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Today's Physical Education Teachers: An Inquiry Into Exceptional Practice

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the findings from a study of the professional lives of four physical education specialist teachers considered exceptional and to explain why they engage in their practice as they do. The issues of how teachers develop as well as how they change during their careers is emphasized. The conclusion highlights some of the most important qualities of exemplary teachers of physical education and opens the discussion for all professional educators, not only those in physical education, but at all levels and curricular backgrounds to search within themselves to determine how they teach and how they have changed over time.

L'objectif de cet article est de présenter un aperçu des résultats d'une étude portant sur la vie professionnelle de quatre enseignants spécialisés en éducation physique et considérés comme étant exceptionnels, et ensuite d'expliquer pourquoi ils s'impliquent dans leur profession comme ils le font. Sont traités plus particulièrement, le développement des enseignants et leur évolution au fil de leur carrière. La conclusion met au premier plan les qualités les plus importantes chez les enseignants d'éducation physique exemplaires et lance la discussion pour que tous les enseignants professionnels, de tous les niveaux et de toutes les matières, se questionnent sur leurs pratiques d'enseignements et sur leur évolution.

Background

Physical education has long been considered an important part of a student's overall education (Canadian Association for Healthy, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance [CAHPERD], 1998), and as a subject area it holds a unique position among school curricula (Fishburne & Hickson, 2001). However, it has never realized its rightful place among the core subjects and those perceived as more important courses (Hardman & Marshall, 2000). Negative stereotyping and public perception have also influenced how society views physical education (Harris, 2003). As a former teacher of physical education for grades 7-12, I have heard first hand opinions on the subject area and people's general attitudes toward teachers of physical education. All subjects possess their own personal appeal, but it can be argued that children enjoy no other subject as much as physical education during their developmental years in elementary education. However, a great deal of evidence has suggested that as children mature both mentally and physically, physical education is no longer an enjoyable class, and their opinions of physical education and its teachers are often negative and uncomplimentary (Deacon, 2000).

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Teachers of physical education should accept part of the responsibility for the high numbers of students dissatisfied with their physical education experiences and their lack of interest in enrolling in elective physical education courses. O'Sullivan and Dyson (1994) found that many teachers failed to explain to students the purpose of their physical education programs and also that many teachers over their careers had reduced their expectations of students because they appeared to become more challenging of authority and less willing to engage intensively with the subject matter. These findings are similar to those of Hastie and Siedentop (1999), who indicated that teachers who hold students accountable for managerial tasks such as dressing for class and simply being present tend to suspend the instructional task system, which contains those details that encompass the content of the lesson and include the knowledge and skills to be learned. Suspending this system results in students' performing only as much of the instructional task as they wish. An example of this behavior is a student who performs the activities in a weight-training circuit according to the outlined requirements of the teacher, but who does not challenge himself or herself to make these activities more difficult.

In one study, Parker (1995) found that most physical education teachers indicated that their primary goals were organization, management, discipline, and control and that their ultimate goal was student success in learning skills and acquiring knowledge. If this finding is in fact the focus of today's physical educators, then we are performing our roles inadequately, and short-term student benefits are the priority, but with minimal regard for the complexity of long-term benefits to students. Hardman and Marshall (2000) probed the roles and responsibilities of physical education teachers and surmised that most physical education teachers are only managers, organizers, and supervisors of physical activities who are hoping for success to emerge in their students. If the priorities and expectations of physical education teachers do not receive the highest possible regard, physical education will never achieve the same status and perceived importance as the core subjects of mathematics, science, and literature (Siedentop, 2002).

Despite the general lack of expertise among elementary teachers in the area of physical education (Berg, 2002) and the frequent lack of high expectations of high school physical educators for students (O'Sullivan & Dyson, 1994), many teachers do a phenomenal job of teaching and educating students about the values and importance of physical education and instructing them proficiently in skill acquisition. So why are some teachers of physical education perpetually successful in teaching in this often misunderstood subject area whereas others appear to be stuck in a perpetual rut? This question merits serious attention.

