Future Teachers’ Perceptions of an Elementary Physical Education Practicum Experience

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Abstract

Understanding future teachers’ (FT) perceptions of their practicum experiences could prove insightful for physical education teacher education (PETE) programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine FTs’ perceptions of the practicum experience to determine areas of concern in an effort to better prepare those individuals entering the physical education teaching profession. Participants were 8 FTs entering their practicum. Data were collected through (a) quantitative methods (questionnaires) and (b) qualitative methods (interviews & weekly journals). Results indicated an increase of confidence in areas of content knowledge, rapport with pupils and maintaining high-quality socialization with faculty, but indicated a decline in perceptions of preparation and classroom management.

Key Words: Physical education, practicum, future teachers’ perceptions

Introduction

The experience of a first year teacher can be an overwhelming and an intense encounter (Smyth, 1995). The uncertainties that come with not knowing what or how to deal with certain circumstances and being afraid to make a mistake that could be detrimental to one’s career can be frightening. Throughout a future teacher’s (FT) undergraduate work there are several opportunities to witness a physical educator’s role. It is important to note that the design of and the value placed on practicum experiences of FTs can vary greatly from country to country. As a frame of reference, this study took place in the United States where it is common for undergraduate programs in physical education to immerse FTs in as many practical, “real world”, early field experiences (i.e. practicums) and teaching scenarios as possible to assist in their growth as future professionals. The FT has many stages to complete before reaching the point of the final practicum experience (FPE) such as their in-class course work where FTs (a) will gain knowledge of educational theories, practical concepts, and procedures necessary for effective teaching, (b) practice teaching
opportunities with undergraduate peers and public school pupils, and (c) many observation points in public schools settings along the way. However, the most direct and beneficial component is the semester long, culminating field experience that every FT must undergo prior to graduating (Chepyator-Thomson & Liu, 2003; Curtner-Smith, 2001; Darden, Scott, Darden, & Westfall, 2001; Hurwitz, & Loovis, 1995).

The FPE in the physical education teacher education (PETE) program allows FTs an opportunity to assume the responsibilities of a professional teacher. FTs need this experience to fully understand the role they will fill as a physical education teacher (Ojeme, 1987). Responsibilities may include everything from unlocking the gym, to setting up equipment for the day’s lesson, to making sure there are no problems in the locker rooms, to filling out forms and requests necessary in teaching physical education or necessary for the involvement in the school system (Curtner-Smith, 1996). Not only does this experience give FTs a chance to view life as a professional teacher, but it establishes the FTs confidence, foundation as a teacher, and plans on how to manage a physical education program (Darden, et al, 2001).

The direct intention of the FPE is to prepare the FT for the role as a professional physical education teacher. It is anticipated that the FPE will show a FT exactly how their professional experience will be and to give them opportunities to cope and develop around the many obstacles that arise as a physical education teacher, in order to help break the shock that a first-year teacher can face (Curtner-Smith, 2001). Many unexpected things can occur that a FT does not anticipate, but the design of the FPE is to resolve this by preparing the FT to learn how to handle situations by experiencing them first hand with the guiding help of a clinical supervisor (O’Sullivan, 1990).

Determining the perceptions of FTs has benefits to the PETE community. By understanding the perceptions of the FTs, PETE educators can determine how best to teach FTs. (Barney & Pleban, 2006). This insight could provide PETE educators the chance to develop curricula that enhance the FTs’ ability to teach. By developing curricula that address areas where FTs need improvement, in terms of confidence and decrease the initial concerns
when entering their FPE, PETE educators might possibly eliminate these fears for future FTs, and as a result, produce more effective FTs. When confidence is instilled the FTs can concentrate more on developing their teaching styles. The more effective FTs become during their FPE, the more effective they will be as a professional. This will enhance today’s schools and thus the pupils within them. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine FTs’ perceptions of the practicum experience to determine areas of concern in an effort to better prepare those entering the physical education teaching profession.

