

ULRR

High school physical education teachers and their world of work: scope and direction of the project

Item Type	Article
Authors	O'Sullivan, Mary
Citation	Journal of Teaching in Physical Education;13, pp. 324-332
Publisher	Human Kinetics Publishers Inc.
Download date	2026-06-14 20:25:39
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/1.0/
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/10344/3178

High School Physical Education Teachers and Their World of Work: Scope and Direction of the Project

Mary O'Sullivan
Ohio State University

There is a paucity of literature on the specific issues of high school physical education and how those who do the job manage to create quality programs. Since a recent issue of *Quest* (Siedentop & O'Sullivan, 1992) featured secondary school physical education, one might wonder whether a monograph so soon afterwards would be overkill. I would like to address this concern up front by suggesting that the intent of this project was significantly different from, though complementary to, the *Quest* effort. The *Quest* feature presented a critique of societal factors within which contemporary physical education programs and practices might be designed, critiqued, and challenged. This project presents an intensive study of the issues and concerns about high school physical education teaching and programming at a micro level with 11 high school teachers and their world of physical education and teaching in today's high schools. The monograph attempts to describe, discuss, and understand perceptions and practices of these teachers of physical education, their students, and parents in light of a contemporary analysis of physical education. The specific objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To describe these physical educators' sense of their work as high school teachers and coaches, that is, the outcomes they have for their programs and the degree to which they feel they accomplish these goals.
2. To describe both the context of the workplace where these high school physical education teachers carry out their responsibilities as teachers and coaches and the implications of such conditions for creating and sustaining challenging and vibrant physical education experiences for young adults.
3. To describe the rules, routines, and expectations these teachers communicated to their students during the first days of school and the degree to which these rules were adhered to and enforced during the year.
4. To describe and analyze the official and functional curricula implemented by these high school physical education teachers and the instructional ecology through which these curricula are made manifest.
5. To investigate the accountability task structures related to systematic evaluation, formal assessment, and objective grading used in these settings.
6. To determine the attitudes of these teachers, their students, and the parents toward the goals, objectives, and content of high school physical education and how these programs contribute to the students' overall education.

Choosing the Subjects

Subjects were 11 high school physical education teachers who volunteered to participate in this study by agreeing that we could visit, observe, and interview them in their schools about their lives as high school physical education teachers. These teachers were drawn from an initial pool of 20 potential candidates whose names were solicited by the research team from faculty in the teacher education program and local area teachers. We sought high school teachers who had a reputation among their peers for being concerned about their teaching and their program. Each of the teachers solicited had received a minimum of two recommendations as "teachers concerned about their programs." They were sent a letter inviting them to participate, and 16 initially responded that they would be willing to take part. Before the study formally began, 5 teachers withdrew: 2 would not be teaching physical education that fall, 1 was a beginning teacher whose department head felt he should not take part, and 2 others decided to withdraw when they realized the extent of involvement that would be required.

The 11 teachers who remained with the study taught in urban and suburban school districts. There were 7 urban teachers, 5 females (Carrie, Pucky, Leigh, Mary, and Kay) and 2 males (Jocko and Phil). There were 4 suburban teachers, 1 male (Bill) and 3 females (Penelope, Molly, and Sandy). (Pseudonyms are used throughout this monograph for teachers and schools.) All, with the exception of Mary and Molly, were well known to us because they had studied in our program (Leigh, Carrie, Jocko, Phil, and Kay), supervised students teachers (all teachers), served as subjects in previous research (Leigh), or had been observed informally and systematically (Leigh, Kay, and Phil). Mary and Molly came recommended by several high school teachers as physical educators committed to providing a quality program to students. We wanted to study teachers in both urban settings and suburban settings and teachers with various levels of experience. The teachers had teaching experience ranging from 7 to 25 years. All 11 had been teaching at their schools for at least 4 years and several had been teaching at their schools for more than 15 years (see Table 1).

