Moving Beyond "Busy, Happy, and Good" in Physical Education Teaching

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Abstract

The preparation of preservice physical education teachers is a complex, but important area of research. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate beliefs and possible changes in the way a group of physical education preservice teachers enrolled in a semester-long method class with a field-based teaching component understood their role as teachers. The participants were a group of 15 preservice physical education teachers and their method’s professor. We collected data through observations, documents, and interviews. We analyzed the data through the use of constant comparison method. The results indicated that preservice teachers changed from issues of management of student behavior to issues of teaching and caring for students. This research has important implications for implementing quality field-based teaching experiences aimed at fostering good teaching and learning practices in preservice physical education teachers.

Keywords: Teacher beliefs; teaching practicum; reflection

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Moving Beyond “Busy, Happy, and Good” in Physical Education Teaching

Every day, teachers face the monumental task of managing the classroom. However, the term manager evokes a business framework where teachers manage learning as if a division head of a corporation manages the profits and losses of a department. In adopting the business metaphor, teachers may overlook some practical aspects of the learning situation: learners are individuals, and learning is not always a simple, orderly process. In fact, Piaget’s disequilibrium, or the state of tension that precedes the learning of new information, highlights the active, disorderly process that accompanies acquiring new concepts (1966, 1970a, 1970b). Teachers, therefore, face the ultimate paradox of teaching: the need to manage students by keeping them controlled and quiet versus the need to provide a stimulating environment conducive to creating tension or disequilibrium for learning (Woolfolk, 2013; Todorovich, 2009). Preservice teachers know that there are others judging about how well he or she manages their students.

This paradox of teaching is keenly apparent to physical education teachers. In her classical research into physical education teaching, Placek (1983) wrote that physical education teachers “seemed to define their teaching situation in terms of busy, happy, and good” (p. 49). In other words, physical education teachers worked to achieve a teaching situation where students were constantly moving during the class period, were cheerful and content, and were well behaved. Placek (1983) indicated that the teachers in her study were mainly concerned with the execution of multiple motor activities in order to keep students busy.

Statement of the Problem

The preparation of preservice physical education teachers is a complex, but important area of research. Previous research (e.g., Byra & Sherman 1993; Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, & Scott, 1994; Graber, 1995; Griffey & Housner, 1991; Heflich & Iran-Nejad, 1995; Housner & Griffey, 1985; Iran-Nejad, 1990; Iran-Nejad & Gregg, 2001; McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2003; Mutton, Hagger, & Burn, 2011; Placek, 1983; Shuell, 1990) provided valuable information in regard to how preservice teachers behave, act, construct, and internalize their knowledge of teaching and learning. In light of those findings, scholars and practitioners alike are reconsidering strategies aimed at strengthening the preparation and experiences of preservice physical education teachers.

In response to Placek’s (1983) seminal findings, physical education teacher education (PETE) programs have worked to emphasize to preservice teachers the role of learning in the physical education classroom. This has led to increased research into understanding the physical education teacher and, in particular, understanding the differences between novice and expert teachers (Byra & Sherman 1993; Graber, 1995; Griffey & Housner, 1991; Housner & Griffey, 1985; McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2003). Some scholars have indicated the importance of conducting research aimed at exploring how preservice teachers acquire and restructure their knowledge of teaching and learning (e.g., Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, & Scott, 1994; Heflich & Iran-Nejad, 1995; Iran-Nejad, 1990; Iran-Nejad & Gregg, 2001; Norman, 2011).
Results of these studies suggest that novice teachers, including preservice teachers, focused on keeping students active and not bored (McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2003) and on teaching as the implementation of activities (Griffey & Housner, 1991); novices were often unable to explain pedagogical content knowledge in their own words or identify different strategies for teaching (Graber, 1995). Woods, GocKarp, and Escamilla (2000) found that preservice teachers had greater difficulty using information about student motor skill development in their teaching. Rovegno (1993) found that preservice teachers had difficulty simplifying and explaining motor skills for students as they moved from one activity to another. In contrast, Griffey and Housner (1991) have indicated that experienced teachers focus more on how to teach a specific activity. Other scholars have suggested that expert teachers modify their teaching in order to meet student needs (e.g., Housner & Griffey, 1985). McCaughtry and Rovegno (2003) discussed that experienced teachers seem to predict better which skills students would have more trouble performing.

