Early career physical education teacher efficacy

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ABSTRACT

The retention of quality teachers has become a critical issue facing the American educational system. Unfortunately, various estimates identify that 30-50% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years. To address this issue, educational researchers have focused on identifying ways of enhancing retention through examining factors that both negatively and positively affect the integration and retention of early career teachers. One such factor is the development of positive teaching efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to be successful across various teaching tasks. For the most part, the early careers of teachers have been studied in traditional classroom settings with little empirical work conducted within the physical education setting. The purpose of this paper is to examine sources that influence the teaching efficacy of early career physical education teachers. Utilizing in-depth interviews, 15 early career physical education teachers shared how their beginning teaching experiences affected their teaching efficacy. Both individual and contextual sources were identified using an inductive content analysis. Results revealed several sources tied to the role and effectiveness of their mentor. Specifically, the role and effectiveness of the mentor specific to the physical education context revealed that the physical education setting created unique sources of influence on these teachers early integration into their teaching environment. Some teachers built confidence with the assistance from mentors while most figured it out on their own. Further exploration and research are required to verify or refute the assumed effectiveness of mentoring programs.

Keywords: teaching efficacy, early career physical education teachers, mentor, induction, retention

INTRODUCTION

The retention of quality teachers has become a critical issue facing the American educational system. Unfortunately, various estimates identify that 30-50% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). To address this issue, educational researchers have focused on identifying ways of enhancing retention through examining factors that both negatively and positively affect the integration and retention of early career teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll 2001; McGaha & Lynn, 2000). One such factor is the development of positive teaching efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to be successful across various teaching tasks. For the most part, the early careers of teachers have been studied in traditional classroom settings with little empirical work conducted within the physical education setting. In turn, little information is available regarding the sources that influence the teaching efficacy of beginning physical education teachers.

Educational researchers have most often examined factors such as teacher background, school environment, and job satisfaction as predictors of retention. However, present day research consistently identifies that both individual and contextual factors influence early career teaching experiences. From an individual perspective, researchers have investigated teaching, or efficacy as defined as an individual teacher's level of confidence in his/her ability to be successful individual teaching tasks (e.g., classroom management, instructional techniques). Importantly, there are several consequences to the development, or lack of development, of high teaching efficacy (Bandura 1986, 1991). Specifically, those teachers with low efficacy are more likely to take a pessimistic view of students' motivation, emphasize control of the classroom behavior through strict regulations, and rely on negative sanctions to perform a required task (Bandura, 1991). Melby (1995) found that individuals with a low sense of teaching efficacy have greater classroom challenges, were stressed by students' misbehavior, were pessimistic about students, resorted more to punishment to change behavior, and reported that if they had to do it all over again, they would not chose teaching as a profession.

Unfortunately, little is known about sources of teacher efficacy among the early career experiences of physical education teachers. Due to the limited empirical work in the physical education domain, a qualitative investigation was pursued to develop a more in-depth understanding of the various self-identified sources of self-efficacy among the early career physical education teachers within this study. The implications for improving retention physical education teachers underscores the importance of developing teaching efficacy in early careers and anticipate the induction experiences that lower general teaching efficacy (Woolfolk-Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005).

Bandura (1986) identified that previous mastery experiences, modeling, and encouragement or positive feedback, would influence the development of an individual's perception of their teaching specific efficacy. Although the researchers in the present study fully expected for the participants to identify some of these sources in detail, we also wanted to allow the participants to identify sources unique to the physical education teaching environment that may have influenced their early career efficacy and overall induction experiences. Blankenship and Coleman (2009) investigated contextual sources of retention among physical education teachers. Their results found that factors that negatively influenced their induction experiences included a lack of facilities and equipment in the start of their first year of teaching, the lack of prestige and respect for physical education, a particular subculture of students, and the teachers' desire for student acceptance and enthusiasm. Positive contextual sources of retention were being

able to team teach with someone from the same physical education program, having a new gym and equipment toward the end of their first teaching year, support from their principal, perceived control over content and teaching methods, and being proactive in soliciting mentor's assistance.

