PHYSICAL EDUCATION MAJORS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive study was to examine physical education teacher education (PETE) students' perceptions of their capstone experiences at a northeastern U.S university. We compared and contrasted 16-week (8-week elementary and 8-week secondary placement) student teachers' perceptions versus 32-week (two 16-week placements) interns' perceptions. A total of 19 ITs and 19 STs were asked to fill out anonymous surveys after each placement. Therefore, a total of 76 surveys were completed. Based on the results of these surveys, additional questions were developed and seven STs and six ITs were purposefully selected to be interviewed after completing both placements. Of the 76 surveys analyzed, 70 respondents claimed they were prepared for their culminating experiences. The survey results revealed that all of the respondents felt prepared to teach the particular grade level they were engaged in, once the experience was over. Survey responses were remarkably similar for both STs and ITs. Questions were asked pertaining to perceived successes and challenges, preparing lessons and resources used, content taught and perceptions about preparedness to teach the content, and perceptions of cooperating teachers. For each of the questions, the top three ranked answers were the same for both groups. In follow-up interviews, participants were asked specifically about the length of time of their placements and issues related to transitioning from one placement to the second one. Again, responses were very similar with participants generally stating that they were very happy with the length of their experiences.
Keywords: Student teaching, perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education scholars have examined issues related to teacher socialization for over 40 years (Templin & Richards, 2014). Beginning in the 1980s, research

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with this focus started to appear in literature related to physical education teacher education (PETE) programs (Richards, Templin, & Graber, 2014). According to Lawson (1986) occupational teacher socialization within physical education has three distinct phases. The first pertains to the recruitment of people who are interested in becoming physical education teachers. The second phase, known as professional socialization, comprises the experiences and coursework that PETE majors are exposed to, as they learn how to teach. While there is a third phase of teacher socialization (organizational), that examines issues pertinent to workplace conditions of physical educators, the central focus of this article will be on the culminating teaching experience (student teaching and the internship) that resides within professional socialization. This experience, often called the capstone experience has been proven over time to be the most meaningful course/experience that undergraduate pre-service teachers undertake as they move from their status as a student to that of a teacher (Chow & Fry, 1999) - and therefore worthy of further investigation.

When examining issues of socialization more broadly, the traditional view assumes "a functionalist perspective in which it is posited that individuals passively adopted the behaviors and attitudes valued by members within a particular social group" (Richards *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, researchers found that PETE recruits were likely to maintain the status quo (also known as a custodial approach) to teaching physical education in a manner similar to what they experienced as K-12 students (Templin & Schempp, 1989). Fortunately for those of us in teacher education, a more contemporary view of socialization is that it is more dialectical in nature. Schempp and Graber (1992) support the concept that those studying to teach are subject to change via interaction with socializing agents (such as PETE faculty and cooperating teachers) and what occurs is "a contest between societal expectations and the individual inclinations of prospective teachers" (p. 329). Indeed, researchers have found that PETE students' thoughts and behaviors can be strongly influenced and changed by their teacher education program (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Wright, 2001). A dialectical perspective of socialization embraces social constructivism (Richards *et al.*, 2014), which views learning as being predominately socially constructed, and therefore influenced via social interaction.

The purpose of collecting and analyzing the data for this study was to better understand the pre-service students' perceptions of their capstone experience. In particular, given that the participants of this study, STs and ITs, spent different lengths of time in schools during their experience (16 and 32 weeks respectively), were their perceptions similar or different? What were the subjects' perceptions of preparedness to teach going into and after the capstone experience? Were they comfortable assessing students, what resources helped

them to plan lessons, what content areas did they teach and were they comfortable teaching all those areas? Also, what were their perceived greatest successes and challenges and how did they feel about their cooperating teachers? While the capstone experience in physical education has been researched quite a bit over the past 35 years, we are not aware of a study that has compared and contrasted experiences varying so greatly, from 16 to 32 weeks. Results from this study will therefore add to the extensive literature on capstone experiences.