In order to help preservice teachers make the transition from student to teacher in the classroom, field-based practicum courses have become an essential element in learning to teach. These courses allow preservice teachers to gain experience in the classroom where they can implement pedagogical content knowledge while working with students of different ages. This type of experience is critical to forming what researchers have referred to as personal, practical knowledge (Carter, 1990; Chant, 2002; Chant, Heafner, & Bennett, 2004; Clandinin, 1986; Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Cornet, 1990a, 1990b; Constantinou, 2011; Elbaz, 1981, 1983, & 1991; McCutcheon, 1992; Pajares, 1992, 1993; Pape, 1992; Ross, 1992; Ross, Cornet, & McCutcheon, 1992; Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001). Teachers’ knowledge is situational, practical, and directed toward understanding the contextual dimension of learning and teaching (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; Verloop et al., 2001). Experienced teachers realize that the act of teaching is more than imparting a body of knowledge. However, preservice teachers do not have the benefit of the practical knowledge that comes from years of teaching experience. While they are not strangers to the classroom, they have not worked with real students in teaching situations. Therefore, they sometimes find themselves between “the objectification of concepts and concept structures” and the reality of the teaching context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, p. 179). In other words, preservice teachers must learn to reconcile teaching practice with the ideological concepts contained in the instructions for teaching. The purpose of this article, then, is to examine the potential changes preservice physical education teachers go through as they create their own personal, practical knowledge about teaching.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers define teacher’s practical knowledge in multiple ways. These interpretations are important in light of the fact that teachers do infer from their work as classroom teachers. Clandinin, et al. (2009) in discussing the preparation of teacher candidates suggested that teachers create stories of teaching as evolving “knowledge landscapes,” of experiences “stories to live by,” in an effort to shape and develop teachers’ identities (p.146). Learning to become a teacher is a difficult journey (Cooper & He, 2013). Furthermore, our understanding of the making of a teacher is still not fully explored or understood (Merseth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008). However, from research conducted on teachers’ development, we know that a teacher
personal values, beliefs, and experiences influence what she does inside the classroom (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; Orton, 1996; Lortie, 1975). Connelly and Clandinin (1988) argued that teachers’ practical knowledge is the general knowledge teachers possess. Researchers believe that experience creates teachers’ practical knowledge. As well, the experiences teachers bring into their teaching affects their practical knowledge (Borg, 2003; Grossman, 1990; Meijer, Verloop, and Beijard, 1999). Additionally, Borg (2003) suggested that teachers draw on this practical knowledge as a guide for teaching. Elbaz (1983) defined teachers’ practical knowledge in terms of students’ learning needs matched by a repertoire of pedagogical techniques and management strategies teachers possess. Finally, teacher practical knowledge is embedded knowledge. This is knowledge related to a practitioner’s own work situation (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986).

The purpose of this research was to investigate beliefs and possible changes in the way a group of physical education preservice teachers enrolled in a semester-long methods class with a field-based teaching component understood their role as teachers. The research addressed the following questions:

(1) What was the preservice teachers’ understanding of their role as teachers in a field-based practicum and did that change over the course of the semester?

(2) What changes, if any, took place as preservice teachers reshaped their knowledge of teaching?

We chose a qualitative research design for the study because of qualitative inquiry’s focus on understanding participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s (Creswell, 2007, 2014).

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were a group of fifteen preservice teachers, nine males, and six females, along with their professor, in a physical education methods class at a major university in the southeastern United States. Most preservice teachers took this methods course in their junior year. While the majority of the preservice teachers were traditional college students, two female were in their 40s; all preservice teachers were white. We used purposeful sampling selection based on: (a) the aim of our investigation, (b) the rich descriptive nature of qualitative research, and (c) a desire for an in-depth understanding of the problem in question (Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Patton, 1990).

The field-based experiences took place at an urban middle school with approximately 800 students; in the student body, 65% were African-American, 31% white, and 4% other ethnic or racial backgrounds. The school held separate physical education classes for males and females, and the preservice teachers taught lessons to both groups. During the course of the semester, the preservice teachers worked in pairs, with each pair teaching 12-14 students at a time. The main cooperating teacher instructed them that they had approximately 30 minutes to work with the students. Preservice teachers taught tactical lessons for soccer and volleyball using a sport
education model. Toward the end of their field teaching, the preservice teachers introduced a few lessons on adventure education. The methods course alternated between class discussions and lesson planning on the university campus and implementing the lessons at the middle school. The preservice teachers taught twice a week for three weeks and then returned to the university campus for two weeks before beginning the next unit of three weeks teaching in the middle school.