Contextual factors were investigated in this study through an examination of the teachers' perceptions of the role and effectiveness of their assigned mentor. In previous literature, these programs have been linked to improving teacher performance (Darling-Hammond, 2003), providing emotional support (Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon 2004), and helping to increase retention rates of early career teachers (Long et al. 2012).

The investigation of individual and contextual sources of teaching efficacy in physical education has been limited. Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop an initial understanding of the individual and contextual factors that influence beginning physical education teacher's self-perceptions regarding their teaching efficacy. The individual factors were represented by sources of teaching efficacy while contextual factors were examined though the perceived role and effectiveness of their mentor.

PARTICIPANTS and PROCEEDURES

The participants were a sample of 15 males (n=8) and females (n=7) early career physical education teachers who had completed between one and three years with primary responsibilities in k-12 physical education. Teachers were primarily from suburban school district in a Midwestern state that mandates daily physical education.

The 15 physical education teachers who agreed to participate in one-hour, audio-taped interview conducted in-person or by phone, were first asked to complete, a teacher efficacy scale to rate themselves on their perceptions of teaching efficacy.

An adapted version of the Gibson & Dembo (1984) Teacher Self Efficacy Scale (TES) was completed at the end of the teacher interview in order to attain a measure of teaching efficacy from which to help interpret the interview data. More specifically it was used as a form of triangulation to interpret the experiences expressed were reflective of the level of self-efficacy indicated on the quantities measure. According to Gibson and Dembo (1984), low efficacy scores are considered scores in the lowest scores ranging from 1-2. Medium or moderate scores were represented within the range of 3-4. High efficacy scores were reflective of a 5-6 range.

Each interview guide consisted of three sections. The first main section was intended as a warm-up section and included asking the participants general questions such as how they would describe themselves as a teacher, what changed from the beginning of this school year until the present, and how well prepared they were to take on their role as a teacher in their first year.

The second section of the interview contained questions that focused on the sources of perceived influence on teaching efficacy based on the work of Bandura (1986) and Gibson and Dembo (1984). Those sources include mastery experiences, modeling, and verbal encouragement. Participants' responses were followed by elaboration and clarification probes. The third section focused on the perceived role and effectiveness of the mentor. Questions focused on early careers' perceptions of the role and effectiveness of their mentor, specifically in relation to the development of their teaching efficacy.

Interview Analysis

An inductive content analysis served as the primary data analysis for the sources of self-efficacy during the early career experiences derived from the interview data (Patton, 1990). The first step in the content analysis was the verbatim interview transcription of the interviews. Following the transcription, each researcher worked independently to read the transcripts to identify meaning units or quotes from the full transcription. The quotes formed the basis of the lower and higher order themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Specifically, quotes of similar meaning were combined into lower order themes and given a label to represent their common meaning (higher order themes).

RESULTS

Teaching efficacy scores

The task of creating effective classrooms rests heavily on the individual teaching abilities and the teachers' perceptions of their abilities to be effective teachers (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). The first analysis sought to determine the level of teaching efficacy in order to frame the qualitative data. Results from the Gibson and Dembo Teacher Efficacy Scale revealed that the teachers in this study all had moderate teaching efficacy, with an average score of 4.17/10. Importantly, this homogeneity of teaching efficacy scores did not allow for comparison across levels of teaching efficacy. Therefore, the analysis proceeded to the qualitative analysis of the sources that influenced these beginning teachers' efficacy. The main analysis provided the sources of individual and contextual sources of teaching efficacy.

