

## “THEY KICKED ME OUT OF MY GYM” AND OTHER ISSUES PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS EXPERIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

*Physical educators know the importance of physical education. Unfortunately, many administrators, faculty, and staff unknowingly downgrade the status and importance of physical education and physical education teachers. This downgrade of relevance may occur in many forms and more often than it should. Self-efficacy of an individual governs the outcomes through experiences. The purpose of this study was to explore issues that seven veteran physical education teachers, each having over 20 years of teaching experience in the field, have experienced throughout their career. Interviews were the main source of data collection. Other means of data collection included self-checks of transcribed interviews and follow-up emails. The participants indicated the main issues were teaching spaces, decision-making processes, and support. Although participants had negative experiences, they managed to persist in the field due to high self-efficacy.*

**Keywords:** Physical education teachers, teaching issues, dilemmas.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Physical education teachers often feel unimportant, or perceive their position to be of a lower status (Makela, Hirvensalo, & Whipp, 2014) when compared to other teachers in public education. According to Whipp, Tan, and Yeo (2007), student learning and the physical education teacher’s working conditions are intertwined, thus creating a cycle; if conditions are good, student learner is good. Issues and problems in the teaching world are not new and seem to be static, with much of the focus on novice teachers. Veteran teachers encounter issues as well. This study examines the issues and problems of seven veteran physical education teachers, each having over 20 years of physical education teaching experience. First, a review of the literature to examine issues and problems faced by a plethora of teaching fields will be presented, followed by an overview of the methodology, findings, and a discussion of the findings.

Research on issues that teachers may face as they enter the field are multifaceted and in abundance, most focusing on retention and beginning teachers (Gore & Bowie, 2015; Ingersoll, 2003). With the focus and the accumulation of research fixated on beginning teachers, the issues and problems never change and are always present. When more problems are experienced by novice teachers, the more likely they will not be retained (Veenam, 1984). These issues and problems can be divided into two main categories: pedagogical responsibilities and relational. Pedagogical responsibilities include classroom management, discipline, lesson planning, differentiation, policies and procedures, and facilities (Gordon, 2016; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; van Hover & Yeager, 2004; Veenam, 1984).

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Relational issues and problems include dealing with parents, colleagues, and principals and administrators (Gordon & Lowrey, 2016; Veenam, 1984)

Pedagogical responsibilities. Pedagogical responsibilities encompass many "duty" components, most common being discipline and classroom management (Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005). Classroom management is essential in gaining knowledge and respect for novice teachers from their peers as well as students (Schempp, Sparks, & Templin, 1993). Classroom management had a significant impact on how novice teachers were viewed in discipline management and overall control of students (Schempp, Sparks, & Templin, 1993). Being a competent classroom manager reflects how effective novice teachers teach (Tsangaridou & Polemitou, 2015). Of course, it is difficult to implement real classroom situations into teacher preparation programs, one reason many novice teachers find classroom management difficult when they acquire their classroom (Chesley & Jordan, 2012). Real classroom situations for physical education teachers are more difficult due to the unpredictability and safety concerns when classes are large (Spittle, Kremer, & Sullivan, 2015) when compared to general education teachers.

In physical education, novice teachers struggle with the same issues as novice general education teachers. Over time there is a shift from a self-centered view to a pupil centered one (Fuller, 1969). Novice teachers with a self-centered view tend to focus more on the areas of classroom management and discipline (Gordon, 2016), although perceived discipline problems are lower in physical education classes than general education classes (Frech & Reichwein, 1977). Once a perceived belief of maintaining a managed classroom has been established, the novice teacher transitions into a pupil-centered view, concentrating on areas of content knowledge and student success (Gordon, 2016).

With the shift in the early career stage to concerns about content knowledge and student success; issues and problems in the areas of lesson planning and differentiation can occur. Lesson planning, curriculum design, and differentiation for special education students were found to be concerns of novice agriculture teachers (Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005). Veenam (1984) found that novice teachers often had difficulty organizing class activities, "devising schemes of work" (p.158), and accommodations for individual differences. The preparation of the novice physical education teacher focuses more on lesson planning than any other pedagogical area (Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1988). Unfortunately, novice physical education teachers still feel underprepared in lesson planning (Banville & Rikard, 2009; Gordon, 2016). Even during the process of learning to differentiate instruction, differentiation does not often occur (Whipp, Taggart, & Jackson, 2014). Veteran physical education teachers do not have the same struggles with lesson planning and differentiation. Struggles faced by experienced physical education teachers are the perceptions of being stuck in routines and not being afforded the opportunity to gain new knowledge to provide a variance in lesson planning and differentiation (Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007).

