

Improving the Student Teaching Experience: Looking to the Research for Guidance

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The mission of preparing effective teachers of physical education is important as it is generally recognized that effective teachers are necessary for the maintenance of good programs. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of what exists in the literature concerning the student teaching experience with an eye toward informing the process of producing effective physical education teachers for the future. First, a synopsis of where the student teaching portion of teacher education originated will be presented along with a description of the various participants and their perceived contributions. Second, information on how much cooperating teachers and university or college supervisors actually interact with their student teachers will be discussed. Third, the content of those interactions will be examined to gain some insights into the potential value of this input. In the next section, the reasons why anyone might choose to be part of this process and a sense of “what works” will be presented through a description of perceived motivations, rewards and usefulness. Lastly, implications of the existing research will be discussed with suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of the student teaching experience.

What is meant by “effective teaching” in physical education has been defined and studied (Siedentop, 1989; 1991). Implicit in this work is the suggestion that there are generic skills which can be linked to effective instruction—regardless of the philosophical orientation of the instructor

or the curricular focus of the program. This assumption is a point of some debate in the field and a caveat for readers. Much is known about the skills and strategies employed by effective teachers. Less is known, however, about how these skills and strategies are acquired by beginning teachers. Teacher preparation programs carry a large share of the responsibility for developing effective teaching skills and strategies in preservice teachers. In addition, the student teaching experience has been identified as one of the most influential components of teacher preparation programs.

Student Teaching

Student teaching is, by most accounts, the most valued aspect of teacher education programs (Appleberry, 1976; Brimfield & Leonard, 1983; Haring & Nelson, 1980; Nosow, 1975). Given this perceived importance, it should not be surprising to discover that student teaching was the area of greatest activity in the research on teacher education in physical education reviewed by Locke (1984) for the period between 1960 and 1981 (p. 28). What is surprising, however, is that few studies describe exactly what happens during this important experience. Some of the factors which have been explored in the student teaching experience include: grade averages, scores on aptitude inventories, physical skill performance as predictors of success; applied behavior analysis techniques to help student teachers acquire technical skills; comparative studies of cooperating teacher feedback with self-monitoring of physical education student teachers and student teachers in other areas with regard to attitudes toward teaching

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(Locke, 1984, pp. 28-29). The uneven attention of researchers has contributed to the criticism of the student teaching experience for lacking a theoretical and conceptual framework, for lacking common and shared goals (by participants in the triad), and for not fulfilling its potential (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). In short, the student teaching experience is not all that it could be.

Within the triad, cooperating teachers have been singled out as having a great influence on student teachers during the student teaching experience (Alper & Retish, 1980; Copeland, 1980; Disposito, 1980; Karmos & Jacko, 1977; Koehler, 1984; Seperson & Joyce, 1973; Yee, 1969). "Agreement among triad members regarding roles and responsibilities is not prevalent," however (Guyton and McIntyre, 1990; p. 522). Such agreement has been identified, at least on a theoretical level, as valuable in socializing student teachers toward specific goals (Lawson, 1983). Furthermore, common sense would indicate that three people working to a common end are more likely to achieve desirable goals than are three independent agents. Communication among the triad members can limit the amount of work done at cross purposes and can contribute to gaining the maximum potential from each member of the triad.

Not all members of the student teaching triad are perceived to make equal contributions. The importance of the college/university supervisor has been questioned. The role is viewed as unnecessary by some (Monson & Bebb, 1970), and extremely complex and *very* important by others (Zimpher, De Voss, & Nott, 1980). In one study, there was no significant difference between the performance of student teachers supervised by university faculty and those supervised by teachers in the school alone (Morris, 1974). The only difference noted was that the students receiving college supervision rated themselves as more effective than the group without college supervision rated themselves. The cause of this increased self-image is not clear. In another study, however, 85% of the comments in written evaluations by supervisors

addressed strengths of the student teachers (Clark, Smith, Thurman, & Baird, 1984). The remaining content in the evaluations addressed suggestions (11%) and only 4% of the comments addressed weaknesses. Perhaps this apparent focus on strengths accounts for the increased self-image of student teachers supervised by university faculty.