Furthermore, as Richards *et al*. (2014) have pointed out, a great deal of PETE socialization research occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. They have suggested a need, however, to revisit this area of research. "Research conducted several decades ago may no longer accurately represent the experiences and perspectives of PE . . . pre-service teachers (today)" (p. 129). Therefore, an additional purpose for this study was to get more up-to-date information about PETE students' perceptions of their professional preparation program.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

2.1 Local Context

Within the PETE program at our university, pre-service teachers have the opportunity to become certified to teach physical education via our four-year program. If they choose this route they are required to complete 16 weeks of student teaching (eight in an elementary placement and eight in a middle and/or secondary setting) as their capstone/culminating experience in their final semester. However, if majors have a GPA (Grade Point Average) of 3.0 or better (out of 4.0), they can choose to delay their capstone experience and apply and enroll in our Education Department's 5th year Master's of Art in Teaching program. All students graduate with a B.S. degree in Kinesiology, but students entering the 5th year program delay their certification until they complete the additional program requirements. This Master's degree requires an additional 20 hours of coursework, as well as a full year of student teaching, which is referred to as an internship. ITs teach one semester in an elementary setting and the second semester in a middle and/or secondary placement. Given this major difference in time spent during the capstone experience, as PETE faculty, we have often wondered if perceptions of this experience would be fairly similar or quite different for STs and ITs.

2.2 Participants
The initial part of this study provided pre-service teachers the opportunity to complete anonymous, open-ended, surveys at the termination of each of their two

placements (one at the elementary level and one at either a middle and/or secondary school). Participants totaled 19 STs and 19 ITs over a three-year period of time. Given that each pre-service teacher completed a survey after each placement, there were a total of 76 surveys collected and analyzed for this study.
The second part to the study involved open-ended interview questions with a convenience sample of seven STs and six ITs, after the completion of both of their placements. It was determined after analyzing the survey data, that there would be value in doing follow-up interviews with some of the same participants.

2.3 Procedures

The Institutional Review Board of our university granted permission for this study. Care was given to put the pre-service teachers at ease that their participation, or lack of participation, in the study would not interfere with their grade (pass/fail) for the capstone experience. The research was explained, consent forms were handed out, along with the first survey during the end of a 'seminar' period, and the researcher then left the room. Once completed, a pre-service student placed them in manila envelopes and returned them to the first author. It was explained to the participants that they were to fill out the surveys anonymously, and that the surveys would not be examined or analyzed until after the capstone experiences were finished and grades were submitted. The first two authors supervised the STs, while the third author supervised the ITs.

The follow-up interviews took place at the end of the third year of data collection, and within two weeks of participants completing their capstone experience. The sample was a convenience one (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), as there were seven STs and seven ITs that had just finished their experience, and all but one IT volunteered to be interviewed. It was explained to them that the first author would conduct the audio-recorded interviews privately in his office. He would then transcribe the interviews within a two-week period, leaving out names and school districts to ensure anonymity and then destroy the recordings. Participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy, know as member checking (Creswell, 1994) and make changes if appropriate. None were deemed necessary.

2.4 Data Collection

The survey was designed to provide answers to questions that were of interest to us as PETE educators. The questions were open-ended, as they allowed for answers that provided more insight than structured questions that would have had fixed responses (Parasuraman, 1991). There were eight questions (mentioned

earlier) and the participants were given as much time as they needed to complete the survey.

An initial analysis of the surveys determined that there was not a lot of difference in the responses of the STs and ITs. We therefore determined that we would like to investigate two areas that might show some difference - namely participants' perceptions about the length of their capstone experience, as well as thoughts pertaining to transitioning from one placement to another in the follow-up interviews. The actual time between placements varied as STs had a one-week break and ITs had 2-3 weeks over the winter break. We also wanted more in-depth answers to questions already asked in the surveys, so we repeated ones related to preparedness to teach, perceptions of cooperating teachers, successes and challenges and any overall thoughts regarding their experiences. The average length of an interview was 20 minutes.

2.5 Data Analysis

The open-ended survey responses, as well as the interview transcriptions were analyzed inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). This process allows general themes to emerge from the data through open coding. Data was further analyzed via axial coding, which resulted in subthemes/subcategories that emerged from the larger themes/categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An analysis of randomly selected surveys and transcripts by the second author, to compare to the first author's analysis, was undertaken to determine inter-rater reliability (Jackson, 2011). This resulted in 100% agreement on themes and more than 90% agreement on subthemes created.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results first discussed based on survey questions/answers and then followed by the interview questions/answers. Findings will also be reported collectively and then separated between STs and ITs. Surprisingly to us, the top three answers given for each of the questions that resulted in multiple answers were the same for STs and for ITs.

Did you feel prepared going into student teaching/interning? If so, what courses experiences helped the most? If not, what were your concerns?

Overall 72 of 76 (95%) participants said yes they felt prepared, and four had both yes and no comments. There was no variation between STs and ITs as three of each had mixed comments and 36 of each wrote that they felt prepared.