Sources of Individual Teaching Efficacy

Several sources influenced the teachers' daily teaching efficacy in both positive and negative ways and ultimately their overall integration and retention. The results revealed that the higher order theme labeled Sources of Teaching Efficacy included the lower order themes labeled:
- *Learn As You Go,*
- *Preferred Feedback, and*
- *Observing Master Teachers*

The Learn as you Go theme reflected teaching experiences in which the participants felt they had to learn their new role and responsibilities over time without assistance. They indicated that mastery experiences in student teaching or pre-service had helped build their efficacy for entering their teaching role, but shortly after beginning their career some teachers developed feelings of self-doubt while they tried to learn their new professional role and responsibilities. Several teachers (n=4) discussed how the level of confidence they developed during their college preparation did not transfer during their first year of teaching. Specifically, one teacher shared, "I came in confident that I could handle the classroom management but then I realized our peer teaching was just like role playing and in the real world students don't listen or respect you right away." In addition, the realty shock of teaching numerous students with a lack of necessary equipment as well as discipline problems provided clinical and student teaching experiences

could not have prepared them for the challenges to their teaching efficacy. Another teacher shared, "It was a real shock to see how little resources there was for buying equipment. I never took a class where we had to adapt our teaching using such little equipment." Additional comments in the *Learn as You Go* theme included,

> "No one could have prepared me for the students who were disrespectful to me and didn't want to listen. In student teaching my co-op had his kids under control…in my first year I had to figure out how to gain their respect as we went along."

According to Bandura (1991), individual efficacy is influenced both positively and negatively by verbal feedback. In the teaching setting this can take the form of encouragement or discouragement, criticism or praise. The participants in this study identified the theme *Preferred Feedback* as reflective of encouragement and discouragement from their mentors and principals, respectively. Mentor feedback provided a source that both positively and negatively influenced their teaching efficacy. Specifically, the mentors who provided specific encouragement about teaching strategies were discussed in terms of having a positive effect on teaching efficacy, whereas general encouragement without specific suggestions had no effect on their teaching efficacy.

Negative Verbal Feedback provided necessary information for those teachers that were willing to test or challenge themselves in relation to their teaching methods. Some of the teachers confidence grew from verbal encouragement, while others experienced negative feedback that created self-doubt. For example, Matt was convinced he was going to get fired in his first year. His teaching efficacy was obviously shaken by the negative feedback from his supervisor. He took a great amount of time telling his story:

> My mentor just rode me so hard because I forgot to turn in lesson plans…I wasn't expecting the kind of negative feedback because I didn't have the kind of support I needed either. The only positive feedback was from my coworkers, but my principal, oh my, he rode me so hard. Maybe it built my confidence just surviving his reprimands but at the time I felt like I didn't have my time management skills down. He just completely flipped a lid and, he rode me pretty hard for about two months. After a while, he calmed down but for the first four months of the school year, he was all over me all the time. I remember hearing that he started to doubt, you know, if I was the right person for the job, and I was definitely under a lot of stress last year. He was a very intimidating man, and I found out later that that's the way he is with younger teachers. He wants to try to have that intimidating factor so that you're always, always thinking about what's the right thing to do.

Other teachers talked about receiving negative feedback from parents. For example, June shared, "Taking negative feedback from parents that blame you for their child's grade…at first it shakes your confidence and then you learn to be a little bit stronger and stand your ground a little bit more and believe in your own decisions."

In terms of building a sense of efficacy needed to survive, several teachers (n=5) felt that their supervisor's opinion was a very important source of assistance. Having daily contact and getting feedback assisted the professional survival during these early years. Mitch shared how important that feedback was to him:

>When no one comes to see you or talk to you – you don't know how you're doing. A lot of my confidence came because I had daily contact with my principal. It was important getting the principal there to give me feedback and how he thought things were going, and it was a real confidence booster. He was a lot of my encouragement and support just because I got to work with him on a daily basis. It also helped that he believed in the importance of daily physical education.

According to some of the beginning teachers (n=5), the opportunities to be observed by the administration helped them to feel valued and supported. Encouragement from supervisors within the schools helped them survive their early years by providing support and a sense of encouragement. Bob assessed his situation like this:

>I think the supervisors or evaluators coming into the schools do a nice job in terms of encouragement. They all seemed to have good personalities and really [have a] love of teaching, and they're there to help you. Even teachers and the friends that I've had were all encouraging. I never really had a bad experience with a professor or with a supervisor or supervising teacher or evaluator.