**Hypotheses**

The hypotheses of this study were that the FTs’ perceptions will (1) show that they are apprehensive in dealing with discipline situations, (2) have strong concerns over their course requirements, (3) worry about relating to the pupils, and (4) have socialization concerns with faculty and staff.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were eight future physical education teachers (3 female & 5 male) enrolled in a 16-week FPE at elementary schools within the mid-south region of the United States. Participants were between the ages of 20-35 and had completed all undergraduate coursework prior to their FPE. Participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study in congruence with the authors’ institutional review board policy on human subjects. It is important to acknowledge that this study involved a fairly small sample of participants’ perceptions regarding their FPE and that an additional group of similar size participants may have yielded different results. However, it is not uncommon for undergraduate PETE programs within the United States to have smaller numbers of FTs placed in FPEs. These participants were selected because they were representative of the FTs in this undergraduate PETE program.
**Context**

During the 16-week FPE, each participant was assigned to 2 clinical supervisors (i.e. professional certified teachers in the public school setting) each for an 8-week period of time. They were placed by the authors’ university’s office of Professional Education Program in an elementary school setting. Prior to their placements, all FTs were required to have completed all undergraduate coursework as well as exhibit competence expected of a FT within the PETE program as mentioned within the introduction of this paper.

**Data trustworthiness**

While the researcher is considered the research instrument in qualitative inquiry (Askins & Imwold, 1994), steps similar to those found in Locke’s (1989) guidelines for qualitative research were taken to ensure data trustworthiness. Triangulation (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) was used. Three data collection points were used to check and re-check data. In addition, the constant comparison method was utilized in accordance to Glaser and Strauss (1967). Journal entries, interview responses, and questionnaire responses were all congruent with current themes found by other previous research (Barney and Pleban, 2006; Chepyator-Thomason & Liu, 2003; Curtner-Smith, 2001; O’Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992).

**Data collection**

Data collection involved three techniques, supported by previous studies of similar investigation (Curtner-Smith, 1996; Curtner-Smith & Sofo, 2004; O’Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992; O’Sullivan, 1990). The first technique, used to establish insight into the perceptions of the FTs, was semi-structured interviews conducted by the third author. Interview questions were evaluated by two experts in PETE to ensure content validity. Interviews were used to establish how the FTs felt prior to and following their FPE. The main purpose of the initial interviews was to establish what areas (1) the FTs felt confident and (2) the FTs had feelings of apprehension. The post-interviews were also used to determine what areas the FTs remained confident in and if any initial areas of apprehension or concern remained. Pre-and-post interviews were audio recorded and manually transcribed. As in Mueller and Skamp (2003), interviews were done in a format that
permitted clarification and expansion of responses. A second technique involved asking the FTs to complete a 15-item questionnaire before and immediately following their 8 week FPE. Questionnaire contents were evaluated by two experts in PETE to ensure content validity. The questionnaires were sub-categorized based on their relationship to FT preparation, classroom management, content, socialization in field experience relative to faculty and administration, and socialization in field experience relative to pupils. The questionnaire was pilot tested during the preceding semester utilizing 16 FTs. The third and final technique used was the critical incident technique. This technique required weekly journals to ascertain significant events of each week. Journal questions were evaluated by two experts in PETE to ensure content validity. The FTs were asked to describe the important events of the week, incidents that might have occurred, the relationship with their cooperating teacher, situations that might have occurred where they felt unprepared, and their experiences when teaching a lesson. Their reports were submitted electronically week by week for 8 weeks.

**Data analysis**

Analytic induction and the constant comparison method (Goetz & LeCompte, 1967) served as the foundation of data analyses. This involved studying the data for tentative themes and then dividing these themes into categories. After interviews were transcribed, they were read and re-read by the authors to determine common themes. These themes were then divided and categorized. A content analysis of the participants’ responses from weekly journals was completed. The authors read and re-read the journals until common themes began to emerge. These were then divided into three categories, (a) lesson content concerns, (b) classroom management concerns, and (c) misbehavior issues. Following the completion of the 8 week FPE, descriptive statistics (frequencies) were computed for the pre-and-post questionnaires. Questionnaires were compared individually, per question, as well as by category. They were then compared collectively to evaluate any disparity and/or resemblances between them.
Results

Interviews
Nine categories emerged related to FT perceptions on (a) preparation, (b) requirements, (c) discipline, (d) teaching lessons, (e) clinical teacher, (f) school site, (g) acceptance, (h) relating to pupils, and (i) confidence. Each category is described below, offering FT comments.

Preparation
Only limited concern regarding preparation was expressed by the FTs initially. When asked if the FTs felt prepared to enter the FPE, seven answered in the affirmative with one unsure, indicating some apprehension as to not knowing what to expect and feelings that more teaching experience in a public school classroom was needed.

“I’d say I’m mostly (prepared). I mean I say mostly because I’m not sure what to expect. So I’d hate to say I am fully prepared because I know that is going to change when I get there.” (Pre-FPE). Upon the completion of the FPE the FTs were again asked if they were as prepared for their FPE as they thought they were before entering. All 8 FTs responded in the affirmative.

