

Elementary Physical Education Specialists: A Commitment to Student Learning

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There are "too few studies which explore the subjective world of teachers in terms of their conceptions of what is salient" (Lortie, 1973, p. 490). Familiarity, Lortie argued, has dulled our curiosity about how teachers perceive their work. This monograph is intended to refocus our attention on the lives of seven teachers, to understand what it is they do in schools with young children, how they do it, and why it is these teachers continue to struggle, day after day and year after year, to provide quality experiences for children in the gymnasium despite the presence of factors that question the validity of their work.

The specific purpose of this study was to investigate the work and beliefs of effective elementary physical education teachers. We attempted to do that in several ways by looking first at how they started the school year, how they planned to accomplish the long- and short-term goals they had established; and we interviewed them several times to learn about their perspectives on teaching: what they cared about as teachers and what kinds of expectations they had for their students.

This article summarizes our findings. Several themes that have emerged from the data and our discussions about those data will be presented. We describe the work of these teachers, their values and beliefs about that work, and the obstacles they encounter in the accomplishment of those goals. It is an effort to outline what Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986, p. 506) described as the "cultures of teaching."

Several themes have emerged from the data that repeat themselves throughout the monograph. We suggest that seemingly diverse situations with teachers of varying experiences and expertise are more alike than one would suspect, and it is underlying themes that provide some perspective on the professional lives of our seven teachers.

The first theme to emerge is the paradox of status. On the one hand these teachers are held in high esteem by a host of individuals within their environment. Administrators, colleagues, and parents support and encourage their efforts in the classroom and respect their opinions on other issues. They are viewed as professionals in the best sense of the word. Yet the subject matter they teach does not share such a high status. Despite support for the quality of their programs, too few people care about what happens in gym. The teachers provide numerous examples of how physical education is the first area to be pushed aside for the "more important school functions" (Bobbie's efforts to ensure that her storeroom was not converted to a computer room; Missy's assembly problems that forced

her from her gym; Chris' overhauled playing field; Mike's concern that physical education teachers are not treated like regular teachers).

Our beginning teachers felt discrimination against their subject matter. Our sense was that the other teachers had felt this discrimination along the way and, partially as a function of that, have become "activists" for physical education. Their efforts to provide a variety of activities outside the regular instructional program have kept the value of the subject matter in front of teachers, administration, and parents (see article by Jones, Tannehill, O'Sullivan, & Stroot). In spite of the issues of time, space, and support echoed throughout the pages of this monograph, these teachers succeed. They have continued to promote their content area and use students as models of achievement in their efforts for recognition of physical education as a subject matter of equal status with other content areas in the curriculum.

A second theme relates to the seriousness of the teachers with respect to their profession. In a discussion on struggles of physical education teachers, Griffin (1986) reported that given the obstacles some teachers must overcome, a mediocre program was the best that could be provided. She stated, "At best, success was described as keeping students busy, happy, and good" (p. 58). The elementary specialists in this study were not willing to settle for mediocrity. These teachers felt strongly about their unique contribution to children and held specific goals and objectives pertaining to skill acquisition. High expectations for students were established and communicated. Student evaluation is an ongoing process, both on a formal and informal basis, to ensure that students work toward these goals and objectives.

The teachers also had high expectations of themselves and were so self-critical of their work that they were seldom satisfied. They planned extensively to meet these expectations, and lessons were evaluated and modified continually to improve the quality of teaching. It was clear these teachers are dedicated to student achievement. They believe in the worth of their profession and wish to convey that mission to others. They could not tolerate "throwing out the ball," as it would destroy them personally. These elementary physical education specialists know where they are going and have definite ideas on how to get there. They value their contribution to the school curriculum and actively promote the subject matter with their colleagues.

The third theme to emerge from the data was the politics of inclusion. The teachers in this study attempted to achieve the goals of their physical education program by broadening the opportunities students had for participating in physical activity to noninstructional times such as early morning, recess, and lunch periods. The elementary specialists gradually involved more people in their programs until the physical education program had support from colleagues, parents, and community volunteers for specific events during the year. The gradual inclusion of significant others in the program during specified instructional and noninstructional periods increased with the teachers' years of experience.