The participants readily discussed the support they received from their administration in terms of observations and being open to new ideas. The teachers found this beneficial in assisting them to stay positive during their beginning years. Diane shared:

>My administration did do a good job encouraging me in terms of helping me through the challenges of getting kids motivated to enjoy PE. They did a lot of informal evaluation where they just basically were walking down the hallway and would peak in the door. They did a really good job with motivating me to remain positive. They were real good at supporting anything that I did because it's especially liked to see new and innovative teaching strategies that something they hadn't seen before.

These opportunities were not always provided through the mentor but sometimes with other administrators in the school, such as a department chair. One teacher, for example, had this experience:

>My department chair helped. He offered encouragement and opportunities to be on committees. He's the one who asked me to be on the committee, not my mentor. His encouragement and support helped me with those things we didn't learn in school about how to do service work.

In all, these participants were not seeking unconditional encouragement but rather looked to have corrective feedback in the attempt to improve their teaching. Three participants discussed corrective or negative feedback as a having an influence on teaching efficacy. One teacher had a fear of being fired in his first year due to what he described as his principal and mentor being "really hard" on him about lesson plans and other planning aspects of his teaching.

Contextual sources of teaching efficacy

From a contextual perspective, the teaching environment provided factors that influenced the development of efficacy in their beginning years of teaching. Specifically, the provision of a mentor was both a positive and negative source of efficacy. Further discussions revealed that the mentors who were not trained in physical education had more of a negative or neutral influence on their mentees while those mentors in the content area of physical education provided many more positive sources of influence on their teaching efficacy.

The lower order themes derived from the mentor effectiveness data included the following; *Mentors' Content Area and Training, Mentor's Availability, Mentor Support.* Not all mentors were helpful due to being trained in different content areas. Bob shared, "My mentor taught me a lot about paperwork, grades, attendance, etc., just not so much about different ways to teach in PE." Practical implications include the potential need to address the mentor selection based on content area. The teachers in this study shared some of their perceptions about qualities and behaviors of an effective mentor. They described an effective mentor as one who makes time for the beginning teacher, one who takes time to observe the beginning teacher in his/her classes, and gives him/her contingent and consistent feedback based on the observed instructional techniques. The mentees were aware of the effectiveness of the mentor's training. Those mentors who had little or no training as a mentor were discussed as having little or no impact on the teacher's efficacy. However, regardless of training the emotional support provided by a mentor was appreciated. Specifically, the teachers highly valued the informational and emotional support provided by the mentors in terms of feeling efficacious about the general and daily tasks of becoming a teacher. Teachers built efficacy when they had a mentor who spent time with them over their first and sometimes second year. Those who had limited connection to their mentor described feeling a lack of certainty especially in their first six months.

A few teachers (n=3) stated that having a relationship with reciprocal positive feedback between them and their mentor helped in terms of building confidence. This came by sharing new teaching ideas and gaining positive support for what the mentee was doing. Some mentors even tried some of the mentees' teaching strategies, which had a positive effect on their teaching efficacy. Nellie, as an example, shared, "My mentor was great; we encouraged each other, and she said that I helped her with new ideas and different ways to think about things." Diane shared how a mentor's feedback, although not evaluative in nature, provided a level of support and distinguished the difference between a formal and informal mentor for her:

> I pretty much wasn't evaluated. I've been affirmed by my mentor in other ways and more in regards to my character and my passions, as opposed to my teaching style. I think that has come from the informal mentor I had. He is good but also he does it more in noticing how we are different, or what gifts I have compared to his, or how we balance out in that because we are very different, but it works sometimes.

There were several reasons why some of these teachers did not take advantage of observing a master teacher. There was only one teacher, Mitch, who felt he did not need to observe another teacher because he was confident in his own current abilities compared to his colleagues. He shared,

> I don't want to sound overconfident, but I felt like half the time I was a better teacher than they were because I was more willing to do other things with and for

the kids, like bring out equipment and set up an obstacle course. The other
teachers weren't willing to do that so what would there be to observe?