Materials and Procedure

The study involved investigating a small group of preservice physical education teachers. The study took place in a naturalistic setting. We decided on the research site after multiple meetings. We contacted three professors teaching methods courses at two different universities in the South via email. The two universities were within a 20-mile range from each other. We explained the purpose of the investigation and solicited their willingness to grant us permission to conduct research involving their preservice teachers. We secured the interest of one professor. We were able to meet with this professor to discuss our study. This professor liked the ideas and suggested that we move forward with the study. Therefore, we contacted via email the principal of the middle school where we would observe the preservice teachers. We submitted the study’s proposal to the principal for review. After she reviewed the proposal and granted her formal permission, we obtained IRB approval. All participants signed consent forms.

Data Collection

We collected data over one semester. Data sources included non-participant observation of the debriefing discussions on the university campus and of field experiences at the middle school, field notes, documents, video tapes, and informal interviews with the professor and the preservice teachers. We carried out four video recordings of the preservice teachers in debriefing discussions with their professor. We did not conduct any teaching observations because the principal of the school did not give permission to do so. We resorted to extensive collection of documentary notes and as well informal interviews for data triangulation. We recorded debriefings on four different occasions throughout the course of the semester. We opted to divide the recording of the debriefing into four sessions. We recorded a total of 200 hours of video. In order to supplement our data collection and to provide multiple data sources, we conducted eight onsite field observations. We observed the preservice teachers teaching in small cohort groups while we took auxiliary notes.

Non-participant Observation

We observed the preservice teachers as they taught three units to middle school students in grades six, seven, and eight, ranging in ages from 12 to 14. The observations followed standard guidelines for non-participant observation: the researchers sat in a corner of the gym, observing and taking field notes on a notepad (see Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Ennis 1992; Spradley, 1980). The observations were non-participant because we did not interact with the participants or the middle school students. The supervising professor requested that we not interact with the preservice teachers while they were teaching. The observations concentrated on
three main aspects: (1) the physical setting, (2) the participants, and (3) the activities and interactions.

In addition to observing teaching demonstration, we video recorded debriefing sessions involving the professor and the students on the university campus following the field experiences; these debriefing sessions lasted approximately 50 minutes each. We placed a video camera in one corner at the back of the classroom to record the interaction of the professor and the preservice teachers. We took field notes in a journal to supplement the interaction during the debriefing sessions. It was important to know if the preservice teachers incorporated the ideas they discussed with their professor during their debriefing sessions.

Documents

The researchers collected documents that included the syllabus for the field experience practicum course and the mission statement of the university’s College of Education. The researchers then analyzed the documents to ascertain the philosophy of teacher education and emphasis on reflection. The professor stated that the College of Education’s main vision for teaching and learning is that active reflection is the basis for teaching and learning. We wanted to know how teachers integrated reflection within the course.

Informal interviews

We interviewed the professor informally following the classroom debriefing discussions. The topics discussed during the informal interviews included what the professor wanted the preservice teachers to learn from the practicum teaching experiences and the kind of discussion the professor wanted to foster.

Cohort Interviews

We conducted two informal group interviews with the preservice teachers. The first informal interview took place early in the semester, and we conducted the second informal interview near the end. The first interview, recorded on tape, lasted 30 minutes. The researchers transcribed the first interview shortly after the meeting with the preservice teachers. This interview took place prior to their first week of teaching. In this first interview, the preservice teachers discussed any hopes, fears, and issues they had regarding their upcoming field-teaching experience. We transcribed the tape soon after conducting the interview. We created notes from the interview and used them as a guide for additional questions. The second interview lasted 45 minutes. The site for both interviews was the university campus. From these interviews, several important issues emerged. In the first interview, the participants talked about issues of discipline and planning as major points. In the second interview, the preservice teachers shifted from management issues to issues of student learning and caring.

Data Analysis

The data analysis used the following guidelines: (1) Observations in a naturalistic setting, (2) data in the form of words and pictures, (3) inductive data analysis, with strong
attention to details throughout the process, focused on the perspectives and meanings given by participants in the study (Bodgan & Biklen, 1992; Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2007, 2014; Eisner, 1991; Maxwell, 2005).

