolve and mature into even more effective practitioners and are viewed as exceptional teachers by their peers.

Self-Awareness

Being truly open and honest with themselves may be the most challenging endeavor for all teachers. For those teachers of physical education who have generally been successful, being critical of their teaching and admitting that something needs to be improved are extremely difficult. Some may perceive this recognition as a sign of weakness or incompetence; however, for the teachers in this study, the continual attempt to improve

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their teaching is a regular part of their practice and a valued aspect of their professional development. All of the teachers in this study routinely engage in reflective practices and seek out opportunities to improve themselves. Their ability to perceive themselves as imperfect and to admit that their teaching can always be improved is an important aspect of their success as physical education teachers and leaders in the field.

Passion for the Field of Physical Education

The teachers in this study exuded passion for their jobs and often mentioned the joy that they receive from teaching. The participants' high level of satisfaction and joy suggests that these qualities are important in any portrait of an effective and potentially exceptional physical educator. Both of these qualities are not necessarily required to be successful or to be classified as an exceptional teacher of physical education, but those teachers who possess them are usually very successful at what they do.

Conclusion

The current study asked the question, *Why do current physical education teachers engage in their practice as they do?* The findings are thought provoking and, in many cases, congruent with those in the literature pertaining to the characteristics of effective and exceptional physical educators. Moreover, to be able to recognize the need to change their teaching, current and future teachers must understand which qualities distinguish exceptional teachers from merely effective ones.

In summarizing the findings, I discovered that these four teachers of physical education engage in their practice because of their true passion for and belief in the subject of physical education. These qualities are contingent on the teachers' self-awareness as educators, their skill in critical reflection, and ability to teach to all types of learners in different environments. The participants' continual evolution as teachers, particularly as

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teachers of a personally meaningful subject, emerged as the main reason of most of the
changes in their practice.

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