

Original Article

Professional socialization issues pertaining to physical education majors

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Published online: March 25, 2016

(Accepted for publication February 05, 2016)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2016.01010

Abstract:

This study focused on the professional socialization of physical education students at a public university in the Northeastern United States. Professional socialization examines courses and experiences that students engage in as they prepare to teach in local schools. Students were initially asked to volunteer to complete an anonymous questionnaire, rating all of the courses (from worthless to very worthwhile) that they took in their 4-year undergraduate program. Students were also given the opportunity to answer open-ended questions about their program and any courses or experiences that they felt were missing. This data collection occurred over a span of six years and resulted in 82 completed, usable questionnaires. The Likert-type scale data were analyzed using the descriptive statistic of the average mean score for each course. The open-ended questions were analyzed inductively, with emerging themes identified. Results revealed that the courses found most worthwhile included practicum courses (students spent 60 hours in local schools - observing, assisting, and teaching), activity courses such as Team and Lifetime Sports, and teaching method classes. The courses found to be least worthwhile were general education courses. The second part to the study involved in-depth focus group interviews for an additional three years and a total of 37 participants. These results found students wanting less peer teaching in methods classes and more opportunities to teach schoolchildren. Students also wanted more health courses to augment their physical education courses. Implications of this study were significant for our program as we went from Physical Education to a Health and Physical Education program.

Key words: tertiary education, curriculum, health

Introduction

Physical education teacher education (PETE) socialization concepts have derived from socialization in general. “Socialization involves a lifelong process in which individuals learn the norms, customs, and ideologies important to the particular culture in which they live through interactions with one another and social institutions” (Templin & Richards, 2014). From broad concepts of socialization, teacher socialization developed (Lortie, 1975) as a way to examine issues that affected the recruitment, professional development and workplace conditions of teachers. Lawson’s occupational socialization model has often been cited as the theoretical perspective most pertinent to physical education teachers’ socialization (Chow & Fry, 1999).

According to Lawson (1986) occupational teacher socialization has three distinct phases. The first has been referred to as anticipatory socialization or acculturation (Templin & Richards, 2014), and pertains to the recruitment of people who are interested in becoming physical education teachers. A significant part of this phase relates to the concept of an “apprenticeship-of-observation” (Lortie, 1975), whereby “prospective” teachers “learn” about teaching via their role as students observing teachers teach them throughout their primary and secondary school experiences. Schempp (1989) found this apprenticeship to be significant, with pre-service PE teacher often having very strong views about how and what should be taught in physical education before they even enroll in a teacher preparation program. Therefore, PETE faculty and researchers wonder how effective the second phase, known as professional socialization (Lawson & Stroot, 1993) can be. This phase pertains to the education recruits receive when enrolled in their PETE programs. Will the coursework and experiences that PETE students engage in be significant enough to influence how and what they will teach when they become full-time professionals? PE professional teacher socialization research has demonstrated that there are concerns about the overall effectiveness of course work that PETE students are required to take, both in the major and in general education courses (Templin & Richards, 2014). However, many researchers have found that “early field experiences,” (EFEs), often known as practicum experiences in the U.S., and student teaching are very valuable and powerful socializing experiences for PETE students (Richards, Templin & Graber, 2014). While there is a third phase of teacher socialization (organizational), that examines issues pertinent to workplace conditions of physical educators, the focus of this paper will reside within professional socialization within one PETE program in a large, public university in the Northeastern United States.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the data collected and analyzed for this article was to give our PETE students the opportunity to provide feedback on their program of study. Specifically, students were given the opportunity to

rate all of the courses they were required to take on a scale of worthless to very worthwhile. They were also given the opportunity to inform us of what might be missing from our program or any other comments they wished to make, all via anonymous surveys. Our students were also given the opportunity to participate in focus group interviews with a research assistant, so that they could expand on their views about their/our program. The purpose in all of this was, and is, to make our PETE program as relevant as possible to our clients - our PETE students. As Richards et al. (2014) have pointed out, the majority of PETE socialization research has taken place in the 1980s and 1990s, but they have suggested that there is a need to revisit this area of research. "Research conducted several decades ago may no longer accurately represent the experiences and perspectives of PE recruits and in-service and pre-service teachers (today)" (p. 129). Therefore, an additional purpose for this study was to get more up-to-date information about PETE students' perceptions of their professional preparation program.

Methods

Participants

The initial part of this study provided the opportunity for PETE students in their fourth and final year of study to complete an anonymous questionnaire. This data were collected over the span of six years, with a total of 82 PETE students participating. There were slightly more male (n=44) than female (n=38) participants, and the vast majority (n=74) were Caucasians. The second part of this study was a follow up to the initial questionnaire and involved different PETE students participating in focus group interviews with a research assistant. This occurred for three years, with 12, 13 and 12 students participating in each of the focus groups. Again, there were slightly more male (n=20) than female (n=17) participants, and most of them (n=34) were Caucasians.