Following data collection, we transcribed, coded and analyzed the video recordings and interviews, utilizing the constant comparative method of data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1999). The constant comparative approach described by Creswell (2014) analyzes the content of textual information and compares it to other parts of the text. Therefore, through constant comparison methodology, the focus was on capturing salient comments emerging from the videotaped sessions by looking at and analyzing each separate videotape transcription in order to capture significant, relevant factors within the debriefing sessions. The researchers coded and analyzed data from the interviews using the constant comparative method of data analysis in order collect additional evidence (Creswell, 2007, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Following Creswell’s (2014) recommendations, we initially identified broad categories from comments made by the participants.

**Triangulation**

In order to maintain research validity and trustworthiness, we utilized three types of triangulation: multiple data sources, multiple researcher perspectives, and cross-examination (Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Denzin, 1978; Merriam, 1998). Multiple data sources included observing the field-based practicum and classroom debriefings, conducting two informal interviews with the preservice teachers, interviewing the professor, and examining the mission statement from the College of Education and the course syllabus. We examined and coded the transcripts; we considered multiple researcher perspectives in the analysis. The professor and the preservice teachers reviewed the transcripts and data analysis for accuracy.

**Results**

Throughout the data analysis, several themes emerged that indicated preservice teachers’ thinking about teaching changed during the course of the field experience practicum. In the initial part of the field experience, the data indicated that the preservice teachers’ thinking about teaching involved issues of management and student behavior. Only later in the semester, the preservice teachers shifted toward issues of learning to teach and caring for their students. During the debriefing sessions of the first half of the semester and in the first informal interview, the preservice teachers discussed issues of classroom management and student behavior. In the second half of the semester, the preservice teachers’ thinking reflected an emphasis on issues of teaching and caring for their students.

In the first debriefings of the field-based experiences, the preservice teachers began by describing their teaching experiences as very challenging. They thought that teaching was too complex and expressed a shared sense of inability to solve the many issues they would face as teachers. In analyzing the transcripts of the first debriefings, it became apparent to us that the first week of teaching was a deep immersion into the reality of teaching. The preservice teachers compared teaching to gasping for air; teaching overwhelmed them with responsibilities, and they explained that there were too many variables to handle in teaching. In addition, similar issues
transpired from the first informal interview conducted with the preservice teachers. There were issues of uncertainty and feeling of stress from the preservice teachers. They did not know if they were going to be able to do all they needed to accomplish.

Classroom Management

Preservice teacher 5: Planning is the hardest thing for me because I always want to over plan in order to make sure my students do not get bored.

Preservice teacher 3: You feel like squished because you do not have time because there are so many thing going on. You cannot focus on the important thing.

The graduate teaching assistant reiterated this point shared by the preservice teachers in the following excerpt.

GTA: There are so many variables going on all at the same time. There are a few of the teachers that are in there and all these things are going on.

GTA: You can have a person who is leading the class who is nervous and uncomfortable when things go smooth and when they start adding in more complex things to do, it is like that confuses them.

Professor: One thing you still think you need to work on?

Students: lesson plan, behavior, keeping students on tasks

Student 1: Tailoring my lesson plans down. I taught too much.

Student 2: Hold the kids accountable for misbehavior and stuff. I was too nice.

Professor: What is wrong with being nice?

Student 1: You cannot be friendly or they will go crazy.

Students 2: I was being too friendly and they started kicking the ball. It was volleyball and they started kicking.

Professor: What would you change?

Students 2: I am not sure. Change a bit more. I was too relaxed. I came off as a friend.

Student 1: I expected too much. I let it get to me if I did not think things were going exactly as planned. If they did not get what I wanted them to get, I would bring them back in, and there was not as much engaged activity. I think I wanted to control too much. In addition, I let that come across in my expression.
**Professor: You do not have to be hard repeatedly.**

Preservice teachers’ discussions gravitated toward issues of planning and management of student behavior during the course of the first interview.

**Managing student behavior**

*Preservice Teacher 2: When I think about planning and instructing, I think about classroom management, organization, and behavioral problems. I try to keep my students active and participating to where I do not have the discipline problems . . . .*

*Preservice teacher 4: Management is important because as long as I am keeping them active, I am not losing them.*

*Preservice Teacher 1: Managing a class, student behavior, keeping everyone participating, juggling all personalities. We need more classes that incorporate management.*

Early in the first part of our study, debriefing comments from the preservice teachers reflected managerial issues. Some preservice teachers stated that they were not “strict enough” or they were “too nice.” The professor asked what was wrong with being nice, and a preservice teacher replied that students would take advantage of the situation and get off task if they were nice or relaxed. All preservice teachers agreed that being too nice or too friendly meant that students would take advantage of them and misbehave. Another preservice teacher echoed the importance of discipline during the first group interview.