The body of current literature related specifically to the relationship between the characteristics and practice of exceptional teachers of physical education is limited, and my research adds to that body. Furthermore, Harrison (1987) stated, "Perhaps researchers need to spend more effort determining why teachers believe and do what they do!" (p. 50).

Purpose of the Study

This study inquired into the professional and personal lives of physical education specialists to determine their reasons for engaging in their practice as they do. I was interested in how the experiences of the participants affected their

teaching careers as these experiences specifically relate to the teaching of physical education. In this research I focused on the current practices of four physical education teachers whom I selected in consultation with regional representatives and physical education consultants as exceptional and respected professionals committed both to the education profession and specifically to the field of physical education. The study of their experiences and current practices led to important findings that may benefit all physical educators who are currently teaching in school systems as well as those instructors of physical education teacher education programs in postsecondary institutions.

Introducing the Literature

The following section will help to increase the reader's understanding of the research on the field of physical education as it directly relates to exceptional teaching in physical education.

Characteristics of Exceptional Teaching of Physical Education

What is an *exceptional* or *expert* teacher? According to Corbin (1993), "Expertise in the discipline is not, by itself, sufficient qualification to be considered a quality practitioner" (p. 86). This important statement causes one to ponder the merits of exceptional teaching and the label *exceptional*. What are the characteristics of such an individual who teaches in the area of physical education? The challenge of describing the difference between an effective teacher and an exceptional or expert teacher is difficult, and it evokes interest and creates passionate discussion among both educators and students.

In my review of the literature I found three major studies that addressed exceptional teaching in the field of physical education as well as information contained in the text by Siedentop and Tannehill (2000). An analysis of this literature identified seven prominent themes: (a) relevant experience, (b) a quest for knowledge, (c) the valuing of students, (d) planning, (e) the classroom ecology, (f) attention to detail (with-it-ness), and (g) the desire always to improve. Some of these themes were also included in the discussion of the characteristics of effective teachers. The three themes—relationship with students, management and organizational skills, and learning environment—from effective teaching are similar to the following three themes identified for exemplary teaching of physical education: (a) valuing and treating students respectfully, (b) planning appropriately, and (c) maintaining positive classroom ecology. Although there are similar themes, to maintain consistency with the literature, the terms identified in the literature are those that are discussed here.

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

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

Relevant experience. Experience is key for a teacher to become an expert teacher. Expert teachers are skilled at drawing from their experience to offer various forms of feedback to their students that is often spontaneous, credible, and shared creatively (Manross & Templeton, 1997). As Pieron and Carreiro da Costa (1996) stated,

Experts are seen as highly motivated to learn and seem to have learned more from their own teaching experience than ordinary teachers. They have a better memory of what they learned and they connect more efficiently with other aspects of their knowledge. (p. 10)

Researchers who have examined how experience influences teacher development both over time and as a result of specific encounters have conclusively demonstrated that experience has the potential to enhance teaching quality. The results from one study that compared preservice teachers with experienced teachers indicate that experienced teachers made more instructional decisions in planning lessons, focused on individual student performance, and possessed knowledge structures that were rich in strategies associated with quality instruction (Housner & Griffey, 1985).

Experts continually draw from their experiences when forced to deal with a problem or a new situation, whereas novice teachers base most of their actions and responses on textbook responses and theories (Chorney, 2000; Pieron & Carreiro da Costa, 1996). According to Tan (1997), "The degree of excellence that experts have gained is crafted by extensive knowledge and skills that are amassed over years of experience" (p. 31). Although experience is generally assumed to equate with having spent time in the profession, no one can determine how much time needs to be spent teaching to acquire adequate experience. Chorney noted that the survey responses of female physical education teachers with two to five years of experience were not significantly different from those of teachers with over 20 years of experience in teaching physical education.