Of those not so sure regarding teaching PE, three were concerned with management and one with assessment. A representative response of the mixed feeling was, "Yes, practicum (early field) experiences were really helpful, by being in a school and working with an experienced teacher. No, I did not feel prepared regarding managing a big class, but that is almost impossible to practice ahead of time" (High school ST).

Of the 72 participants who felt prepared - what helped the most were: Practicum courses/early field experiences (57 responses); Methods/Pedagogy courses and/or peer teaching (26); Team Sports (18); Lifetime Sports (15); and Inclusion in PE (13) - each of these fairly evenly split between STs and ITs. A typical response was, "I was prepared for student teaching, both planning and teaching lessons - the practicum experiences were most helpful for me feeling prepared" (Elementary ST).

The lack of variation here between STs and ITs was not surprising to us, as all of the students took the same required courses leading up to their capstone experiences. The courses mentioned most often as helping pre-service teachers to prepare to teach - early field experiences, methods courses and activity courses are similar to findings of other researchers examining this issue (for a review, see Richards, et al., 2014).

What were your greatest challenges when teaching during your placement?

While there were 25 different responses to this question, the top five will be reported on. The most prevalent answer pertained to classroom management/behavior issues reported by 26 pre-service teachers - 14 STs and 12 ITs. The second largest response by nine participants was the challenge of learning so many names (5 STs and 4 ITs). Seven respondents struggled with high school students with "bad" attitudes (3 STs and 4 ITs) and six others commented that transitioning from one placement to the next one was difficult (3 STs and 3 ITs). Four pre-service teachers wrote that communicating with young children was their greatest challenge (2 STs and 2 ITs). An example of someone being challenged by management/behavior issues stated that:

> *My greatest challenge teaching at the elementary level was class management and student behavior. Class management is everything at the elementary level and if you do not have a routine I realized my classes would easily get out of control. This would lead to more behavioral problems because there was no structure. When I had to deal with behavioral problems at the beginning, I was unsure how to approach different situations. Toward the end, I knew which students I should ignore for minor issues, which students needed to be sat out to think about what*

they had done, and which students I simply needed to say their name once for them to behave (Elementary IT).

Findings of concerns related to management/behavior in this study are similar to previous studies examining STs' challenges (for a review, see Chow & Fry, 1999). The challenge of transitioning from one placement to the next was explored more in-depth in interviews and will be reported on later in this article.

What were your greatest successes?

A total of 27 (out of 72) participants commented that their greatest success was building strong relationships with students (and sometimes other school personnel).

"Building relationships with every student and the majority of the school staff. I never thought I could impact a school so much" (Middle school ST).

The top response for this question surprised us in the sense that this is not a prevalent finding in previous research in the U.S. A strong message that we deliver repeatedly to our students is the importance of building relationships when teaching, so it appears many of them have internalized this message. This is an example of how the participants' teacher education influenced how they thought about teaching. Chow and Fry (1999) in a study comparing pre-service teachers in Hong Kong and Australia, also found the pupil-centered concept of building relationships as fairly important to their subjects.

The next three most prevalent answers had to do with respondents' own teaching and included: Gained confidence and/or improved teaching (16 responses), did well managing classes (12), and was well prepared with good lesson plans (11). The fifth highest response pertained to improvement in student performance (6).

What content areas (activities) did you teach during this placement (IE: gymnastics, dance, etc.)? Did you feel comfortable teaching in these areas?

At the elementary level, a total of 53 different activities were mentioned by the 38 STs and ITs. All activities mentioned by at least three participants are listed below. There was very little variation between activities taught by STs and ITs at all levels, so the results, again will be combined together.

Table 1: Elementary level content areas taught

Respondents	Activities taught
15	Gymnastics
12	Throwing and catching; Floor hockey
11	Fitness
10	Basketball
8	Striking; Volleyball
7	Dance; Cooperative games
5	Jump rope; Parachute games; Soccer
4	Tag games; Bowling; Snowshoeing; Disability Sports
3	Tennis; Lacrosse

All the elementary respondents said that they felt comfortable teaching in all the areas they were required to for their placement. It appears that most of the activities taught would be considered part of a rather 'traditional' elementary PE program, with the exception perhaps of cooperative games, snowshoeing and disability sports such as goal ball and sit volleyball.

At the middle/secondary level, a total of 40 different activities were mentioned by the 38 STs and ITs - see the table below.