Another area that may not be truly reflected in teacher preparation program is that of policies and procedures, which leads to a perception of being omitted in the decision-making process. Many teachers lack the knowledge and resources to administratively manage policies and procedures such as federal and state policies regarding students in the areas of standardized testing and special populations (Imig & Imig, 2006; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005). Once in the classroom, many novice teachers may feel restricted and unable to initiate academic freedoms due to policies and procedures. Moreover, a lack of academic freedom is not uncommon of the veteran teacher (Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007).

Templin (1989) found that physical education teachers perceived having less autonomy and bogged down in administrative duties due to policies and procedures, and if the opportunity arose to have input, physical educators are often overlooked (Whipp, Tan & Yeo, 2007). With physical education teachers perceiving to have lower status and unimportant (Makela, Hirvensalo, & Whipp, 2014), many may not take the initiative to become involved

in the decision-making processes. A perception of having a low status does not equate to being seen as unimportant or worthy (Anicich, Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2015), and all teachers must seize the opportunity to be heard.

Unfortunately, there are times when teachers must work within the boundaries of what they have as far as facilities. Teachers may be categorized as "floaters," these are teachers that do not have their classroom but share classes with those teachers that have their rooms. Novice history teachers experiencing floating may be left to their accord and struggle with the perception of being ostracized (Hoover & Yeager, 2004). In general, most physical education teachers do not have to float from classroom to classroom, unless they are teaching. No doubt the gymnasium is larger than the normal classroom and presents different problems such as safety concerns, (e.g., broken bones and bloody noses from activities), transitions from the locker room to activities (Gordon, 2016). The physical education teacher is faced with safety and transitions of students on their own or with limited engagement with colleagues. Physical education teachers may experience physical isolation from being in the "classroom," the gymnasium, with no interaction with colleagues (Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007).

Relational issues. Establishing relationships is a crucial component for growth and development for all teachers (Dembo & Gibson, 1985). Novice agriculture teachers ranked working with other teachers, administration, and parents as an issue that would have difficulty in handling (Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005). As with any subject outside the realm of general education, not all stakeholders view those subjects with the same levels of value. One reason relationships are problems between physical education teachers, teachers in other areas, and administrations are due to the perception that physical education is a "break from more educationally worthwhile mental pursuits" (Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007, p. 488).

Schempp, Sparks, and Templin (1993) found that administrators, teachers, and students were responsible for creating an atmosphere of acceptance and normalcy with novice physical education teachers, but administrators had the most influence. While novice physical education teachers dislike the absence of administration, some prefer autonomy from supervision. Carson, Richards, Hemphill, and Templin (2016) found that veteran physical education teachers preferred administration stay "out of their teaching space" (p. 287).

While a difference may exist between novice and veteran physical education teachers regarding principal support, collectively, physical education teachers can agree on the importance of parental involvement. Pomerantz and Monti (2015) found that parental involvement in their child's school generates positive results in performance. Unfortunately, this may not be the case in physical education. Parents may have a lack of knowledge of activities and events occurring in their child's physical education class because of a disconnect in communication from the parent reaching out to the physical education teacher (Sheehy, 2006). Sheehy (2006) describes that this disconnect may be derived from the parent's bad memories of the experiences in physical education they encountered, thus the hesitancy to reach out and connect. Parental involvement opens the lines of communication and informs the parent of the expectations of the child in physical education (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010).

Relationship development with colleagues, as reported in research, can be a positive or negative experience for novice and veteran teachers. Van Hoover and Yeager (2004) indicated that novice history teachers had no or little support or were met with hostility from colleagues in the history department. Fine arts teachers, in general, may experience alienation from colleagues due to the specialization of the field (Scheib, 2006). Physical education teacher's interaction with colleagues has been mixed in research. Novice physical education teachers have reported most colleagues outside of physical education are supportive, but an encounter with one that looks down on the profession is likely (Gordon, 2016). With veteran physical education teachers, colleagues outside of the field may not be supportive of physical education teachers because "it might shine the light on others' achievements as the expense

of their ego” (Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007). Carson et al. (2016) reported that veteran physical education teachers have a good rapport with other physical education teachers.