Moreover, Pieron and Carreiro da Costa (1996) found that an expert's knowledge "is structured in sophisticated and complex ways that make it easy and economical to recall and apply" and that "experts recall more easily and appropriately their knowledge and transfer it more easily to unusual situations [than do nonexperts]" (p. 10). Tan's (1997) findings were similar: "Experts can remember and recall a great deal of information about their subject, both short-term and long-term" (p. 32). This ability can be attributed to a number of factors, including the inherent skill of memory recall or simply the experience of having taught a subject for so long that many examples can be thought of instantly. Nevertheless, although expertise typically is developed as a function of experience, experience alone is not a sufficient condition for expertise.

Quest for additional knowledge and analysis. General pedagogical knowledge represents what a teacher understands about the principles and strategies that are designed to guide class instruction, organization, and management (Shulman, 1987). Although pedagogical knowledge has received less attention than

other forms of teacher knowledge, it is central to the development of expertise (Dodds, 1994; Rink & Hall, 2008; Siedentop & Eldar, 1994).

The quest for additional content knowledge and the deep level of analysis that most experts demonstrate through reflective practice are joint factors in the profile of an exceptional teacher: "Because experts know the importance of their own personal understanding of the subject matter, they go to great lengths to increase their knowledge base prior to teaching" (Manross & Templeton, 1997, p. 32). As well, experts tend to invest a great deal of time in identifying, defining, and analyzing a problem before searching for a solution—that is, reflecting—and "when making decisions or solving problems, experts sort, identify, and analyze the essential factors with precision and proficiency" (Tan, 1997, p. 31). Continual self-improvement is a common characteristic of highly driven professionals in the field of education, for they rarely remain satisfied with their level and depth of general pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, or pedagogical content knowledge.

Valuing of students. Expert teachers also regularly attend to the individual needs of their students and use a variety of teaching styles to benefit the uniqueness of students. Ballinger (1993) revealed, "Expert instructors communicate new information to students using multiple examples and styles of teaching which match the learning style of students" (p. 14). This approach is pedagogically sound because all learners are unique and in many cases require information to be explained in more than one way. According to Manross and Templeton (1997), expert teachers are able to "easily outline logical and detailed skill progressions and concepts, beginning with the simple and leading to the complex" (p. 30). These findings are encouraging because many teachers of physical education simply use a direct method of instruction that does not permit the students to be creative and have input into their own learning (Behets, 1997).

According to the pupils' responses in Pieron and Carreiro da Costa's (1996) study, "The expert teachers used multiple techniques to a greater extent than the novice teachers to help students to understand the activity" (p. 13). Similarly, Manross and Templeton (1997) suggested that "expert teachers search for new and fresh methods for teaching familiar subject matter, while less expert teachers settle for business as usual" (p. 33). These points are valuable for all physical education teachers to remember, and perhaps more specifically for those undergraduate students who are preparing to begin their teaching careers in the field of physical education.

In a study on exceptional teachers, Manross and Templeton (1997) reported findings that are valuable to instructors at all levels of education. Perhaps the most significant finding is that exceptional teachers have a strong commitment to all learners in their classes and are dedicated to connecting with all students in every possible way. Not only is connecting with every student important for overall learning, but also as an added benefit, doing so minimizes management issues and efficiently uses class time. Thus Manross and Templeton concluded, "Expert teachers focus attention on individual student needs and performances while at the same time running a smooth and effective classroom" (p. 34).

Planning for instruction. As a technical skill, expert teachers often carry out planning well in advance by thinking long term (Rink & Hall, 2008; Manross &

Templeton, 1997). Pieron and Carreiro da Costa (1996) found that subject-area experts often have a greater propensity for planning progressive learning activities and contingency plans than do other teachers. As well, Manross and Templeton remarked, "Experts find a variety of ways for effectively communicating instructions, goals, and objectives" (p. 32). Experts are also capable of and extremely skilled at creating highly organized, yet flexible plans with various activity alternatives and explanations for students. The basic lessons are detailed and flexible and allow for easy interpretation by other teachers. Griffey and Housner (1991) also found that planning varies with experience. It is not surprising that experienced teachers ask more questions before planning and show greater concern for contingencies that may arise during the lesson.

