



Opinions from veteran physical education teachers: Characteristics of effective physical education teachers

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Abstract

This study explored the characteristics one needs to possess to be an effective physical education teacher. Data was collected from an open-ended response question on a questionnaire regarding exemplary classroom teachers. Physical education teachers were subjects for this study. Eighty-eight responders, having over 20+ years of physical education teaching experience, provided answers. Data were analyzed using content analysis based on word count and content similarity. The findings show that veteran physical education teachers believe relationship building, flexibility, humanitarianism, life-long learning, and respect are characteristics that make effective physical education teachers.

Keywords: Physical education, elementary education, secondary education, teacher preparation

Introduction

Many of us, if asked, could name teachers who have positively impacted our lives. What made those teachers so memorable? What was it about those teachers that made them effective? Anyone who has been an educator will tell you that teaching can be challenging and rewarding. Some teachers become effective in these environments, while others become ineffective. Orlando (2013) ^[17] summed it up best, "Great teaching seems to have less to do with our knowledge and skills than with our attitude toward our students, our subject, and our work" (p. 2, par. 2). The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics one needs to possess to be an effective physical education teacher.

Literature Review

Parker (1995) ^[18] defined effective teaching as "a hierarchy of pedagogical practices in which organization, management, discipline, and control form the base with the student success being the ultimate goal" (p. 127). In this study, Parker had 14 physical education teachers as participants ranging in years of experience from 11 to 32 years, using predetermined statement cards to rank in order of importance. Parker also employed informal interview techniques to explain the reasoning behind the rank and found that student success was the most mentioned term regarding being an effective teacher. In contrast, other words included strategies, explaining, evaluation, expectations, goal setting, respectful learning environments, and diversity regarding activities. Parker concluded that effective teaching could be defined based on a teacher's pedagogical knowledge, organization, and classroom management skills.

If this defines effective teaching, what are effective teaching characteristics? Characteristics great teachers share include having fun, a shared love for lifelong learning, a love for students determined, self-efficacy, and courage (Shaukat *et al.*, 2019; Williams, 2003) ^[19, 23]. Effective teachers are energized by witnessing "change and growth" (Williams, 2003, p. 72) ^[23] while being autonomous change agents in the classroom. Enthusiasm and humanitarianism also drive teacher satisfaction levels, which drives the intent to stay teaching (Okwendi & Nwidag, 2015) ^[16]. Williams' (2003) ^[23] participants also shared the characteristics of being flexible and resilient.

Lifelong learning spurs the teacher into creating a fun atmosphere for students to learn in, and in the process of continually learning, it shows the students one has a passion for the subject matter (Gordon, 2017; Orlando, 2013) ^[6, 17].

Respect for students, respect between teachers, and respect between students and teachers are critical to becoming effective teachers (Benekos, 2016) ^[2]. Creating a respectful classroom environment is an essential characteristic of an effective teacher (Gordon, 2017; Lund & Kirk, 2019; Majid *et al.*, 2014; Weimer, 2010) ^[6, 12, 13, 21]. Respect is the foundation for relationship building and trust (Benekos, 2016) ^[2].

Whitaker (2012) ^[23] emphasizes that effective teachers are about people, not just the programs. Effective teachers focus on people and relationships (Avegno & DeBlieux, 2013; Moen *et al.*, 2020) ^[1, 15]. Effective teachers are involved in relationship building and caring for the student and the student's situation. To have learning occur in the classroom, one must build relationships with students (Bobek, 2010; Gordon, 2017; Moen *et al.*, 2020) ^[6, 15, 3].

The teachers in Williams' (2003) ^[23] study also realized they could only be effective with others. They saw the need for collaboration and a great support system in the form of administration and fellow teachers. Orlando (2013) ^[17] stresses the need to ask for assistance and connect with colleagues. Just the mere act of reaching out to someone indicates that one is aware that being a great teacher cannot happen alone. Okwendi and Nwidag (2015) ^[16] suggested that reaching out could include positive feedback, a support system, and increased opportunities to interact with parents in the community.

Parker's (1995) ^[18] research included physical education teachers from 11 years to 32 years of experience. Unfortunately, the study did not distinguish between the responses from the physical education teachers based on career stages even though she described them as "veterans" (p. 129) physical education teachers. Also, the number of participants was low ($N = 14$). With the low number of participants and the absence of indicating which participants responded based on career stages, it is worth exploring the topic of effective teaching. The literature reviewed described what characteristics the researchers found that made an effective teacher. Parker (1995) ^[18] stated that a less pronounced definition that arrived from the research was "effective teaching that emphasized the development of personal attributes, fun, and teacher-student interaction" (p. 136). This study explored the characteristics that veteran physical education teachers believe one needs to be an effective physical education teacher.