Requirements
When asked in the pre-interviews if there were any concerns as far as the university requirements and projects to complete during their FPE, five FTs answered no, but three were unsure. Responses of being “nervous” about meeting all requirements occurred, as did worry about passing licensure tests. “A little nervous about all the paper work that I’m going to have to do. I’m kind of scared about keeping it all together. Just kind of nervous really.” (Pre-FPE). When asked if initial concerns were still valid, five responded that they were concerned about getting all of the required paperwork and projects completed, two were not concerned but not overly confident either, and one was not concerned. “I think I should have been more concerned about it…for whatever reason I should have been more prepared.” (Post-FPE)
Discipline

During the pre-interviews the FTs were asked if they expected to have to deal with disruptive pupils and problem behavior. All FTs confirmed that they absolutely expected to have to deal with disciplinary issues. “Hopefully I handle it well; I expect it to be the worst part” (Pre-FPE). In the post-interviews, all FTs affirmed that they did, in fact, have discipline issues to handle. However, none of the participants suggested that they were unable to handle it, while some stated that their supervisor assisted them in certain situations. When asked their least favorite aspect of the FFE, four reported discipline issues. “Probably just all of the behavioral issues that we do have and the kids that just constantly don’t really care about anything but themselves. They constantly disrupt class and mess it up for the rest of the kids. That is just kind of heartbreaking because I know that the other ones wanted to come in there and they wanted to have time to do activities and learn more.” (Post-FPE).

Teaching lessons

The pre-interviews revealed an excitement by 7 FTs at the chance to teach. “Getting out to do all the things I’ve been training to do my entire life at college. It will be fun to see it all come together in a real life setting.” (Pre-FPE). Post-interviews revealed both comfort and confidence in being able to teach a lesson. All 8 FTs agreed that they were comfortable teaching a lesson on their own. Five added that they felt more confident teaching a lesson on their own than they did prior to their FPE. “I handled everything great, which surprised me. I was scared to death having that young of a group. Now I want nothing more than to go into elementary. It was great. I handled everything great.” (Post-FPE).

Clinical teacher

All FTs denied having any concerns about their clinical supervisor in either the pre- or post-interviews. The majority of the FTs had spoken with or met with their clinical supervisor and expressed no concerns. “Generally you are going to get a nice person who is looking to help you and I just feel like that is what is going to happen. I am confident that everything is going to be fine.” (Pre-FPE). “I was just given a great one. He was willing to
work with me on anything. He always wanted to discuss things and see my point of view compared to his point of view. I think he wanted to make me better as well as get better himself from listening to me. I was just a great experience.” (Post-FPE).

School site
During the pre-interviews, only one FT expressed concern about the assigned school. “I am a little nervous about that because my school placement is quite diverse” (Pre-FPE). Responses during post-interviews indicated that all FTs felt comfortable and had no concerns with the schools in which they were placed.

Acceptance
During pre-interviews the FTs were asked if they had any concerns about being accepted by the faculty and staff. Only one FT had a slight concern. “A little bit, but I don’t think I’m hard to get along with though.” (Pre-FPE). In post-interviews, all FTs felt that they had been accepted. “I really did feel accepted. Everyone would always stop and talk with me and ask me how it was going. If I had any questions about anything they were quick to help me out. It was a good faculty.” (Post-FPE).

Relating to pupils
Being able to relate to pupils was a concern for some FTs. Four FTs had definite concerns, while three denied having any concerns, leaving only one unsure. “I feel like I will be able to connect for the most part with most of my pupils, but there is always a couple in there that I feel like I won’t be able to reach. I’m comfortable yes, but nervous I’m not going to be able to help the ones that I need to help.” (Pre-FPE). During post-interviews, six FTs’, expressed no longer having concerns in this area. “I was able to relate to the pupils. A lot of them just want to come in there and have fun. They want to learn about different sports and just a lot of these things that I am already interested in anyways. So I could really connect to them and their willingness to come out more and play.” (Post-FPE).
**Confidence**

The final category that emerged during the interviews dealt with the FTs’ overall confidence prior to and following their FPE. During pre-interviews, five FTs responded that they were confident, while three were only fairly confident. “I feel really good, really confident. I’ve been wanting this to happen for a long time…I’m ready to get out in the field and do what I’ve been planning for a long time.” (Pre-FPE). During post-interviews, all expressed overwhelming confidence. “I feel like I have improved in confidence, yes. When we first talked I was not afraid but I was a little nervous and apprehensive about what to do. I don’t know it just seems like it is one of those things where you have to experience it.” (Post-FPE).