The beginning teachers for the most part attempted to achieve the goals of their program within the confines of their allocated time for physical education lessons. The intermediate teachers had established relationships with other teachers in their respective buildings, and there were several examples of Kathy and Missy integrating their subject matter with a topic of interest to the regular teachers (Kathy's "Western" unit). Not only did the veterans integrate their subject matter

with other components in the curriculum, they also used community and parent volunteers to organize and supervise several special events during the year (bike day, sports week, and camp). These events expanded the scope of their program and often required support from colleagues in giving up class time. Some of their peers devised classroom units relating to physical education themes (Bobbie's sports week often focused on a sport from a specific country).

It seemed the more experienced the teachers became, the more support they generated for the programs by involving diverse groups in their projects. These groups were powerful supporters of the program, as was demonstrated by the fact that they gave of their time to the program even when their children had grown and moved on to high school. The advocacy of this support group was an asset to the teacher in the formal and informal negotiations with administration for time, space, budget, and equipment. At best, they provided direct support in terms of PTA funds for equipment and volunteer personnel to supervise activities. This global perspective and active recruitment of various support groups ensured that the program would be recognized beyond the walls of the gymnasium and the limited instructional time allocated to physical education. It also allowed them to interact with other professionals in their school, an issue highlighted in the following theme.

A fourth theme relates to professional isolation and is a specific problem in physical education. This theme emerged again and again for all the teachers regardless of experience. Being the only physical education specialist in the building sets them apart from other teachers. They see adults occasionally, and teachers, the principal, and parents from time to time, but rarely do they see a professional who understands what they are trying to accomplish. Gary said there are no colleagues in his school with whom to discuss program concerns, to share new and innovative ideas, or to brainstorm with to solve specific problems. The issue was not one of adult isolation but of professional isolation. The veterans used the presence of the student teacher and the university supervisor to talk about teaching. This was one of the rewards for having a student teacher. The beginners tried to set up inservice sessions that would allow them to keep up with new information in their field. Several teachers took evening graduate courses in physical education in order to have contact with other professionals in their subject area. The chance to get together as a large group was a rare occasion for these teachers to speak with fellow physical educators about their work and what it meant to them. Their days were filled with children in an isolated environment with few opportunities to talk with adults.

A fifth theme to emerge was the lack of power of these "powerful" teachers. It was clear to us that the veteran teachers had the respect of both their colleagues and administrators. Their opinions about school and district policy were sought out and valued. Each of the veterans was on several school and district committees. These veterans recognized the importance of their full participation in the decision-making structure at the school and district level (Locke, 1986). The veterans had achieved as much power as a teacher can get in most any educational system in this country. In fact, one principal spoke about the concern some teachers had with the extent of power one of the teachers had within the school. Despite this power, these physical education teachers were not empowered to have an impact on the curriculum and direction of their schools.

All of the veterans made presentations at state or national professional

meetings, and two of the three veterans had published articles on physical education issues. There is no doubt these teachers took as active a role as the present educational system will allow them to have in the decision-making processes in their district and beyond. However, attending to both bureaucratic and educational goals manifested itself sometimes in frustration with administrative assignments that seemed to have little relevance to their daily interaction with students and the goal of student learning. They often questioned the value of their input when decisions made by the administration seemed to have ignored their expressed concerns. It seemed that while the veterans were respected by their principals, this respect was for them as persons and professionals and did not automatically transfer to respect for their subject matter. Despite the prestige of its advocates, physical education was not considered to be of central value when tough curricular decisions were called for. Regardless, the veterans continued to give of their time because they believed their efforts in the long term would affect the quality of the experiences children should receive in their school curriculum, and they could not tolerate doing otherwise.

A sixth theme to emerge addressed the broadening scope of beginning, intermediate, and veteran teachers, respectively. First-year teachers expend a great deal of energy planning their lessons, organizing students, and establishing their place in the school environment. Their concerns revolve around their own isolated setting and students within that setting (see article by O'Sullivan). They are involved in few school activities outside of physical education, have limited contact with parents, and focus on their immediate setting in an attempt to establish a stable, productive environment.