Authors of another study suggested a different contribution by college supervisors. Zimpher, De Voss and Nott (1980) identified the supervisors as being the main force toward having student teachers advance beyond concerns for daily chores to concerns for self-analysis and improvement. The significance of this contribution rests in the extent to which student teachers are helped to see generalizations beyond the immediate experience to other situations and settings which the student is likely to encounter in her or his own school in the future. This broader "way of seeing" is contrasted to simply viewing all experiences in the context of the immediate school setting from which the student will leave after a brief stay.

To summarize, there are different perspectives both brought to and expected in the student teaching experience. In the following sections, more specific information will be presented with regard to examining what goes on during student teaching. In particular, research evidence regarding the quantity and quality of cooperating teacher and university supervisor conferences will be examined.

A quantification of cooperating teacher conferencing

The conference is that time during the student teaching experience when the student teacher sits down with the cooperating teacher (as a dyad) and/or with the university supervisor (either as another dyad or as a triad) to discuss the student teaching experience and/or the progress of the student teacher. Although such conferences are common across student teacher preparation programs (Yates & Johnson, 1982), they are not frequent (Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1988; Tittle, 1974) and tend to occur more at

the end of the student teaching experience (Kilian & McIntyre, 1988).

Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1988) studied the supervisory behaviors of 18 cooperating teachers in physical education. The authors discovered that student teachers received few comments during their 8 week practicum, averaging about 4 comments per week (p. 4). Furthermore, a gender difference was identified with female cooperating teachers providing an average of about 6.5 comments per week as compared to less than 3 comments per week by male cooperating teachers (p. 4).

In a follow-up study, Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1990) found a similar low average of comments per week (an average of less than 5 comments per week, per subject) among control subjects. The authors reported a much higher rate of comments made by subjects that had received a training protocol (an average of 14.0 comments per week, per subject).

Schwager, Reiken, Mitchell, and Giardina (1991) reported an alternative methodological approach to identifying comments made to student teachers by cooperating teachers. Hypothesizing that retrospective logs may miss much that is discussed, these authors employed a personal audiotape protocol where cooperating teachers recorded all professionally related comments occurring between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher. A much higher rate of interactions is reported with this methodology. Interesting questions for future study surround the search for an explanation as to why much of the professional dialogue does not receive attention in the logs of student teachers. Is the information not perceived as important enough to write down? Is the information important enough to be retained for future applications?

In summary, the rate at which cooperating teachers conference with their student teachers is variable but low. Although cooperating teachers can be trained to increase their conferencing behaviors (Cramer, 1978; Hutslar, 1977; Ocansey, 1988; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1990), several related issues require attention. One is-

issue involves the identification of how substantial a program must be to assist cooperating teachers in providing student teachers with a useful experience. Another issue involves the extent to which cooperating teachers can realistically be expected to participate in a training program involving substantial time and energy with little or no compensation (particularly when the primary commitment for teachers is to their pupils rather than to the student teacher). A third issue relates to the notion of the conference as the unit of analysis for examining the extent to which cooperating teachers discuss the experience with their student teachers. Put differently, it is possible that cooperating teachers discuss a variety of professional issues at times other than during the formal conference period. Furthermore, it is possible that such discussions may have a substantial impact on the subsequent behaviors and attitudes of student teachers and still not be recorded in retrospective, written logs (a common data collection strategy).

A quantification of supervisor conferencing

The time spent conferencing differs substantially across supervisors. The number of visits required by college/university supervisors to observe student teachers is established either by sponsoring institutions or by the State Department of Education. Subjects from Strand's (1992) stratified national sample reported an average of about five visits to physical education student teachers (p. 109). The job of supervising student teachers is handled differently at different institutions. At some schools each visit is made by a qualified specialist in the teaching field. At other schools, visits may be made by supervisors without expertise in the content area. Strand reported that visits to student teachers were made predominantly by physical education faculty (80.5%); a variety of others without this subject expertise also contributed to the supervisory duties (p. 110). Whether or not there is a difference in the quality of supervision provided by individuals with this variety of backgrounds is, as yet, unstudied and unknown.