Urban Teachers

Mary was 46 years of age and single at the time of the study. She graduated in 1966 and was certified to teach K-12 physical education and health. She had been teaching full time for 25 years and taught at Weber High School, an urban school, for 21 of those 25 years. Weber was a racially integrated school and had students from mostly working- and lower-middle-class families. Mary had been department head of a four-person unit for 19 of her 21 years at Weber and taught 25 classes of physical education per week. She had coached for 25 years and was then varsity girls' volleyball coach. She had more than 30 hours of graduate credit but was not in any specific degree program.

Pucky was 42 years of age and married at the time of the study. She graduated in 1971 and was certified to teach health and physical education. She had been teaching full-time for 20 years and at Cedar for 16 years. She began her teaching in an all-black school before moving to Cedar, which at the time was predominantly white. Since court-ordered desegregation, Cedar had become a racially integrated school with over 50% of the students African American,

Table 1 Demographic Information for 11 High School Teachers

Name	Age	School type	Highest degree	Hours beyond	Full-time teach (years)	Time at pres. schl. (years)	Nonteaching duties
Mary	46	U	BA	30+	25	21	Dept. head Girls' VB coach
Kay	40	U	BA	15+	18	10	Dept. head Girls' VB coach
Pucky	42	U	MA	0	20	16	None
Leigh	40	U	MA	0	17	11	Dept. head Dance director
Jocko	35	U	BA	30+	10	5	Dept. head Boys' BB coach Boys' bas. coach
Carrie	33	U	BA	<15	8	8	Dept. head Girls' softb. coach Girls' tennis coach Officiate college ball
Phil	31	U	BA	<15	7	7	Boys' bas. coach
Sandy	43	S	BA	30+	21	20	Dept. head Ass't track coach
Bill	42	S	MA	0	18	12	Dept. head Girls' VB coach
Molly	41	S	BA	<15	8	8	Dept. head Cheerleading coach
Penelope	29	S	BA	<15	7	5	None

Note. U = urban; S = suburban.

Asian American, Hispanic, or Appalachian from mostly working- or lower-middle-class families. Pucky had coached for 11 years but no longer coached or had any other employment. Her major hobby is breeding dogs to which she devotes her summer vacations and time away from school. She taught 10 health and 20 physical education classes a week. Pucky was the department head designee of a two-person department (they did not have a full contractual agreement though she did all the departmental work).

Kay was 40 years of age and single at the time of the study. She completed her undergraduate degree in 1973 and was certified to teach K-12 health and physical education and 7-12 English. She had been teaching full-time for 18 years and had been teaching at Winton, a local suburban school for the last 10 years. Winton High School's population was predominantly white, with a large African-American population and students from mostly working- and lower-middle-class families. She had coached at the school for 17 years and was then girls' head volleyball coach. She had been department head of a three-person

department for 3 years, teaching 10 physical education and 15 health classes a week.

Leigh was 40 years of age and married with three children at the time of the study. She graduated in 1973 and received a master's degree specializing in physical education teacher education in the 1980s. She had taught full-time for 17 years, with 11 of those at her current school, Colonial High School, an inner-city magnet school focused on academics and the arts. Earlier in her career she had coached for 5 years and was the director of the school's dance company. She was the head of a Department of Personal Growth and Development that included physical education and home economics although she was the only physical education teacher in the school. Her school did not offer interscholastic sport, though interested students could sign up to play with their "home school." Leigh taught 16 physical education classes, 4 biology classes, and 4 dance classes per week. She had no outside employment and spent her outside time with her family.

Jocko was 35 years of age and married with three children at the time of the study. He had graduated in 1978 with certifications in health, driver's education, and physical education. He had been teaching full-time for 10 years, and 5 of those were at Maple High School, an inner-city school, with a racially diverse student population from mostly working- and lower-class families, with a large percentage of families on federal assistance programs. Jocko had been coaching at the school for 4 years and was the varsity boys' basketball and baseball coach. He had been the department head designee of a two-person department for 3 years and was teaching 16 physical education classes per week. He attended graduate courses regularly and had accumulated more than 30 hours of credit, though not in any specified degree program. He did not indicate any outside employment, though he did teach a tennis course at the local university one summer.