Much of the research presently available is fixated on novice teachers and the recurring issues experienced with each new batch. Nelson and Thompson’s (1963) findings are still reflected in research regarding issues with novice teachers. Gordon’s (2016) research specifically targeted novice physical education teacher’s issues and problems. What about the issues and problems veteran physical education teachers face? Currently, little information exists concerning the issues and problems faced by veteran physical education teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore issues that seven veteran physical education teachers have encountered during their 20 plus years of teaching physical education.

Bandura’s (1977) model of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1994), is one’s belief in “their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (para. 1). Self-efficacy is an individual’s belief in the capabilities in performing tasks to reach goals and mastery in one profession (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy, as hypothesized by Bandura (1977), is a cognitive process which can be shaped by external influences, or performance-based experiences. These external influences could be a combination of the environment, personal, and behaviors. Since teachers gain more knowledge as they persist in the field, the ability to handle issues and problems become easier (Kurtz, 2015). Bandura (1977) found that performance-based experiences produce stronger results in efficacy than vicarious experiences. Performance-based experiences are crucial to the novice teacher. The type of experiences, either positive or negative, has an impact on a novice teacher surviving or thriving as well as being retained or leaving the field of teaching. It is understood that self-efficacy varies from person to person. Individuals with high self-efficacy will have more confidence and will be willing to overcome obstacles to succeed whereas an individual with low self-efficacy will not put forth the effort (Kushwaha & Dhawan, 2014).

## 2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

### 2.1 Design

A qualitative research design was implemented to explore the issues experienced by the participants in the study. A qualitative approach was selected because it provides for a more in-depth process, highlighting experiences from the participants who may not otherwise have a voice, or whose viewpoints are rarely echoed (Sofaer, 1999).

### 2.2 Participants

According to Merriam (2009), when using interviews as a means of data collection, one must determine the participants. Participants for this study were randomly selected from a purposively sampled group that had completed a survey. Siegle (2002) defines purposive sampling as the process of selecting a specific group because of certain characteristics that the researcher wants to capture. According to Patton (1990), purposive sampling allows the researcher to focus on the deep and rich information that participants can provide.

**Table 1: Summary of Participants**

<i>Name</i>	<i>Years Taught</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Teaching Status</i>
Bill	24	Master’s Degree	47	Active
Jane	41	Master’s Degree	62	Active
Joann	44	Two Master’s Degrees	73	Retired
Larry	34	Master’s Degree	64	Retired
Mary	31	Master’s Degree	55	Active
Sue	41	Ph.D.	66	Active
Tracy	23	Master’s Degree	46	Active



Participants included seven physical education teachers (four female and three male), each having over 20 years of teaching experience in physical education (Table 1). All participants have advanced degrees; six participants have a master's degree (three female and three male), and one has a Ph.D. (female). The years of teaching experience ranged from 23 years to 44 years ( $M = 28.14$ ).

### **2.3 Data Collection**

Data collection included interviews and emails. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour in length. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured and guided by questions concerning experiences, the work environment, and the reason for persisting in the field of physical education. The semi-structured interview process also allowed for the researcher to guide the discussion upon hearing information that needed more detail. Email communication remained open to clarify answers and for questions that arose during the data analysis process providing quick responses (Selwyn & Robson, 1998).

### **2.4 Data Analysis**

The use of open coding and the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) was used to analyze data. Merriam (2009) describes open coding as "being open to anything possible" (p. 178), while the constant comparative method uses the information from open coding to compare all the data to "determine similarities and differences" (p.30). NVivo was used to code data into categories based on the similarities and differences of the information gained through the transcription of the interviews. The transcribed interviews were emailed to the participants to facilitate member-checks. Member checks were employed to ensure interpretation adequately represented the participant's answers, thoughts, and feelings (Merriam, 2009).

Trustworthiness was established during the data analysis process through the use of member checks and the researcher's position or reflexivity (Merriam, 2009). Reflexivity "is the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183). The researcher is an instrument in the research process and must be accountable for "biases, disposition, and assumptions" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219).

## **3. RESULTS**

The seven veteran physical education teacher's main issues during the 20 plus years of teaching physical education included concerns about teaching spaces, decision-making processes, and support problems. Besides the mentioned issues and concerns with teaching in physical education, the participants love their jobs and feel they were meant to be a teacher.