The length of time involved in a supervisory

visit varies and to some extent is dependent upon the style of supervision being offered. Styles of supervision have been categorized in a variety of different ways. Eldar (1987) identifies four basic models: (a) Clinical; (b) Technological; (c) Artistic; and (d) Counseling (p. 15). Although space does not permit a deeper explanation of these models, suffice it to say that different supervisory styles require different amounts of time. Further, length of class periods, coordinating responsibilities of the supervisor, cooperating teacher and student teacher as well as the importance and number of issues warranting immediate attention will all influence the length of a conference. Bowman (1978) found that, in general, supervisory visits range from 30 to 90 minutes per student per week, over an 8-week period.

In summary, variety in supervisory patterns is the rule rather than the exception. Unfortunately, there is little in the research literature to provide direction or prescription for what is desirable or most effective in terms of the college supervisor's role.

A qualitative analysis of cooperating teacher and supervisor conferences

Another issue warranting mention involves the quality of the interactions between cooperating teachers and student teachers. That is, "what" is discussed is at least as important as **how much** discussion takes place. Tabachnick, Popkewitz and Zeichner (1979) suggested that the cooperating teacher/student teacher conferences "tend to be somewhat ritualized" (p. 19). The authors suggest that because student teachers are concerned with letters of recommendation and getting a job, they may be less open and honest in discussing substantive issues. The authors also noted that student teachers typically assumed a passive role during conferences with cooperating teachers.

Heidelbach (1969) identified three functional categories of cooperating teacher verbal behavior from conference tapes of student teacher-cooperating teacher dyads. Most (about 67%) talk was descriptive, 17% was prescriptive, and

16% was focusing (calling attention to a particular substantive area). Heidelbach also noted that conferences of college supervisors focused on particular substantive issues more than cooperating teacher conferences and that, although given slightly different emphasis, the major substantive issues of conferences were the same for both groups.

In at least three additional studies, it was noted that discussions between student teachers and cooperating teachers focused primarily on activities for the next day and coming weeks, and included planning for instruction and classroom management and control (O'Neal, 1983; Richardson-Koehler, 1988; Tannehill & Zakrajsek (1988). The discussions of classroom actions were quite specific. Generalized principles for applications to other situations were rarely identified in these conferences. Hence, the extent to which student teachers might be able to make connections to new experiences and settings is a question warranting further attention.

Motives and Rewards and Usefulness

Information on motives and rewards for participating in the student teaching experience is thin. Tannehill (1989) asked teachers why they supervise student teachers and 4 reasons were identified: (1) Opportunity to learn new things for their own classroom; (2) To give or put back into life or the profession what you got out of it; (3) Fee waiver to return to school for advanced degree work; (4) Knowing that one is making a difference.

There appear to be different perceptions of success for supervisors at different types of colleges and universities. Koehler (1984) found that supervisors from private schools considered themselves to be professional educators who were successful and effective. Supervisors from large state universities, on the other hand, were generally frustrated due to the need for more time to do the job properly; time not available to them. They considered themselves to be university faculty members in lower positions than other faculty. In other words, as Lanier and Little (1986) put it: "There is an inverse relation-

ship between professorial prestige and the intensity of involvement with the formal education of teachers” (p. 530). So, for some supervisors it is simply a job that is assigned, while for others, it is a preferred choice.

In a study of student teacher perceptions of usefulness or competence, Schempp (1983) concluded that the ability to teach motor skills was of minimal importance. The primary focus of student teachers in that study was on the social and emotional behaviors of students—pupil compliance with directions issued by the student teacher and pupil satisfaction with selected activities.

With regard to perceptions of useful feedback, student teachers identified the feedback related to classroom management as feedback that helped. A second focus of feedback that helped centered on informal discussions that didn't have a student teaching focus but established a friendly relationship.

Brunelle, Tousignant, and Piron (1981) analyzed student teacher perceptions of cooperating teacher's effectiveness. The authors noted that some student teachers mentioned their dissatisfaction for not receiving enough feedback or for having feedback that was too general, too deferred, too negative or for receiving advice which resulted in being ineffective for them. Student teachers “appreciated receiving abundant, immediate and specific feedback as well as advice which may be classified as ‘tricks of the trade.’” (p. 85).