Carrie was 33 years of age and single at the time of the study. She graduated in 1979 and was certified to teach general science, health, and physical education. She had taught for 8 years at Kinney and was then the department head, teaching 25 physical education classes a week. Kinney had a racially diverse student population from mostly low-income homes. It was one of the smallest city high schools, had a large English as a second language program, and was one of the most poorly maintained schools in the district, according to Carrie. She was head coach for girls' tennis and softball and supervised Saturday school at Kinney. In addition, she was employed in winter as referee for Division I and II women's college basketball. She indicated she had fewer than 15 graduate credit hours and applied to enter a master's in education program during the year of the study.

Phil was 31 years of age and married with two children at the time of the study. He taught with Kay at Winton for the last 7 years, which had been his only full-time teaching position since graduation in 1981. He completed his undergraduate degree with certifications to teach K-12 physical education and 7-12 health and was teaching 25 classes of physical education a week. He indicated he had fewer than 15 graduate credit hours and hoped to begin regular graduate work. At the end of the study he had not begun to pursue that goal. He was the varsity boys' baseball coach and, with Kay, was one of three teachers in the physical education department. Phil was a qualified carpenter and supplemented his teaching income during the summer months doing what he viewed

as something "completely different than working with kids" to keep him fresh each new school year.

Suburban Teachers

We had decided early in our planning that contrasting urban with suburban teachers might prove interesting and might help us better understand the conditions under which high school physical education teachers worked and taught. The suburban teachers were highly recommended by at least two of their peers and/or by members of the research team who had seen them teach or had worked with them as a cooperating teacher.

Sandy was 43 years of age and single at the time of the study. She graduated in 1970 and was certified to teach physical education, health, and quest (a living skills course for high school students). She had been teaching full-time for 21 years, 20 of them at Ferry High School, where she had coached the entire time. Ferry's student population was predominantly white with a wide range of income brackets. Sandy was the assistant track coach and previously had been head volleyball coach for several years but had given it up to concentrate on other things including outside seasonal employment on evenings and weekends. She had taken regular graduate course work and had over 30 graduate credits. She was the department head designee and taught 25 physical education classes per week. She also served on the school's curriculum committee and did duty at the attendance office daily.

Bill was 42 years of age and married with two children at the time of the study. He was certified to teach health and physical education and, like Leigh, had a master's degree in physical education. He had 18 years of full-time teaching and coaching, 12 of which were spent teaching and coaching volleyball at Welsh High School, a suburban school of mostly middle-income families in a predominantly white neighborhood. Bill was in his second year as department head of a six-person department and taught 25 classes of physical education a week. He was head girls' volleyball coach for several years and had no other outside employment.

Molly was 41 years of age and married with one child at the time of the study. She had graduated with certifications to teach health, physical education, and quest. She had been teaching at Hall High School, a local suburban school for 8 years, and it had been her only full-time teaching position. Hall had a predominantly white student population from a wide range of family incomes. Though there is not an official head of their four-person department, Molly noted that things "fall my way." She taught 20 lessons a week in physical education and 5 in the quest program. She was the cheerleading coach for varsity football in the fall and had no other outside employment.

Penelope was 29 years of age and married with one child at the time of the study. She graduated with a degree in physical education in 1983 and was beginning her master's in education. She had taught for 5 of her 7 years of full-time teaching at Davitt High School, an affluent suburban school with mostly middle- and upper-middle-class students in a growing school district. Penelope was one of five physical education teachers in her department who shared duties of the program. The position of department head had been abolished when the former head of department, the only other female teacher, had been "forced out" the previous year. Penelope indicated she taught 35-37 physical education

classes a week, but our observations show 25 classes of physical education a week. She had coached for 7 years but had given it up to begin a family and return to graduate school. She had no outside employment except a supplemental school contract for which she organized and led several outdoor pursuits weekend trips as part of the physical education program.

