

PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF SUPPORT MECHANISMS WITHIN CONTEMPORARY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON TEACHING PRACTICES



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INTRODUCTION

Improvements to student learning through the use of collaborative PD have begun to be identified in physical education (Hunuk, Ince, & Tannehill, 2012). Therefore, examining the social and situated nature of how teachers are supported may allow for an in depth view of how this paradigm impacts teaching practice (Fosnot, 2005). Furthermore, supportive relationships are foundational to producing positive outcomes in the development of teachers (Deglau & O'Sullivan, 2006; Parker et al., 2012). Despite these initial findings, a gap remains as to how support impacts the practice of physical education teachers.

PURPOSE

To explore the role of support mechanisms within professional learning communities (PLCs).

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do physical education teachers view support mechanisms within a PLC as impacting their teaching practice?

METHODS

Participants

34 elementary physical education teachers (14 female; 20 male; $N = 34$) representing three active PLCs in the inter-mountain west United States.

Data Sources

- field notes
- focus group interviews
- informal conversational interviews
- follow-up interviews
- artifacts

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007). Trustworthiness was established through: a) triangulation, b) member checks, c) researcher position, d) peer review, and e) an audit trail.

RESULTS: LEVEL 1 ENHANCED CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Support between teachers allowed for the development of contextually meaningful guides and openness in implementing new instructional practices.

RESULTS: LEVEL 2 TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

Support within the PLCs lead to a sense of empowerment that was displayed through increased risk taking and confidence from working with others and sharing the same interests and struggles.

Enhanced Curriculum

The curriculum guides were an important by-product of the PLCs as they supported teachers by offering structure for the teachers' practice when teaching in isolation or in a variety of settings.

"Take this little Bible. I mean I went to another country and taught, but even going to Costa Rica I felt so comfortable and I am like, 'ok I will go to this classroom and I don't speak Spanish.'" (FG B)

"[When I was a young teacher], I so wish somebody would have handed me a curriculum guide and said whatever you need just call me." (FG B)

Risk Taking

Support from the PLCs provided teachers with a heightened aptitude to take risks and try out new ideas to challenge each other's teaching.

"This is where I compare myself to others to see what they are doing to see if I am on the right track." (FG A)

"I know someone [another colleague] in this district encouraged us to go to national board [an independent, nonprofit organization formed to advance the quality of teaching by developing professional standards] so if these people pass we will have the largest nationally board certified people in the state as a district." (FG C)

Instruction

Through supportive environments teachers were allowed to implement new ideas as a result of ideas shared at meetings and observation of colleagues into their own classes.

"You can just bring [ideas] and [say] like 'hey guys I am doing a gymnastics unit and I am teaching this and somebody will have it you know what I mean so that is always beneficial.'" (FG C)

"I went to see Robert just to see how he runs his class. I just went and watched during my planning time. Things like that, if you get to know people you feel comfortable emailing all the time you know." (FG B)

Increased Confidence

Increased confidence occurred through feeling of competence from possessing content knowledge and effective teaching strategies.

"I just feel much more confident and sure of what I am doing and what I am doing is right for kids." (FG B)

"It's good too because I feel like we are really good at celebrating each other. Hey you know he did this, this person did this, you know great job keep it up, you know that's always encouraging to hear too and keeps [us] motivated." (FG C)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The impact of support on teaching practice occurred on two levels: tangible and intangible. The tangible aspects referred to visible artifacts (e.g., curriculum guides) and observable implementation of evidence-based instructional practices. The intangible aspects referred to empowerment which was experienced by individual teachers yet more difficult to observe. A strong relationship occurred between enhanced curriculum and instruction and teacher empowerment. When support was present the teachers identified their personal needs and were empowered to take control of their own learning and implement changes to their teaching practice. Although the two types of support were reported as independent of each other, each might have a reciprocal influence for teachers to have a real impact on students. Therefore, educational policy should be developed to provide for teachers to have authority and control of their own learning.

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