*Preservice Teacher 3: You know discipline obviously the lesson will go a lot better if they are motivated and more disciplined to do what we are going to do, but if they are not, it is all another aspect.*

**Reflecting on teaching and caring about students**

The thinking of these preservice teachers changed in the second half of the semester. This started to appear in the last debriefing session as well as during the second and final interview. The professor asked the preservice teachers to reflect on their latest teaching experience and to write about it for 10-15 minutes at the beginning of the debriefing session. The class then met in small groups to discuss an area of strength and an area needing improvement in their teaching. The themes that came out of this discussion were observably different from the first session.

To facilitate learning, the professor asked the preservice teachers to review their ideas from the beginning of the semester on management and behavior. However, the focus this time was not on the preservice teachers’ lack of control, but on their ability to adapt their lessons to the teaching situation. The following discussion shows different aspects of classroom management from a practical perspective.
Student 3: I have one troublemaker in my group.

Professor: That is bad. Now he is forever sketched in your mind as a troublemaker, even though he may be. Just because the teacher of record has that relationship with him does not mean yours is that way. It is s a fresh start.

Professor: Is there something that you have ascertained from your behavior, such as safety; is there something you have to change?

Student 3: Crossing the street, running around with bats, softer balls for softball, cars.

Student 4: It is important to plan. We are not able to move to something better until the students settle down.

Student 5: Some things went quicker and some things took longer, moving equipment.

Student 6: At first, let things go. If kids do not do it, I had to take them out later and talk.

Professor: I see—behavior with consequences, help them making good decisions.

Student 3: Basically simplify pretty much everything.

Although the preservice teachers discussed misbehavior or off-task behavior, their focus was not on loss of authority in the classroom or control of students. The preservice teachers were able to place misbehavior in the right perspective without feeling challenged or threatened.

Preservice teacher 8: The biggest thing I want to encourage is motivating the students to want to keep learning. I felt like I have experienced a cognitive shift because in the beginning it goes from you planning just for college requirements to you writing a plan for your students.

The professor asked the preservice teachers if there was anything they would change about their teaching; He discussed that if the preservice teachers did not plan differently, they would continue to make the same mistakes, and repeating the same experiences would not necessarily lead to new outcomes.

Professor: If you do not factor in these differences in your lesson plan, if you do not rewrite it that way, you will make the same mistakes.

Professor: Did you have effective objectives? In the lesson plan, you have how the objectives will be met.

Professor: You should have at least one affective objective. Those who did not have an affective objective, did you have a task where the students worked with more than one person? It would be easy to go back and put that in. Did you talk about what it meant to work with someone else?
Preservice teacher 4: Post planning or reflection is a very big part of your lesson plan because I think if you don’t go back and reflect on it you’re not going to improve as a teacher, not every lesson plan is going to work perfectly as planned.

Preservice teacher 5: I like to by the end of the unit students will understand the consequences involved with bad sportsmanship. That is something I added in my lesson plans. I do not I had that in my first few lesson plans.

Preservice teachers linked the notion of organization that rose in the course of the last debriefing to curricular concepts. In this phase, the preservice teachers discussed organization as it related to planning and instruction, not just on having equipment organized so students would have less “down time,” and their focus was on meeting the academic needs of their students in general.

Preservice teacher 4: Writing reflections are good for assessment, they allow you to see where the kids are developmentally. I want my lesson plans to be progressive and built on one another.

Later field observations of preservice teachers supported their change in focus. In their last teaching unit, the preservice teachers conducted three lessons on adventure education. The preservice teachers involved the middle school students in the unit and encouraged them to work through their own understanding of the material. The middle school students were active; they participated and appeared motivated. The middle school students found ways to work cooperatively in the activity even though occasionally they had to communicate non-verbally, and the lessons seemed to be very successful. The preservice teachers interacted with the students and provided suggestions, but most of the time they allowed the middle-school students to solve the problems. They did not focus on issues of discipline. In the last debriefing period, the preservice teachers revealed significant changes in disposition toward teaching. In the last teaching session, the preservice teachers felt that their teaching improved. They believed that their planning improved greatly. During the debriefing session, one preservice teacher representing her group said, “We feel now our lesson plans are better and have more variety. We are prepared to modify in case there should be a need.” While they were looking at getting the middle school students more involved in learning, the preservice teachers also stated that they should show their pride in their subject matter. It was important to them to show a positive attitude about their subject.