Table 2: Middle/secondary level content areas taught

Respondents	Activities Taught
18	Basketball
17	Fitness
14	Volleyball
12	Floor hockey
11	Soccer; Badminton
9	Project adventure/high ropes/climbing; Ultimate
8	Weight training
7	Cooperative games
6	Invasion games
5	Dance
4	Pickle ball; Flag football
3	Tennis; Speedball; Softball; Lacrosse

All of the respondents said that they were comfortable teaching in the areas they did for their middle/or secondary placement, except for five who felt uncomfortable teaching at least one activity. Three people mentioned dance, and one each mentioned fitness testing, and field hockey. The fact that three of the five participants who taught dance at the middle/secondary level felt uncomfortable doing so, suggests that we should address this in our teacher education program. Similar to the elementary content delivered, participant

reporting on activities taught suggests that the majority of PE programs in our area are fairly traditional, with an emphasis on team sports and fitness. Interestingly though, nine of the 38 pre-service teachers at this level reported teaching a unit on Project Adventure/high ropes/climbing and another seven mentioned cooperative games.

Are you comfortable assessing students at this level? Please explain and explain how you would assess if teaching full time at this level.

Overall, 67 of 76 (88%) participants said yes they were comfortable assessing students - but three had mixed feelings and six said no at the elementary level. Again, there was very little difference between STs (32) and ITs (35) who wrote that they felt comfortable assessing their students. The prevailing thought for those who felt uncomfortable assessing young children was: "I do not feel very comfortable at this level doing assessment. It is tough because skill levels vary so much at the younger ages" (Elementary school IT).

Not all students commented on how they would assess when teaching full time, but those that did include the following on Table 3.

Table 3: Type of assessment participants would use

Respondents	Assessment Types
19	Rubrics
10	Checklists
8	Assess on skill ability
5	Peer assessment; Quiz or test; Assess on effort
3	General observations; Assess on behavior

Again, because of the open-ended nature of the question, there were a variety of answers. The majority of responses focused on objective assessments of the authentic variety (SHAPE, 2013), as opposed to traditional assessments or subjective grading. We are encouraged by this finding, because we stress authentic assessments in our PETE courses, yet we know that there is still assessment going on in local schools that focuses on rather subjective attendance/participation criteria. This again, is an example of how the participants have been influenced by their teacher education program.

When planning lessons, what resources did you typically use to help you?

Participants often mentioned more than one source. Once again, STs and ITs gave similar answers, as the top four choices were the same for both groups (see Table 4).

Table 4: Planning resources used

Respondents	Resource
53	The internet
35	Cooperating teacher
28	Textbooks
27	Lesson plan written for a previous course
7	NASPE's grade level outcomes; Peers
4	Own personal experience

Note: National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE).

Respondents often gave more than one response to this question, such as the following statement. "The resources I used were websites like PE Central and my PE books. I also used my CT for any additional help I might have needed" (Elementary IT). It is clearly a sign of the times that the resource mentioned the most was the internet. We do not spend a lot of time in our program talking about web resources, but it is something that we will consider more strongly, given these results.

Were you happy with your cooperating teacher? Please explain.

Overall, 69 of 76 (91%) said yes, with four having mixed feelings and three saying no (exclusively at the secondary level). Continuing a trend, STs who stated they were happy with their cooperating teacher (34), was almost identical to the ITs' positive responses (35).

The yes responses were typically very enthusiastic, such as this response:
110% - She was fantastic. She challenged me by letting me try out things on my own. We then would reflect and collaborate on ways to improve my lesson. We reflected constantly on every lesson (even during the class). She had the perfect amount of 'you can figure it out yourself ' and 'let's work together' (Middle school IT).

An example of a mixed response was:
Yes/No – both. I started off at times not knowing where I stood with him, not even knowing if he liked me. But now it is awesome and I have really enjoyed working with and learning from him. I don't think you really know who your CT is until you have spent months with them (Elementary IT).

An example of a no response was:

> *I was not very happy with my CT. I did not receive much feedback or evaluation (aside from the written 5th and 8th week ones). He did not really care about my lesson plans and he would overtake classes that I was teaching sometimes (High school ST).*

We were encouraged to read that the pre-service students overwhelming felt positive about this relationship. During follow-up interviews, when asked about the cooperating teacher relationship, all 13 interviewees spoke very highly of it. An over-riding theme was that,

> *My CT was so supportive and helpful. He always asked me how I thought my lesson went, which was great. It gave me a chance to reflect and talk first and then later on he would give me his thoughts. He was awesome – so experienced, yet open to my ideas too (Middle school ST).*

Follow-up interviews

Reporting on the interview questions, the focus will be on two new questions that were not asked on the survey.

How do you feel about the length of time you had for each placement – too little, too much or just right? Please explain.