**Weekly journals**

FTs were asked to keep a weekly journal to ascertain any significant events that occurred. A total of 41 journals were submitted electronically, yielding a return rate of 64%. Utilizing the constant comparison method, three themes emerged from the journals; (a) classroom management, (b) discipline, and (c) teaching content. For the purpose of this paper, classroom management consists of any management concerns excluding those that were disciplinary in nature, which are too abundant as to be categorized separately. Each theme is described below, offering FT comments where applicable.

**Classroom management**

The most recurrent theme was that of classroom management. Responses from the FTs indicate that the time in which pupils were under their direction was of concern. Several FTs indicated that they either lacked sufficient time appropriate to conclude their lesson or simply finished their lesson prior to the ending of class time. Alarmingly, these concerns were noted not only in the early stages of the FPE, but throughout the placement, indicating that there may be the need by PETE faculty to address time management during undergraduate coursework. The following are two examples of FT responses alluding to this concern:
“My pacing of the class is poor. I only have forty minutes in each class period and most times I run behind, but a few times I have finished early. Finishing late is better! I definitely need work on my time management.” (Week 3)

“I wish we would have had more time to play the game, by the time we did our exercises and I gave the pupils the instruction of the game, there wasn’t a lot of time to play it. I would adjust next time maybe not doing all of the exercises but just a few of them so I would have more time for the pupils to play the game.” (Week 8)

Since every FT was placed in a different school, classes varied in size and composition. Results indicate that not all the FTs were ready for these differences. Since this was the first opportunities the FTs had complete control of the classroom environment, a majority of their responses addressed concern of “being alone” with more pupils than they anticipated. The following are two examples of FT responses alluding to this concern:

“I had a class of 30 kindergarten kids, I was prepared to teach them a lesson, but was not prepared how to handle that many by myself.” (Week 1)

“When teaching such big classes in a small area it is tough to give them adequate room for the activity which throws off my organization. It is a constant job to keep some of these pupils on task if you look away for one second to handle a situation pupils will begin to run around, dance, spin on the ground, or many other things.” (Week 3)

While minor classroom disruptions can often be expected, the FTs in this study commonly reported unexpected disruptions as an area of concern. These disruptions occurred from both inside and outside of the classroom and were mostly caused by pupils. This required the FTs to adjust their teachings. The following are two examples of FT responses alluding to this concern:

“This week I encountered some changes to our P.E. class schedule. The children had picture day on Wednesday, where I teach our classes, so I had to adapt our class schedule by taking the pupils outside on the playground for the classes. It worked out really well because the weather was good, but if it had been raining, I’m not sure what I would have done.” (Week 4)
“This past Tuesday a man came into the gym that we did not know. He was looking for the office to the church, since we have our class in a gym at the church across the street. It was a uneasy situation because he was someone from outside the school. I wasn’t sure how to handle the situation.” (Week 5)

**Discipline**

The second theme to appear in the weekly journals was that of discipline with elementary school pupils. Previous works (O’Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992; Barney & Pleban, 2006) of similar investigation noted the common concern of FTs to maintain or keep pupils under control. Not unlike these studies, the FTs conveyed concern with discipline. However, the concerns expressed by the FTs occurred during the initial weeks and seemed to diminish as there were fewer and fewer references to discipline found within the weekly journals as the FPE progressed. In the initial weeks (1-3), common comments made by FTs included, “need to get control of the class”, “controlling the pupils”, “my pupils didn’t listen to my instruction” and “would not listen to me at all.” As the FPE progressed, only minor comments regarding discipline by FTs were noted, reporting individual student rather than whole class concerns; using phrases such as “causing disruptions of the class” and “his disruptive behavior affects the entire classes learning”. This is a somewhat positive trend, indicating a maturation of FTs to understand discipline issues as sometimes an unfortunate “part” of the environment, but to more importantly be concerned with how individualized issues might affect the overall learning process of the class as a whole.