In the second interview, some students talked about the importance of being positive for the good of their students.

Preservice teacher 4: You have to go back and be mature enough to say what do I need to change and what didn’t work and you may even have to start over sometimes. Here again, the tablet that I carry comes in handy right after I teach a lesson so I would not forget my reflective thoughts.
Preservice teacher 6: I do feel like student learning is gradually becoming my ultimate goal. I also look forward to feedback from my students. I enjoy when students come up to me and tell me they played a game at home that we did in PE. Even though it is a game to them and whether they realize or not they are being active.

They were able to reflect and reconfigure possible pitfalls in their initial understanding over their role as teachers working with young students. The preservice teacher did not blame their students when things did not work well for them, as earlier on one preservice teacher expressed in the first interview, “I just, I am, I just cannot deal with the attitude at this age.” These preservice teachers learned to reflect on their teaching experiences.

Preservice teacher 1: At first you are so worried about the person observing you or your peers that you are teaching with, pointing out what you forgot or what you did not do or what you did wrong. Now when we go in it is more focused on the students that we are teaching and making sure they are getting something out of it. Now I am a lot more relaxed and have even learned to make my organization a little bit more flexible. The more field experiences we have the more efficient we become and are able to focus more on student learning.

Preservice teacher 4: I have seen days where I thought I might not have enough smiles on my face and it showed in my kids. I have to stay highly positive every day. You have to get to know the kids on a personal individual level.

Another teacher showed insightful reflective awareness in picking-up the role affect plays in students learning.

Preservice teacher 5: I feel like the most important thing is not how well they do it how they learn it. Because, you know, kids these days, I feel like get discouraged so much with everything if they cannot do something a certain way.

When interviewed about the debriefing sessions in the semester, the professor stated that his goal was to allow the preservice teachers to be more reflective in their approach to teaching. He wanted to encourage this by having them evaluate their own teaching during the debriefings instead of depending on the professor’s opinions. By doing this, the professor helped foster critical thinking that allowed these preservice teachers to restructure their current understanding about their roles as teachers. This is best summarized by exert from the second interview.

Preservice teacher 6: Teaching is more than just the things you learn in these classrooms. In addition, I think that is the most important thing every young teacher has to know. You are a parent. You are a parent of about 800 kids every day because probably 75% of them do not get the parenting life you had, my sister had, or some other friends I have. In addition, that is your job as a teacher.

In examining the syllabus for the practicum, we noted that the stated objectives and those of the College of Education were to promote “reflective practitioners.” Therefore, the debriefings that
occurred after the teaching experiences along with the activities associated with the debriefings
gave the preservice teachers time to reflect and learn from their experiences.

Preservice teacher 5: *If you do not go back and reflect, you are not going to improve as
a teacher. Not every lesson plan is going to work perfectly as planned. Reflecting gives
you a good way to see if you need to progress for the next lesson or if you need to regress.*

**Discussion**

The preservice teachers in our study focused initially on issues of classroom management
and student behavior, holding students accountable, and keeping students on task, having too
much variety in lesson plans, and controlling student behavior. By the end of the semester, the
preservice teachers changed their focus to teaching and caring attitudes. Classroom management
and student behavior heavily influenced the preservice teachers’ early teaching experiences and
practices in their field experiences. The preservice teachers expressed the desire to hold middle
school students accountable for off-task behavior so that the students had to participate in class
activities and have stronger consequences for non-participation. Because the preservice teachers
worried about the amount of off-task behavior in their classes, they translated those worries into
needing more tasks or a greater variety of tasks. They assumed that keeping students busy would
keep them under control. This focus on custodial behavior supports findings by Placek (1983,
1984), Griffey and Housner (1991), McCaughtry and Rovegno (2003), and Todorovich (2009).
Placek (1983) wrote that the teachers in her study were “more concerned about student
behavior than transmitting a body of knowledge” (p. 49). In Griffey and Housner’s study, the
inexperienced teachers spent more time criticizing the behavior of their students. McCaughtry
and Rovegno (2003) stated that preservice teachers frequently blamed students for not following
directions when actually the students were unable to perform the activity successfully.