As a skill unto itself, planning is seen as an integral part of good teaching and an integral part of their practice for all exceptional teachers of physical education. The value placed on planning is extremely high, and as Manross and Templeton (1997) noted, "Expert teachers strive to form a clear, thorough picture of what they are going to do in a lesson, who they are going to teach, and what equipment they will use" (p. 29).

Classroom ecology. The learning environment of expert teachers is generally relaxed and has an air of efficiency. As expert teachers hover over their environment, they tend to be proactive in giving specific and meaningful feedback to their students (Beighle & Pangrazi, 2002; Manross & Templeton, 1997). This ability to see everything and have a strong sense of classroom dynamics is key to ensuring that the lesson and ultimately student learning progress.

For exceptional teachers of physical education, the time spent in a typical class tends to be thought through deliberately so that all the time allocated for a specific class is accounted for in advance. As Manross and Templeton (1997) noted, "Experts often have established routines for starting and stopping class, managing student activity, distributing equipment, etc." (p. 32). Almost everything that may happen in a typical lesson has been planned to avoid confusion and wasting valuable class time.

Pieron and Carreiro da Costa (1996) found that the amount of time that pupils are engaged in their learning is strikingly higher in classes managed by expert teachers and that "the pupils of expert teachers [are] more often invited to understand the skills and the concepts taught [than are the pupils of other teachers]" (p. 10). In presenting tasks to students, expert teachers complete their information-sharing much faster and with greater clarity than do novice teachers (Pieron & Carreiro da Costa). Although younger or less experienced teachers often try to be firm and structured in their working environment, they lack the flexibility and confidence that generally develop with experience. Of course, novice teachers can be effective in their teaching; however, they tend to be more rigid with their plans than are expert teachers and tend to feel less secure about breaking away from their plans if a lesson is not working.

With-it-ness (attention to detail). Another theme that emerged from the literature on expertise in teaching physical education is exceptional teachers' intuitiveness and general sense of astute awareness. For example, Tan (1997) stated, "Experts see details or information that other people either miss or dismiss" (p. 31). This awareness of every detail in a class may be inherent and possibly a characteristic of only exceptional teachers. The limited research conducted on

classroom management indicated that teachers who exhibit with-it-ness—that is, prompt, accurate, and appropriate teacher responses to student actions (Kounin, 1970)—appear to have greater student compliance (Johnson, 1995).

A structured process of observation is another technique that exceptional teachers use more often during their teaching than do other teachers. Experts quickly perceive large clusters of information and “see things in a different and more insightful light. They extract meaningful cues from the instructional context that allow them to understand events in ways that help them plan and teach more effectively” (Tan, 1997, p. 32). Similarly, Manross and Templeton (1997) affirmed, “Experts are acutely aware of what is happening in their classes and why,” and “experts can detect slight but significant shifts in the learning environment which foretell events to come” (p. 31).

Desire to improve practice. Another quality that tends to set apart the expert teacher of physical education from the effective educator is the internal drive to improve continually while maintaining a humble and often low-key attitude. Highly competent teachers hold themselves accountable for students who have difficulty learning, but novice teachers tend to believe that they know most if not all that they need to know about their craft (Manross & Templeton, 1997; Pieron & Carreiro da Costa, 1996). Undergraduate students’ or novice teachers’ perceptions of their competence may result from their previous successes as athletes or coaches and their enthusiasm for effecting change in students. These teachers’ ability to admit shortcomings early in their careers may, therefore, be clouded by their personal perception of already being skilled and knowledgeable enough in all areas of the field.

To develop expertise, teachers must continually reflect on and question the rationale underlying their decisions, and according to Tan (1997), “experts objectively and honestly assess and identify their shortcomings and knowledge deficiencies” (p. 32). This highly admirable characteristic is not often found in novice or generally “average” teachers because of lack of experience and limited engagement with their teaching respectively.