**Teaching content**

The final theme dealt with various content issues while teaching. Comments indicate that while a number of factors can affect a FT’s FPE from week to week, their overall success in teaching elementary pupils is of concern. The FTs felt that for their pupils to learn, their lessons should be kept interesting and age appropriate. “I felt that some of the pupils were getting bored with the activities, so I’m searching for a way to excite them about our regular activities. I need to modify the games to make them age appropriate.”
Questionnaire

FTs completed a 15-item questionnaire before and immediately following their 8 week FPE. These questionnaires were sub-categorized based on their relationship to (a) FT preparation, (b) classroom management, (c) content, (d) socialization in field experience in regards to faculty and administration, and (e) socialization in field experience in regards to pupils. Descriptive data for the perception questionnaire are displayed in Table 1. These data reveal that the FTs’ perceptions regarding these subcategories increased from pre-FPE to post-FPE, indicating a trend that throughout the 8-week FPE FTs’ perceptions grew positive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel that my coursework at ASU has fully prepared me for my student internship.</td>
<td>1 12.5</td>
<td>5 62.5</td>
<td>2 25.0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am fully aware of what is required of me this semester in order to graduate.</td>
<td>2 25.0</td>
<td>5 62.5</td>
<td>1 12.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I am fully aware of what is to be included in my student internship portfolio.</td>
<td>3 37.5</td>
<td>5 62.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I anticipate having to deal with disruptive pupils.</td>
<td>5 62.5</td>
<td>3 37.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel confident in my ability to handle disruptive pupils.</td>
<td>3 37.5</td>
<td>4 50.0</td>
<td>1 12.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I have a system in place that will allow me to maintain control of the class.</td>
<td>2 25.0</td>
<td>4 50.0</td>
<td>2 25.0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. When teaching, I feel confident that I can relay the subject matter in an understandable way.</td>
<td>2 25.0</td>
<td>5 62.5</td>
<td>1 12.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. When teaching, I feel confident that my lessons will be effective and meaningful for the pupils.</td>
<td>4 50.0</td>
<td>2 25.0</td>
<td>2 25.0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. When teaching, I feel confident that I will be able to engage all pupils.</td>
<td>1 12.5</td>
<td>4 50.0</td>
<td>3 37.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I am confident that I will be accepted socially by all of the</td>
<td>5 62.5</td>
<td>3 37.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
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Table 1: FTs’ perceptions pre-FPE & post-FPE
Conclusion

FTs’ perceptions are extremely valuable to PETE programs (Pellett, Strayve, & Pellett, 1999). This study determined that, based on the FTs’ perceptions, the dominant themes from the interview and journal data indicate that there were initial concerns regarding classroom management and discipline that continued throughout the FPE, a finding that provides support for the first of our initial hypotheses. However, their confidence in handling management and discipline situations increased due to the FPE, an encouraging result given that a direct intention of the FPE is to prepare the FT for their role as a professional physical education teacher while establishing their confidence in various situations. Time management and age appropriateness of lessons was a constant concern, a finding that provides support for the second of our hypotheses. Recall that these perceptions were recorded over a relatively short period (i.e. 16-weeks), thus we are confident that with time, this particular concern will be gradually alleviated as the FT assumes their new role as a professional. The FT’s overall confidence in their abilities to relate to pupils and socialize with the faculty, our final hypotheses, increased during the FPE, another important finding, reiterating the importance and benefit of completing a semester long, culminating field experience. Data from the pre-questionnaires, as well as the post-questionnaires, supported these themes with the frequencies of the FTs’ responses showing more confidence in all of the subcategories and are congruent with the findings of
similar studies in this line (Barney & Pleban, 2006; Chepyator-Thomson & Liu, 2003; Curtner-Smith, 2001; O’Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992).

This most practical implication of the study is that it suggests that while this particular study involved a fairly small sample of FTs’ perceptions regarding their FPE, future teachers regardless of geographical location often share common perceptions and concerns regarding various issues that they may face prior to entering, as well as during, their FPE. Further, it suggests that having an awareness of these perceptions could allow PETE faculty the opportunity to address these issues within their undergraduate programs prior to the FPE, thus enhancing the overall experience for both the faculty and the FTs. Likewise, PETE faculty in universities would do well to hear the feelings, thoughts, and voices of their undergraduate FTs while providing occasions for coping and professional development around the many obstacles that arise as a professional teacher.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that this study was limited in a number of ways. For example, as previously mentioned, it involved a fairly small sample of participants’ perceptions regarding their FPE and that an additional group of similar size participants may have yielded different results. Further, the study was conducted in one region of the United States. Replication of a study of this nature could prove beneficial. However, it may be that future studies in this line be aimed at a greater number of participants, data from various geographical regions or nations, and that additional FT settings (i.e. secondary) might yield richer data, and hence could possibly be more generalizable to a greater number of PETE programs.
References


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