However, the statements made by the preservice teachers in the current study also
reflected an attempt to maintain an outward appearance of an orderly classroom without
attending to the underlying core of learning. They were unable to reconcile their perception of a
quiet class where students listened to their teachers and engaged in activities with the fact that
students come to physical education classes with other peers they rarely see during the school
day, full of energy after sitting quietly in classes for several hours. However, becoming “hard”
or more controlling was unlikely to create the results these preservice teachers were looking for.
Therefore, the methods professor encouraged the preservice teachers to think of other ways to
achieve their teaching goals.

By the end of the semester, the preservice teachers changed their understanding of
teaching. As the preservice teachers became more comfortable with their own experiences, they
focused more on teaching and taking care of their students. The preservice teachers let go of
their focus on controlling students’ actions and took a more reflective approach in respect to how
they viewed their role as teachers working with young learners (Levin & He, 2008). This focus
on academic needs supports Griffey and Housner (1991) that more experienced teachers focus on
how to teach their objectives. These preservice teachers were able to integrate into their
knowledge the experience of working with real students. They were able to focus on what they
thought their students needed rather than on being in control at all times.
The fact that these preservice teachers were able to rethink their lesson plans is critical for the optimization of student teaching (Duncan & Clemons, 2012). This rethinking represented a reorganization of their thoughts and understanding about teaching. The preservice teachers now presented ideas, such as using variety within their lesson plans, as a means of clarifying teaching objectives instead of as a way to keep students busy, and they stated that they thought they were more prepared to face the challenges that could occur in their teaching. The importance of controlling every aspect in the classroom, clearly manifested in the first debriefing session, was not as important now. In this new phase, the preservice teachers reflected on their goals through the scaffolding provided by the professor. The professor encouraged the preservice teachers to reflect on their teaching practices (Mutton, Hagger, & Burn, 2011). This emphasis on reflection was one of the main objectives of the College of Education: to prepare teachers who are reflective, respectful of others’ differences, and ethical.

Stanley (1999) wrote that teachers might resist reflection because they may have initial negative feelings since it is more natural for people to dwell on their mistakes than their successes. Stanley suggested that reflection without guidance might cause teachers to focus on negative behavior or what went wrong during the lesson. By doing so, they may end up blaming students or even becoming angry with them as noted by McCaughtry and Rovegno (2003). An important aspect of debriefing as observed in the present study was that it encouraged reflection with guidance, as recommended by Stanley. The professor did not allow the students to focus only on their weakness. Instead of focusing on the negative feelings associated with mistakes, the professor encouraged them to consider what they could do differently the next time so they would not be repeating the same strategies they thought were unsuccessful.

The participants’ situated their earlier ways of knowing about teaching within their own conceptual understanding of teaching and learning, as described by Connelly and Clandinin (1985) and Elbaz (1983), but their lack of personal experience as teachers limited them. In the earlier period of their thinking about teaching, the participants worried most about the middle school students’ being active and well behaved. This way of conceptualizing the learner supports Placek’s (1984) findings on teacher thinking. It also reflected a level of frustration, with preservice teachers attempting to follow guidelines and methodologies of teaching not supported by their own personal, practical knowledge. They were teaching according to what others thought they should be doing. As Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997) wrote, teachers “are not mere screens who translate others’ intentions and ideologies into practice” (p. 674). These preservice teachers had to learn to teach from their own knowledge.

The changes observed in these preservice teachers indicate different phases of learning. Shuell (1990) described a second phase of learning characterized by the dominance of internal processes in learning. To apply this concept to the preparation of preservice teachers, it would seem that the initial learning phase would be where preservice teachers abandoned their lesson plans without curricular motivation for doing so, as discussed by Griffey and Housner (1991). The next phase was the strict adherence to the lesson plan no matter what was happening in the class, as characterized by the participants in the first debriefing session when they expressed frustration that they could not get the middle school students to cooperate. The last phase
indicates the blending of external and internal stimuli, as seen in the preservice teachers’ being comfortable to make changes as needed according to the situation.