Procedures

Our Institutional Review Board granted permission for this study, on the condition that all questionnaires and responses to focus group interview questions were anonymous – which they were. Students participating in the questionnaire were first informed of the study, understood that it was voluntary and if they agreed, were given an informed consent form to sign by a research assistant before filling out the questionnaire. Over the course of the six years, four students chose to not participate. This questionnaire was given to PETE students toward the end of their final year in our program, but before their final culminating student teaching experience. A similar protocol was implemented for the focus group interviews. Again, two students chose not to participate. A research assistant asked open-ended questions that were provided by the author to the interviewees and then transcribed the interviews within two weeks. No names were ever transcribed, to assure anonymity of all participants.

Data Collection

The questionnaire provided opportunities for the PETE students to rate each of 20 courses (18 PE and 2 education courses) on a Likert-type scale of 0 = worthless to 3 = very valuable. Students could also comment about any of the courses in an open-ended manner. Participants were also given the opportunity to comment in an open-ended format regarding ways to improve the program, as well as any additional courses they would like to see implemented and finally any other general/overall comments about our program. A research assistant was trained on how to conduct focus group interviews, specifically focusing on trying to get all the students to actively participate and to probe with follow up questions to predetermined questions. The average length of the interviews was 55 minutes.

Data Analysis

The Likert-type scaled questions were analyzed with the descriptive statistic of the average mean for each course. The open-ended questions were analyzed inductively, coding each answer and determining emerging themes that arose (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2006).

Results

Questionnaires

Each of the 20 courses was given an overall ranking based on their average mean score. The secondary and primary school practicum courses (where students spent 60 hours in local schools – observing, assisting and teaching in PE settings) were ranked highest with mean scores of 2.95 and 2.9 respectively, out of 3.0. These courses were followed by 'activity' courses Team Sports (2.85), Lifetime Sports (2.8) and Gymnastics (2.65). Next in line were 'methods' courses that focus on teaching a particular population. These included: primary (2.6), special populations (2.6), secondary (2.4) and health topics (2.4). Introduction to PE, First Aid and Adventure Activities all scored a 2.2. The next grouping of courses was all science-related, and included: Kinesiology (1.6), Biomechanics (1.5), Exercise Physiology (1.4) and Anatomy and Physiology (1.3). At the bottom of the rankings were Sport Psychology (1.2), Motor Development (1.2) and two courses taken with the Education Department at 1.0 each. The open-ended response that was by far most prevalent was the view that students wanted many more health courses as part of their PE program.

Focus Group Interviews

Results reported on the focus group interviews will be limited to the most significant areas of discussion – issues related to the methods courses (we were disappointed that the above ratings for these courses were not a little higher), and the desire for more health-related courses. We provided a lot of opportunities for our students

to be engaged in peer teaching in our methods courses. The students appreciated those opportunities but they felt they are a bit contrived, given that they are teaching motivated, well-behaved peers. They expressed a desire to also be able to teach schoolchildren during these courses, and not just during their practicum experiences. We therefore have set up opportunities for them to teach children who are escorted onto our campus in a laboratory-type situation in our gymnasium. This provides PETE students with a more 'real world' teaching environment, which they claim has been very beneficial for them. These opportunities are now being provided for them in three of our methods courses. They have said to us that this teaching provides the most meaningful experiences related to our methods courses. Comments from students regarding wanting more health courses took up the majority of time during focus group interviews. It has become common practice that school district looking to hire physical education teachers also requires them to teach health. Our students are aware of this and they have been very vocal about their desire to be better prepared to teach health. They have also been very vocal about their belief that some of our curriculum courses are somewhat redundant, and it would be best if they were removed from our program.

Discussion

Due to the feedback we have received from our students from the questionnaires and the focus group interviews over the past nine years, we have made a number of changes to our PETE program. Some of the changes were minor, such as eliminating a Test and Measurement course, but redistributing the content of that course into several other courses. The major change was incorporating four new health courses into our curriculum, hiring a health education specialist, and changing our name from Physical Education to Health and Physical Education. The four new health courses added (to augment our existing Health Methods course) include Nutrition and Well-being, Human Sexuality, Youth Risk Behavior Content, and a 60-hour Health Practicum course whereby our students are placed with a certified health educator in a local school. When our students do their student teaching, they now will teach physical education and health in an extended 20-week experience at both the primary and secondary level. As a result of these changes, our State Department of Education has agreed to allow our students to become certified to teach both physical education and health education upon graduation. This makes our students more marketable and they will be better prepared to teach both subject areas. As this major curriculum change is just being implemented, it will take some time for us to evaluate the effectiveness of it.

Conclusion

The purpose of providing our students with opportunities to give us feedback about our program via questionnaires and focus group interviews was because we value what they think about our program. We understand that sometimes students do not always know what is best for them, and as the 'experts' we make decisions about what courses and experiences they should have to best prepare them to be effective teachers in schools. However, we like to practice what we preach. One of our strongest messages to our students is that we believe they should teach using a student-centered approach, rather than a teacher dominated one. We therefore model that in our program and one of the ways to do that is to demonstrate to them that what they think about our curriculum matters to us and that we truly value their input. We will continue to provide tangible opportunities for our students to give us feedback about our program. We know that in doing so, it strengthens us.

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