The findings from the research will provide information to physical education student teachers and novice physical education teachers on areas to focus on beyond pedagogical knowledge, organization, and classroom management.

Methodology

Participants

The data source for this study was replies from physical education teachers to an open-ended response from a survey on exemplary teacher characteristics. The initial questionnaire, which was a questionnaire developed for the DeBruyn Institute with the assistance of the Office of Education Innovation and Evaluation at Kansas State University for all teachers in public education, was composed of six sections with a total of 69 statements and had 192 ($N =$

192; Male = 45; Female = 147) responders. The six sections addressed classroom culture, assessment, motivation, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, teacher beliefs, and outside-the-classroom activities. Requirements for initial participation in the questionnaire were that participants had to have 20 years or more of teaching experience in physical education. The 20-year mark was decided based on the work of Huberman (1989) ^[9] in the description of the career stages of teachers, with 20 or more years of teaching falling into the serenity category of those, 88 ($N = 88$) responders opted to answer the open-ended statement which stated: "Please describe any other characteristic(s) of an exemplary teacher that you think should have been included but was not mentioned in any of the previous statements." The study using the questionnaire can be found in the MAHPERD Journal, 5(2), 3-14.

Data Analysis

A summative content analysis approach was used to analyze data qualitatively. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) ^[8], a summative content analysis approach starts with keywords, which can be identified throughout the analysis. The words can be areas of interest by the researcher or from literature. As Merriam (2009) ^[14] indicated, in essence, "all qualitative data analysis is content analysis in that it is the content of interviews, field notes, and documents that are analyzed" (p. 205). Kassirjian (1977) ^[10] describes content analysis as the "study of the message itself, and not the communicator or the audience" (p. 8). In this case, the content was the open-ended responses from a questionnaire. From the responses, the data were coded into categories and themes based on repeated word or words and words that were similar to the repeated words (Merriam, 2009) ^[14]. The summative content analysis counts and compares a word or words interpreted into themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kassirjian, 1977) ^[8, 10]. For example, the word count of the word flexibility or flexible would be coded to the theme of flexibility. Next, content or other words that paralleled flexibility would be added to the theme. For example, the word "diplomacy" or "try new things" would be added to the theme of flexibility.

Trustworthiness was established by employing triangulation and an audit trail (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993) ^[5]. Triangulation is defined as the use of three data collection resources (Thomas *et al.*, 2011) ^[20]. Data triangulation was achieved using multiple data analysis methods (Merriam, 2009) ^[14]. The multiple data collection tools used for triangulation were NVivo, Excel, and the researcher's journal. The researcher's journal created an audit trail, which Merriam (2009) ^[14] describes as a detailed record of how data was collected and analyzed during the research process. The original open-ended questions were maintained in Qualtrics while note cards were created and manually manipulated to form themes.

Results

The content analyzed created a broad spectrum of areas physical education teachers believe to be essential to effective teachers. After further analysis of the content, five themes emerged from the data. These themes were building relationships, humanitarianism, lifelong learning, flexibility, and respect. Each of these content areas was driven by defining the main theme description.

Building relationships

Building relationships was defined as developing and making positive connections with stakeholders within an educational setting. This theme has the most content, including connecting, establishing relationships, reaching every student, and creating rapport. Participants made the following statements:

- Connect with their student's environment to meet the need of the student
- Be interested in the students as people, learn their likes, dislikes, and hobbies
- The ability to connect with students
- Positive student rapport

Flexibility

Participants believed that being flexible makes one an effective physical education teacher. Flexibility was defined as a willingness to change or adjust one's plans. This theme had the second-highest content responses, including flexibility, diplomacy, thinking outside the box, creativity, adjusting, and adapting. Participants made the following statements:

- Have a willingness to step out of one's comfort zone and try new activities the students may never have tried
- Be flexible and able to go with the flow of the many unexpected changes that can occur when teaching
- Ability to monitor and adjust – even the best-laid plans go astray at times

Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism was the third most described content. It was defined as promoting the well-being of others. It included terms such as compassion, passion, passionate, being a positive role model, advocacy, empathy, sincerity, and being a life changer. Participants believed that being a humanitarian makes an effective physical education teacher. Participants made the following statements:

- Be compassionate to students coming from difficult environmental situations.
- Possess an empathetic side
- Have heart and passion and reflect that into teaching

Life-long learning

Participants believed being a lifelong learner was essential to be an effective physical education teacher. Life-long learning was defined as continual learning of physical education and those tactics involved with teaching physical education. This theme was second to last based on content and included terms such as higher education, board certification, professional development, and additional certifications. Participants made the following statements:

- One must get as much professional development in our field as possible and be a member of at least their state professional association.
- Constantly learning by taking courses and professional development classes

Respect

Participants believed respect was essential to be an effective teacher, not just respect for the student but all stakeholders in physical education. Respect was defined as demonstrating attention to others with high affection. Respect ranked last based on the analysis of content responses. Content responses included terms such as respectful, fairness, and fair.