In a study of supervisors in physical education, Dodds and Placek (1988) found a variety of factors which made their subjects feel effective. The predominant factor, however, involved the demonstration by student teachers of program-taught teaching behaviors under real conditions as the primary source of personal satisfaction.

Conclusions and Implications

Selected findings from the literature concerning the student teaching experience have been presented with an eye toward informing the process of producing effective physical education

teachers for the future. Based on the literature presented, three conclusions with accompanying implications for future practice will be presented.

First, misunderstanding and/or disagreement regarding the purposes of the student teaching experience appear to be the norm rather than the exception. Furthermore, this discrepancy extends to perceptions of roles and responsibilities of key participants in the experience, often resulting in mixed messages altering the impact of the experience to yield, at best unpredictable and at worst undesirable, outcomes for student teachers. There is clearly a need to fully articulate the expectations of all parties in the student teaching experience. Such an articulation needs to involve a dialogue in which all members can ensure a common understanding of goals and strategies for achieving these goals.

Second, most student teachers receive instruction in how to cope with and succeed in the immediate setting of their student teaching placement. Instruction in how to generalize lessons learned in the immediate setting to future situations is done inconsistently. Relatedly, the relationship between immediate instructional practices and broader educational issues is rarely addressed. For future teachers to become thoughtful professionals rather than semi-skilled laborers able only to follow explicit directions, these skills of introspection must become focal. To influence the youth of tomorrow is an important mandate. In this changing world where the needs and problems of tomorrow may not be closely related to the needs and problems of yesterday, professionals with the ability to adapt the services they offer will be essential. Without this adaptability, the perceived need for services of physical educators will continue to be threatened.

Third, the issues addressed by the first two conclusions outlined above will require an investment of time by all members of the student teaching experience. Quantifications of how much conferencing occurs indicate student teachers receive minimal guidance from either cooperating teachers or from college/university

supervisors. There must be a change here. There are at least two promising directions for action. One strategy involves teaching self-management skills to student teachers (Eldar, 1987). The underlying motive for this solution is that student teachers will soon be on their own and need to acquire skills to monitor their own and their students' progress toward program goals. In the often isolated environment of teaching, these important skills can be taught during the preservice program and refined during the student teaching experience.

A second direction for solutions involves training cooperating teachers. In the design of any training programs there are concerns with the financial and time costs. Several models appear promising. One type of program involves ongoing professional development activities for cooperating teachers. The goal of this activity is to provide continuity between what is being taught in the teacher preparation courses at the college and what is reinforced in the schools. Potential cooperating teachers are trained in a clinical supervision model that mirrors the approach taken by the college teacher education faculty (cf., Michelli, Pines, & Oxman-Michelli, 1990). The goal of this type of ongoing program is to improve the communication between the college and the schools in which student teachers are placed. A strong advantage of this improved communication is better consistency in the messages given to student teachers regarding appropriate and effective teaching practices throughout their teacher education program. Hence, two underlying problems are addressed through this program. There is a shared sense of purpose for the experience, and teachers trained to deal with pupils in their subject matter are given some assistance with new and quite different responsibilities; namely, teaching preservice teachers how to teach.

Another promising model involves the creation of self-instruction modules for cooperating teachers. Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1990) described the development and testing of a module designed to address concerns of time, money, and ease of use. Ocansey (1988) reported a simi-

lar approach to developing a personalized instruction program for specific cooperating teacher behaviors. In both studies, the authors reported success in having an impact on cooperating teacher behaviors. An area still warranting attention is the extent to which any of these interventions make a difference with the ultimate target of instruction—the *learning* of the pupils of teachers and student teachers.

All physical education professionals need to assess their beliefs for what *should* be happening in the name of physical education and the extent to which their practices reflect these beliefs. Only then will student teachers have the potential to become effective professionals and only then will physical education programs become more secure and deserving of a place in the school curriculum.

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