### **Teaching Spaces**

**Where will I teach class?** The participants have experienced being removed from their teaching space due to the need for a larger space. Most teaching spaces for physical education teachers are a gymnasium or a cafetorium. The loss of space happens often, and most physical education teachers would probably agree that it happens too often. If it was not a workshop, it was for other reasons such as picture day or preparing for a middle school dance. "Someone kicked me out of my gym today for a workshop that they're doing so I had to cancel one of my classes in the afternoon." Bill was in this situation. Jane also has to work around this, "If there is something going on in the gym that I can avoid anybody missing their PE time I try to make sure to do that." Fortunately, this doesn't happen often, but it does happen.

**Facility conditions.** Unlike regular education classrooms, physical education teachers must teach in shared spaces or in gymnasiums that are not adequate to support students or safe for student activity. Jane had to conduct physical education classes during lunch time in a cafetorium, a combined cafeteria/gymnasium. Jane said, "We have a pretty good amount of space to work in. They've (students) learned how to watch out for tables, people carrying trays, things like that."

Larry, during his interview, was told he would have wooden floors in the gymnasium. When he arrived, "There had been termites in it, and it created a 10-foot hole, all they did was put cones around it." Once Larry brought up liability issues, the floor was repaired quickly. Before that incident, Larry described the stand-alone buildings he taught physical education in with "no bathrooms, no water facilities, and no air conditioning."

**Too many kids in the gymnasium.** The physical education teachers that participated in this study had a high number of students in their physical education classes. Safety is a concern when there are many people in a small space that are moving. Mary had 106 students assigned to her and two other physical education teachers. Mary said, "The administration's response was, 'Well you have three teachers.' That's crowd control! You've got adolescents, 106 of them; you are putting them in a room, and you want teaching to be done?" Safety is a concern when there are that many people in a small space.

### **Decision Making**

Participants reported times when they did not feel valued in the decision-making process that directly affected them. Bill has a great co-teacher, but Bill was not invited to the interview. "The assistant principal thought they had invited me and the principal thought they invited me. They had him (co-teacher) there and did the interview without me." Tracy is frustrated because he feels he has no influence on plans for a new facility. Tracy has been advocating for a rock wall because it is in the curriculum. Unfortunately, he feels it will not come to fruition. Tracy stated, "That's frustrating to sit in there from the beginning and dream and then have everything just get back to where you don't get anything."

Jane never meets with other physical education teachers. Jane said, "The last two years we haven't had any meetings." Jane described that during the year, many teachers had been out completing workshops and professional development. Unfortunately, she has not received any information. "I'm not involved in receiving those emails, getting the information. I'm not sure why they haven't done it. You hope your teachers are doing some kind of updated training."

### **Support Problems**

Lack of consistent support can occur in many forms and include many different people. Support problems reported by the participants included inconsistent evaluations and a lack of knowledge about physical education by the administration and other teachers. One area in which Joann felt like she was not supported was in district evaluation procedures for teachers. Joann had no one to evaluate her even though an individual was assigned. Bill has inconsistent evaluators, "One might be a tough grader," or an easier grader. As Bill exclaimed, "Yet when it comes to layoffs and who keeps their jobs, they're looked at equally."

A lack of knowledge about the educational requirements for physical education by administration and colleagues can occur and cause the perception of a lack of support. To Tracy, the reason for the lack of consistent support from the administration was due to a lack of knowledge of "what it's (physical education) supposed to look like." Larry had encountered hostility from a co-worker about being a physical education teacher that he perceived as displaying a lack of knowledge about physical education. Larry said, "I had a second-grade teacher actually ask me if I had to go to college to do this. I didn't always have the greatest faculty relationships." Larry explained that his display of content knowledge in physical education did win him support from colleagues even though they may not have understood the complexities of his job.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the issues and problems of seven veteran physical education teachers, each having over 20 years of physical education teaching experience while using Bandura's self-efficacy model as a guide. The themes that formed after data

analysis were the issues and concerns of teaching spaces, decision making, and support problems. Decision-making opportunities and support from administration and colleagues have been identified as areas of concerns for novice and veteran PE teachers (Carson, Hemphill, Richards, & Templin, 2016; Mouloud, Bougherra, & Samir, 2016; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007). Whipp, Tan, and Yeo (2007) found that physical education teachers often feel they have no opportunity in the decision-making process due to a top-down structure. Mouloud, Bougherra, and Samir (2016) suggest engaging physical education teachers in the decision-making process while creating environments for success. A lack of decision making may cause friction in the support structure between the physical education, administration, and colleagues. As Whipp, Tan, & Yeo (2007) found physical education teachers perceive a "limited professional respect" (p. 496).