Although reflective practice is one of the most widely discussed areas in teacher education, it is probably the least investigated (or evaluated) area of inquiry in physical education. The findings suggest that reflection may promote connections in the knowledge structures of preservice teachers (Byra, 1996; Sebren, 1995). In addition, it has been shown to be a more meaningful practice with a more sustained effect for teachers with relevant experience (Schön, 1991). It is also clear that some of the skills required for reflection can be taught and the act itself at least encouraged, although some strategies have particular advantages over others (Byra; Tsangaridou & O’Sullivan, 1994).

Research Methods and Procedure

Methods

As the authors of other case studies (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) have indicated, varied forms of data collection can be implemented in a case study. For the purposes of this study, I employed a process that combined interviews with observations of four participants. Each of the four participants was interviewed for approximately 90 minutes, and at least one follow-up contact was made with each. The interview process was semistructured, with

all participants receiving the interview questions in advance. All the interviews were conducted in the schools where the teachers were employed.

Questions during the interview focused on topics such the teachers' philosophy toward planning and teaching physical education, how they had changed during their careers as physical education teachers, and their approach to assessment as it related to physical education. The major source of data that was analyzed came from the participant interviews. The observations were made following the interviews and were primarily for me to verify whether these selected participants taught and planned as they said they did in the context of a typical lesson in physical education. The observations also validated the recommendations of my colleagues who had initially put forth the names of these teachers as possible participants for my research. My observations were quite simple in that I collected field notes while observing the teachers teach daily scheduled physical education classes. These observations did in fact give me the sense that these professionals were strong in terms of their preparedness for teaching and possessed the passion required to be a teacher of physical education at the highest level possible.

Data Analysis

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

Recruitment of Participants

Various qualified professionals throughout Alberta had recommended all the participants to me. These qualified professionals included physical education consultants, university professors, and district physical education representatives from all regions of Alberta.

The process of selecting the participants spanned approximately six months. The selection of participants was based on the submission of names from people whom I solicited and who were strongly connected to the field of physical education in Alberta. At the conclusion of my selection, I identified two female and two male physical education teachers who varied in their experience of teaching physical education from five to 25 years. As well, two teachers were employed by the separate school system, and the remaining two

were employees of the public school system. Two of the teachers were high school physical education teachers, one was a middle school physical education teacher, and the fourth participant was an elementary teacher who taught only physical education. Of the four teachers, two had attended the same postsecondary institution for their physical education teacher education program.

Results

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

Relating to/with Students

This category emerged from the data as the most important because each of the four participants identified several of the same related phrases, and in the final analysis this category included the largest number of themes: (a) caring for students, (b) student input, (c) honesty with students, (d) creating student enjoyment, (e) respecting students, and (f) options and variety for students. Each of these six themes is supported by the participants' direct quotations to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experience of teaching. For example, I asked Participant C how he had changed in terms of his style of teaching:

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

Experiences Gained Through Teaching

All the participants in this study reported that experience has had a major influence on their practice as teachers of physical education. Experience may be considered the single most important factor that causes physical education teachers to rethink their philosophies regarding teaching and planning. This category contained six themes that related to the experiences gained through teaching: (a) external influences, (b) professional development, (c) content knowledge, (d) meaning of physical education, (e) evolution and maturity, and (f) varied teaching styles.

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

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

Self-Awareness

The category of self-awareness represented five themes that emerged in my interviews with the participants: (a) early success, (b) reflection, (c) self-improvement, (d) confidence, and (e) organization and planning. The participants are well aware of who they are as professionals and recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and they explained to me their belief in reflection. From a young age, physical education had always been a generally enjoyable and positive experience for them, and as professionals they use and value reflection in their daily practice.

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

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

Passion for the Field of Physical Education

This final category contains two important related themes involving teachers' passion for and beliefs about the subject of physical education: belief and joy in teaching and personal fulfillment. In describing their feelings about how they view teaching and how much they value it, the four participants used words such as *joy*, *love*, and *passion*.

Participant C spoke about his belief in his job and in what he does daily as a teacher of young learners:

I think that my belief in the value of PE has served me well. Both my colleagues and my students know how much I value PE as a discipline and the field of study. It's not just game time, but we are here to learn things and experience learning. We want to have fun, but learning is first.