In general, only some (n=5) of the beginning teachers received help from a mentor, in both teaching and their induction into school culture. When this relationship was viewed as a positive experience, it allowed the teachers to successfully navigate their way through their first years of teaching. Not all mentors were helpful due to different content areas and the lack of adequate time and training to provide effective mentoring. Bob shared, "My mentor taught me a lot about paperwork, grades, attendance, etc., just not so much about different ways to teach things." June, who was a second-year teacher, acknowledged that her first mentor did not provide much support for teaching, but instead helped her navigate the school environment and staff. She said, "I wanted more help with teaching than just how to do my grades. My mentor was nice but not for teaching PE or helpful for how to deal with problems specific to PE like working with little equipment or kids who didn't dress for class. That's why I felt sometimes I was better off without his help." The issue of being early in one's physical education career created different pedagogical issues for these teachers and therefore made them feel their experiences were different from many of their colleagues. Three of the new teachers had mentors who taught outside of physical education. The relevance of matching the *mentor's content area* with that of their protégé was noted by the majority of participants (n=9) and influenced their perceived effectiveness of their mentor. They felt there was a certain amount of uniqueness to their beginning experiences with a mentor in physical education as compared to other subject areas. They viewed physical education as a more unique content area than others within the school curriculum, and they felt strongly that a mentor from physical education should be assigned. In their opinion, having both the mentor and the early career in physical education provided an opportunity to gain pedagogical as well as general advice. One teacher, Mitch, described his perspective:

> Make sure there's always an open door policy and that the people they're mentoring know they can come to them whenever they have a question. Ideally, I think it would be really good if the mentors were in the same content area because then you have more in common, and there are more things for them to talk about. It is important for your mentor to be able to give you some feedback about your teaching.

Another teacher, Elaine, shared that non-physical education mentors may not view physical education as "teaching," therefore finding it difficult to provide good guidance. She stated,

> I would say that even if you're not in the same field of teaching, to not be, "Oh, I don't know anything about it so I'm going to push you off on this person." Or just because we're in PE, we still do a lot of teaching in like regular classrooms…when she [mentor] said she didn't know much about it [PE], she pushed herself away when she really could not relate to me.

Having a mentor outside of physical education proved challenging for some (n=6) because the mentor did not view physical education as "real teaching." Lola shared her experiences of having a mentor in another content area. When she began her first year, she had no mentor and when assigned one, he was a computer technology teacher. Lola described it as,

It was half way through the first semester before I ever had a mentor. Then when I did, he came to one of my classes, looked around, and said, "I don't really know much about this so I am going to have to find you someone else." That someone else never came, and I was left without a mentor once again.

June shared similar experiences with a mentor from a different content area. Her mentor came to her class and said, "Kids look good, room looks good, you are doing fine." The mentor never returned after this one visit. June felt that a mentor outside physical education might negatively impact his/her ability to be an effective mentor. Her advice was, "Be open-minded and willing, and not be so scared just because we're in a gym and not a classroom. I think she was intimidated by the PE environment."

In this study, the mentor content area was revealed as important to establishing a connection with the beginning teacher. Specifically, due to the uniqueness of the physical education setting and curriculum, if the mentor has not taught in physical education, it can be challenging for both parties. In turn, this occasionally resulted in the mentor dropping the mentee or leaving him/her to fend for themselves in terms of their socialization into the school. The results support the notion that the professional and social integration of early career teachers is an important strategy for addressing teacher satisfaction and retention issues (Long, McKenzie-Robblee, Schaefer, Steeves, Wnuk, Pinnegar, & Clandinin, 2012).

Conclusion

The examination of the induction experiences of beginning physical education teachers in this study focused on both individual and contextual variables. Previous research has provided evidence that the physical education context is unique in terms of isolation, marginalization, and overall perceived value within the greater school community. These unique factors interact to form the context of the beginning physical educator's induction experiences.

The examination of the self-perceptions of the beginning physical education teacher offered an opportunity to better understand the individual and contextual sources that influence teaching efficacy in one's early years of teaching. Specifically, the role and effectiveness of the mentor specific to the physical education context revealed that the physical education setting created unique sources of influence on these teachers early integration into their teaching environment. Some teachers built confidence with the assistance from mentors while most figured it out on their own. Further exploration and research are required to verify or refute the assumed effectiveness of mentoring programs.

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