Teaching space was an area of concern for the participants in this study. Carson et al. (2016) stated that large class sizes and the gymnasium being used for other purposes during physical education class time was a concern, as it was for the participants in this study. While all teachers' experience certain difficult issues, particular issues seem to occur to physical education teachers, for example, being removed from the "classroom" (Carson et al., 2016). Being removed from one's teaching space may cause a sense of frustration and a perception of low status (Carson et al., 2016). Many physical education teachers lose class time due to unnecessary issues that may arise, or unideal situations; this can lead to poor teaching because working conditions are not consistent, which can lead to burn out and the perception of being unimportant (Mouloud, Bougherra, & Samir, 2016; Templin, 1989; Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007). Although it is understood the gymnasium may provide adequate space for certain events (e.g., picture day), what is not understood is the class time lost in physical education due to these events. Physical education teachers deal with removal from their teaching space and must be flexible on short notice. Bill stated he had to cancel one of his classes because of an event that used the gymnasium. More research should be conducted on how often the loss of teaching occurs due to the use of the gymnasium. In conjunction with being removed from a teaching space, as in Mary's case, if the space for 106 students is no longer available, where does one take these students to conduct class? Similar to the Carson et al. (2016) findings, the participants had concerns with large classes with a focus on safety for their students.

Veteran teacher concerns are different from novice teacher concerns. The participants in this study did not mention concerns such as classroom management, preparation times, lesson plans, and discipline. As Bandura's (1994) self-efficacy theory states, when one becomes more experienced through continual exposure, one becomes more confident. Even though the veteran physical education teachers did encounter issues, and most throughout their career, they managed to persist. Each participant demonstrated a high self-efficacy by persisting and overcoming barriers. The key to veteran physical education teacher's resilience may be flexibility and "stick-to-it-ive-ness," qualities that should be experienced and fostered with novice physical education teachers in teacher preparation programs and induction programs once employed within an educational structure. Thus, returning to Bandura's (1977) hypothesis that states that performance-based experiences assists in forming cognitive processes based on one's environment, personal, and behavioral experiences and may help with retention. For some teachers, the cognitive process formed from negative experiences may be to leave the teaching altogether. Unfortunately, the attrition rate for all novice teachers remains a concern and further research into resilience and teacher self-efficacy should be continued (Hughes, 2012; Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012).

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy model applies to the students in physical education classes as well. The students learn that physical education is not that important when their classroom has been confiscated for other uses, shared, or not in quality condition. Embedding these experiences into students is in direct conflict with the health and wellness standards

developed by The Association for Middle Level Education (formerly National Middle School Association) (NMSA, 2010). When teaching spaces are not available, it is unlikely students will "develop and maintain healthy minds and bodies" (NMSA, 2010).

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The number of participants and the years of experience of the participants are limitations to the study. To truly assess the depth and breadth of issues in physical education, a wider participant pool should be gathered to assemble a bigger picture of the issues faced by physical education teachers. It would also be in the best interest for future studies to include physical education teachers in different career stages. The participants in this study were all late career stage physical education teachers. Examining the issues and concerns of physical education teachers at different career stages may be beneficial in retention research. Of course, all the participants experienced positive and negative occurrences throughout their years of teaching. The negatives were the only areas analyzed for this study.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Although the participants voiced major concerns about some of the issues and experiences they have been through, each one had positive things to say about their schools. Bill, even though he did not attend the interview, "loves" his co-teacher. Jane has great support from "other teachers and administrators," so does Sue. Joann loves "fighting" for the cause of physical education. Larry stated that one principal he worked with was "very involved" and raised funds to help update flooring in the gymnasium. Mary enjoys educating individuals about physical education. Moreover, Tracy has a great relationship with his interdisciplinary co-teachers and principal. The other thing all these teachers have in common, they love what they do, they love physical education, and above all, they love their students.

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