All of the six ITs stated that they felt like 16 weeks for each placement was just right, with the exception of one who stated that their HS placement was just right, but the elementary placement got a bit repetitive at the end, so he would have preferred it to be a little shorter. The overall theme of the length was that the more time you spend in a placement, the more you learn. So, out of 12 placements (six ITs with two each), the feeling was that 11 of them were just right as far as time went. This is a very strong endorsement for 16 weeks for each IT placement, and obviously much more time than a typical student teaching experience.

For the STs, six of the seven felt that eight weeks for each placement was good/just enough/great/perfect. The overall theme was that "there was enough time to know the students pretty well and get into a groove teaching the kids and working with your CT." Two did, however, lament the fact that they saw the students at the elementary level only once a week, so "it would have been nice to spend a bit more time with them - but eight weeks was enough time for me to feel comfortable teaching at this level." The one dissenting voice regarding time stated that: "At first it sounded like eight weeks would be too long, but then I realized it's too short. I would have liked a semester of each. I just got settled into a placement and was feeling comfortable and then bam, it was over!" From this

small sample size, it is a fairly strong endorsement for 16 weeks (two eight-week placements) for student teaching.

This is an interesting set of results to consider. For the most part, even though ITs spent twice as much time in their placements as STs, the vast majority of participants were very happy with the amount of time for their capstone experience. There is one difference in the expectation of how soon pre-service teachers should be responsible for their own (autonomous) teaching, however. The belief for ITs is that they have so much time in a placement that they can be eased into teaching on their own, whereas for STs, the expectation is that they will be teaching on their own by the end of the first week of their placement. Of course this can vary, as each ST/IT, cooperating teacher and school environment is different.

Did you have any issues transitioning from one placement to the other, or was it smooth and easy? Please explain. (This question was very open-ended on purpose.) As a follow-up to this question, participants were also asked – **Do you think it is easier going from elementary to secondary or vice versa?**

All of the ITs stated that it was a bit of a challenge at first, going to their new placement, as the students, behavior, management, etc., were all different. As one IT stated, "Working at the high school was a challenge at first as you get some students who just check out but you learn to deal with them. But then, I went to the elementary school and from day one it was like I was famous or something, all the kids loved me and wanted to be active. Of course it was a challenge at first to try and harness all that enthusiasm." So this IT liked going from high school to elementary school. It was interesting because all of the ITs liked the transition/progression that they experienced. So for example, an IT who started at the elementary level first, preferred that and those who started at the secondary first preferred that. None of the ITs spoke about the time in-between placements but upon reflection, it was realized that they all had the winter/Christmas break built in there of two weeks).

Similar to the ITs, the STs felt that the transition was a bit of a challenge at first, given the differences between elementary school students and older students. Two of the seven STs mentioned specifically that they were upset at leaving the first placement. "I really loved my first placement so I hated the idea that I had to move on. Thank god we had a week off in-between. That gave me the time to process the whole experience and then get ready to start it all over again." The first five STs mentioned the week off without it being brought up. It was then brought up to the last two interviewees and all seven were very clear that

the week off between the first and second placement was really important to them, as a way to ease the transition from the first to the second placement.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Given the uniqueness of our program options for the capstone experience, a total of 16 versus 32 weeks, we wanted to get our pre-service students' perceptions of their experiences. We were not surprised to see a strong similarity between STs and ITs perceptions of their readiness to teach in their capstone experiences, given their similar preparatory course work and experiences. We were, however, a little surprised to see how similar their perceptions were pertaining to feelings of success and challenge, preparedness to assess students, feeling about CTs, etc. Answers to every question on the surveys resulted in the same top three rankings of responses for both STs and CTs. Even the follow-up, in-depth interviews with both groups resulted in participants similarly being happy with the length of their experiences and their perceptions of transitioning from one placement to the other. This suggests to us, that either placement length meets the needs of our pre-service teachers, at least from their perspective. These results will allow us, as PETE faculty, to examine more closely our perceptions of how we prepare our students to teach and these capstone experiences as well. Future research could look more closely at findings such as the participants' responses that their greatest success in teaching pertained to quality relationships with students. Why do they feel this way, and what does it mean for the teaching/learning process – both within our courses and for STs and ITs during their capstone experiences. Also, given that participants used the internet more than any other resource when planning lessons, what ramifications does this have for how we are preparing our students to teach? Finally, we have CTs that have worked with both STs and ITs. It would be interesting to determine what their perceptions are when comparing and contrasting the student teaching and the internship experiences.

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