As teachers gain 3 to 4 years of experience, the scope of their program expands. Within the school setting, Kathy is experimenting with new teaching styles, Missy is adding a climbing wall unit to her yearly curriculum, and both are building an intramural program. Although these teachers spend less time on planning, they are still reviewing previously taught lessons and revising plans. The intermediate teachers are more comfortable communicating with parents than the 1st-year teachers and they have more cooperative school programs, such as Kathy's kindergarten program in which she integrates her physical education class with the classroom theme of the week. Kathy also took on the responsibility of supervising a student teacher for the first time and Missy is planning to work with one in the fall. Intermediate teachers are establishing interests outside of the school setting: Missy is working on her master's degree and Kathy has become involved in an adventure education camp.

Veteran teachers have expanded their program to include activities beyond the district course of study. Bobbie plans special events several times a year, such as the bicycle unit and the Olympic games unit. Gary incorporates an extensive adventure education unit into his program, and Chris collaborates with the music teacher to develop a cooperative movement program. They are very comfortable in communicating with parents and encourage parental involvement in activities. Each has a student teacher at least once a year and enjoys the interaction and exchange of ideas with these teachers (see article by Tannehill).

A final theme deals with the teachers' outside responsibilities. All three veterans have extensive involvement outside of school. Chris has significant wrestling and gymnastic administrative responsibilities. Bobbie has a full schedule of activities that could keep her occupied without a full-time teaching position. She is a member of her alma mater alumni association board and has great diffi-

culty attending to all her interests during the academic year because of the tremendous amount of time she devotes to her school responsibilities. Gary also has significant responsibilities beyond his teaching position. He is an adjunct faculty member at OSU and has organized, developed, and supervises a large and complex adventure camp operation that has had a significant impact on curricular programming at the local and state level.

These teachers do not allow their involvement with outside activities to adversely affect their teaching or their program. On the contrary, it seems to have had quite the opposite effect in all three cases. Outside interests have provided the veterans with many rewards. All three veterans have "drawn the line" about doing a good, solid professional job (which we have documented in the pages of this monograph) and "consuming themselves" with it, which none of them do. Their outside interests act to re-energize them, albeit for reasons that are highly specific to each individual, for the demanding work of teaching and their role as teachers. They have decided that they will do things (Missy's and Gary's climbing wall units and Bobbie's intramural jump rope program) that are fun for them as teachers and different from the routine of teaching six to nine lessons a day.

Conclusion

It was difficult to come to terms with why these teachers continue to work as hard as they do for such an extended period of time. It is with persistence, enthusiasm, and dedication that they overcome obstacles and develop and maintain outstanding and effective programs (Griffin, 1986). What are the rewards of teaching for these seven physical education specialists? Why do they push themselves beyond expected norms to provide learning opportunities for children?

Oliver, Bibick, Chandler, and Lane (1988) discuss rewards of teaching by focusing on motivation theory, commitment to teaching, and the role of intrinsic rewards in job satisfaction. Children were the major source of satisfaction for our seven specialists, as revealed by several examples throughout the monograph (i.e., "kids make me feel important," or the joy of hearing children tell "what they learned in gym today"). These teachers are committed to what they do, as reflected in Missy's statement, "I'll fight the system to do what is best for my children." Finally, our teachers seem to equate job satisfaction with how they perform and how well children learn. Children were also these teachers' major source of punishment. They were significantly affected when the children were rude, insolent, or showed lack of appreciation. Our seven teachers are clearly committed to children. It is a realistic commitment about what they can expect of them and from them in this isolated environment that makes teaching physical education most worthwhile for these teachers.

Although we have learned a great deal, there were things about which we could only speculate. For instance, what factors allow veteran teachers to maintain high levels of performance year after year? How does expertise develop over time? To what extent is expertise context specific? Do plan-independent teachers make decisions or perform differently from plan-dependent teachers? Our study has allowed us to speculate about answers to these questions. What *is* clear is that there are elementary physical education specialists who are performing at a high level of effectiveness on a daily basis, providing programs for children that are imaginatively conceived and well taught, and from which children can learn the subject matter in a nurturant climate.

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