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

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

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

Results: Grounded in Literature

A total of six specific themes were identified as major influences on the current teaching practice of the four participants in this study. These themes were not ranked, but I present them as themes that emerged from the analysis and that are firmly grounded in earlier literature such as Siedentop and Tannehill (2000). Each theme is highlighted because it contains valuable information that has helped me to improve my understanding of who the participating teachers

are and why they engage in their practice as they do. The six themes are (a) evolution and maturity, (b) caring for students, (c) options and variety for students, (d) professional development and self-improvement, (e) varied teaching styles, and (f) reflection.

Results: Not Grounded in Literature

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

Discussion

The key question posed at the outset of this study was Why do current physical education teachers engage in their practice as they do? I have explored the personal and professional lives of four exceptional teachers of physical education. Some of this study's findings are congruent with those from earlier studies and literature (Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000; Manross & Templeton, 1997), whereas other findings reveal new information about teaching physical education. I have selected the following four categories to show the interdependencies among them and to group the specific themes.

Relating to/with Students

The personal interactions of teachers and students may be the most vital factor in determining whether students learn and whether teachers enjoy teaching. Preservice teachers who are eager to make their mark on the teaching profession often comment on their love for teaching and their desire to connect with every student when they eventually begin teaching. In theory, these ideals are admirable; however, I believe that many of these teachers fall into a pattern of teaching to the masses and that their initial love for teaching eventually becomes a liking for teaching and a job that provides a satisfying life.

The four exceptional physical education teachers in this study began by loving their jobs, and they continue to do so. They have learned the importance, necessity, and educational value of connecting with all learners to meet their needs. Sincerely caring for students, being open and honest with them, respecting them, and valuing their input are characteristics that only a few physical education teachers have and more important, act on in their daily teaching.

Experiences Gained Through Teaching

If relating to/with students is one of the most vital requirements for successfully teaching students, then experience is perhaps the most crucial factor in effecting positive changes in the teaching practice of physical educators. The experience of teaching is arguably the greatest *teacher* for teachers themselves. For all participants in this research study, their personal experience was the key to defining and understanding who they are. The knowledge that they gain from continued professional development, the support and guidance of past and current colleagues, the realization of the vital importance of having content knowledge in many areas, and the participants' personal evolution and maturity are all directly linked to their experience in the profession. The teach-

ers in this study believe that their experience has shaped their practice as physical education teachers. Having learned from past mistakes and seeking to build on their successes, all these teachers continue to evolve and mature into even more effective practitioners and are generally viewed by their peers as exceptional teachers.

Self-Awareness

Being truly open and honest with themselves may be the most challenging endeavor for all teachers. For those teachers of physical education who have generally been successful, being critical of their teaching and admitting the need for improvement are extremely difficult. This key point is also stressed in the literature according to Siedentop and Eldar (1994). Some may perceive this recognition as a sign of weakness or incompetence; however, for the teachers in this study, the continual attempt to improve their teaching is a regular and integral part of their practice and a valued aspect of their professional development. All the teachers in this study routinely engage in reflective practices and seek opportunities to improve themselves. Their ability to perceive themselves as imperfect and to admit that their teaching can always be improved is an important aspect of their success as physical education teachers and leaders in the field.

Passion for the Field of Physical Education

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

Conclusion

In this study I asked, Why do current physical education teachers engage in their practice as they do? The findings are thought-provoking, as I believe that any teacher regardless of subject specialization or experience, can learn something from this study. From subject specialists in secondary school settings to curriculum generalists in elementary classrooms, there is much to be learned from this study in how one can improve one's teaching and overall commitment to the teaching profession. In many cases, the findings revealed through this study are also congruent with those in the literature pertaining to the characteristics of effective and exceptional physical educators. It is important for all teachers to be able to recognize the need to reflect on their teaching. Current and future teachers must understand the qualities that distinguish exceptional teachers from merely effective ones but also realize that simply knowing these characteristics is not enough solely to raise them to the highest standard.

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