Byra and Sherman (1993) discussed that inexperienced preservice teachers tend “to follow their planned routines regardless of whether the lesson is progressing as planned, and in the few instances when lesson adjustments are implemented, implementation is based on their interpretation of learner off-task behavior” (p. 53). In contrast, experienced teachers follow their plans, but they make adjustments as needed based on their evaluation of the students’ performance. Griffey and Housner (1991) also discussed the difficulty inexperienced teachers have in making appropriate decisions regarding instruction.

However, the participants in this study, through reflection, seemed to have learned to make decisions in the classroom that took them outside aspects for classroom management alone. The focus of the last debriefing session was on abandoning the need to control everything and focusing more on teaching and academic points. This point is significant since it shows that the preservice teachers were moving toward a reorganization of knowledge through encouragement from the professor to rethink their understanding by probing comments and restructuring their learning (Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, & Scott, 1994; Heflich & Iran-Nejad, 1995; Iran-Nejad, 1990; Iran-Nejad & Gregg, 2001). Throughout the course of the semester, the preservice teachers had an opportunity to evaluate their own frame for understanding and knowing and to develop their own ways of knowing. The results of our study are important because they underscore the importance of providing quality field-based teaching experiences to the preparation of preservice physical education teachers. The results of our study are promising because they underpin the role professors’ play in mentoring young teachers.

Conclusion

We observed changes in the preservice teachers in this study as they moved from inexperienced teachers’ focus on student behavior to those of more experienced teachers that focus on student learning and performance. Reflecting on academic and curricular needs of students represented a refocus on the part of these preservice teachers. The idea of control that was present earlier took a different meaning for these preservice teachers. The opportunity for reflective practice encouraged a reconfiguration of their understanding of teaching and learning. Reflective practices in teachers should be encouraged, according to Heflich and Iran-Nejad (1995), since they promote more reflection in students.

As preservice teachers reflected on their personal, practical knowledge, both individually and collectively, this became a way of knowing about the other side of teaching, where students come to classes with their own life experiences reflected in the learning situation. As the preservice teachers reflected on their practicum experiences, they became less rigid in their teaching and generated personal philosophies of teaching and learning born out of the struggle of knowing through experience. In the later part of the field experiences, these preservice teachers showed that, they had changed or modified their understanding about teaching.

The results of this research are promising in supporting the framework of personal practical knowledge. Research has indicated the importance of investigating factors that shape
preservice teachers’ acquisition of knowledge of teaching. It is important to know what factors impede or contribute to the development of new teachers. Researchers in the future may want to look at teachers training programs that emphasize extensive field-based teaching experiences for their preservice teachers. Our research shows that well-designed methods courses can have a positive impact on the preparation of preservice physical education teachers (Constantinou, 2011). Programs can make a difference in how preservice teachers think and believe about their role as teachers (Levin & He Ye, 2008). Carefully managed field-based teaching experiences are valuable augmenting sources important for scaffolding the development of personal and practical theories of teaching in young teachers (Chant, 2002; Chant, Heafner, & Bennett, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin, 1986; Cornet, 1990a, 1990b; McCutcheon, 1992; Pajares, 1992, 1993; Pape, 1992; Ross, 1992; Ross, Cornet, & McCutcheon, 1992). Our study shows the importance of evaluating current teaching practices aimed at preparing and developing young teachers (Cooper & He, 2013). Researchers and practitioners alike will benefit in terms of knowing more about how preservice physical education teachers acquire their knowledge of teaching (Norman, 2011).

Limitation and Recommendations

The nature and scope of qualitative research is not to generalize. We acknowledge the following limitations within our study: first, the sample is too small to be able to claim for any possible generalizability from the findings of our study. Second, the inherent nature of qualitative research prohibits us from making any assumptions other than those extrapolated from the data per se. Third, the study is limited in that the content delivered did not control for the individual preservice teachers’ level of content knowledge. Fourth, the study is limited in that it occurs during the first of four supervised field based experiences. A final limitation of the study was not being able to audio or video tape the teaching episodes to draw further points of reference to serve as reflective points. This study highlights that Fuller and Brown’s model of teacher concerns applies within physical education preservice education. Students at the beginning of a supervised practicum experience benefited from the bracketing of their initial concerns. The study reinforces the benefits of early-supervised field experiences. Preservice teachers benefit from having guided questions upon which to draw their reflections. These guided questions can serve as scaffolding to build upon their pedagogical content knowledge. A recommendation for further study would be to complete the data collection as the preservice teachers make their way through each of the three practicum experiences and through student teaching and to include students from multiple majors.

References


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