Participants made the following statements:

- Be respectful of yourself and your students.
- Respect is shown to all persons involved in the educational process
- Love and respect for the classroom and student

Discussion

This study explored the characteristics one needs to possess to be an effective physical education teacher. After analyzing the open-ended responses, veteran physical education teachers in this study believed that building relationships, having flexibility, being a humanitarian, being a lifelong learner, and being respectful are the characteristics that make an effective physical education teacher.

The first finding, building relationships, was believed to be the most crucial characteristic of being an effective physical education teacher by the participants. The findings reflect the conclusions in Avegno and DeBlieux (2013) ^[1], Moen *et al.* (2020) ^[15], and Whitaker's (2012) ^[23] research that effective teachers care about the students and find it necessary to build caring and trusting relationships. Bobek (2010) ^[3] confirmed that learning occurs in classrooms where the relationship base has been established. Relationship status is essential to beginning teachers as well. In a 1999 study by Witcher and Onwuegbuzie (1999) ^[26], preservice teachers believed that focusing on the student was more important than classroom management or teaching knowledge. There needs to be a curriculum to teach relationship building. It is a complex maze that is based on the knowledge of the individual, a reflection of the social, emotional, environmental, and physical status of the students, and lastly, humanitarianism (Moen *et al.*, 2020) ^[15].

The second finding, flexibility, was essential to the participants in this study. With all having more than 20 years of teaching experience in physical education, the need to change when needed was a necessity. In Williams' (2003) ^[23] research, flexibility and resilience were also essential to the participants. The assumption is that having the knowledge and willingness to adjust plans when students are not responding is connected to relationship building.

The last three findings the participants believed essential to being an effective physical education teacher were humanitarianism, lifelong learning, and being respectful. Okwendi and Nwidag's (2015) ^[16] study noted that humanitarianism produced higher teacher satisfaction. Also, physical education teaching can take on a holistic approach that includes social, academic, and admiration or, as Weiss (2011) ^[22] describes, the Five C's (competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring).

The findings from this study reflect much of the previous literature. Henninger (2007) ^[7] focused on physical education teachers in urban schools and found that relationship-building with students and staff and becoming life-long learners were essential characteristics. One thing to note is that the items stressed in teacher preparation programs, such as lesson planning, content, and classroom management (Gordon, 2017) ^[6], were not mentioned as personal characteristics that make a physical education teacher effective among the veteran participants. As mentioned previously, Orlando (2013) ^[17] stated, "Great teaching seems to have less to do with our knowledge and skills than with our attitude toward our students, our subject, and our work" (p. 2, par. 2). Content and pedagogical knowledge were ranked low on a survey measuring attributes of exemplary teachers with physical

education teachers that have 20 or more years of experience (Gordon, 2017) ^[6] and with Witcher & Onwuegbuzie's (1999) ^[26] study with preservice teachers. This information does not indicate that subject knowledge is not essential but may be seen as not the most important factor.

Building relationships, flexibility, humanitarianism, lifelong learning, and respect contribute to physical education teacher retention. Bobek (2010) ^[3] stressed the importance of relationships as a potential way to increase teacher retention. The relationships between students and teachers were critical of the support structure (Wilson & Mant, 2011) ^[25]. Teacher support is essential to maintain job satisfaction in three areas: networking with other teachers, partnerships with the administration, and parents (Bobek, 2010) ^[3].

Implications and Recommendations

An implication of this study identifies areas that should be stressed during physical education teacher preparation programs. Veteran physical education teachers have a wealth of knowledge that needs to be incorporated into the process in more ways than just cooperating or supervising teachers. Building relationships, flexibility, humanitarianism, life-long learning, and respect are just as crucial as lesson planning, content, and classroom management for our future physical education teachers to become effective teachers. More research should be conducted to develop teacher preparation programs incorporating such characteristics into the curriculum. After 20 years of teaching physical education, all teachers agree that building relationships, flexibility, humanitarianism, life-long learning, and respect are necessary to be an effective teacher. Education is changing, but the simple values of being an effective teacher hold steady.

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