Data Collection

This was a descriptive study that drew upon multiple quantitative and qualitative techniques to gather information relative to the research questions. These included several visits to schools during the year to observe the teachers teaching, to gather documents about the physical education program for later analysis, and to shadow teachers for extended periods of time as they went about their daily work. In addition, teachers completed several questionnaires and were interviewed on different occasions about their educational values and beliefs in general, the dual roles as teachers and coaches, and their physical education programs in particular. We also surveyed students and parents about their views of high school physical education. A summary of the overall data collection procedures follows. For further information on specific data collection procedures, readers should consult appropriate chapters in this monograph or request a copy of the technical manual.¹

Data Collection Teams

Data were collected throughout the 1991–1992 academic year by five teams of three researchers. These data collection teams were comprised of one faculty member and two doctoral students. Each team was assigned two or three schools, and the teams were responsible for all observations of lessons at those schools; distribution and collection of teacher, parent, and student questionnaires; shadowing; and the formal interview at their schools. This allowed the teacher to establish a sustained relationship with one or two of the researchers throughout the year and assisted in the data collection process.

Research Teams

To establish the major questions and foci of the study, faculty and doctoral students met for several sessions to plan the specific research questions that we would study during the year and to determine methods needed to answer those questions. Six teams emerged from those discussions that reflected specific research interests related to high school physical education. These research teams defined the scope of the study and provided the data collection teams with the necessary questions, tools, and training to collect data at their sites. The research teams then analyzed the data and wrote on that particular aspect of the study. We realized as data collection progressed that these teams would need to remain flexible and fluid to react to emerging issues in the study. We began with six research teams that focused on (a) the nature of teaching and the conditions of

¹The technical manual can be purchased from the editor. It provides all the measurement instruments, training manuals, and interview protocols used in the study.

teachers' work, (b) teachers' perceptions of their work, (c) curricular issues in high school physical education, (d) instructional ecology of the gymnasium, (e) student attitudes toward physical education, and (f) parental attitudes toward physical education. We completed the project with research teams as represented by each of the chapters in this monograph.

To help us understand and make sense of what we were hearing and observing in the field, we organized a weekly seminar over two quarters for all members of the project. In the first seminar we read and discussed the literature on school reform and looked at issues facing physical education at the secondary level. During the second seminar we devoted our time to sharing aspects of the data with the group, developing assertions about those data, looking for negative instances of our assertions, and couching the findings in our earlier readings of the literature.

Scope of the Study

Four data-collection strategies were adopted for this study. These included direct observations of teaching; document collection and analysis; surveys of teachers, students, and parents; Carrie's journal of her life as a teacher; and teacher interviews. During the 1991-1992 academic year with these 11 teachers, we completed over 220 hours of observations of their programs and their teaching; coded 95 physical education lessons; conducted over 40 hours of interviews; collected a myriad of documents about the programs, schools, and units of instruction; had the teachers spend over 30 hours completing four questionnaires; and had 314 students and 139 parents respond to surveys of their attitudes about physical education. General data collection procedures are described in the following paragraphs. The technical manual contains the instruments used and the protocols developed for and during the project.

Observations

First, the lessons at the beginning of the semester in which teachers presented rules, routines, and expectations for the physical education programs were observed and coded, and field notes were taken using a modified version of the rules, routines, and expectations (RRE) instrument (Fink & Siedentop, 1989) developed several years earlier during our study of elementary physical education specialists. The codes were modified primarily to reflect the nature of routines typically found in secondary schools, such as attendance taking and sign-in procedures for class. The RRE instrument was used in the natural setting to code 1-4 lessons of the first unit of the semester for each teacher for a total of 30 lessons. Coding started on the first day of the unit and finished when the teacher began teaching the content of this first activity unit. For further information on this procedure refer to the chapter by O'Sullivan and Dyson.

Second, a task structure observation system (Jones, 1992; Lund, 1992; Marks, 1988) was used to gather data on the instructional tasks in which students were engaged during the physical education lessons observed. The system was adapted to gather additional information on teacher- and student-initiated discipline behaviors. Teachers were asked to indicate their strongest unit of instruction and 5-7 lessons distributed throughout each of those instructional units were

observed. A total of 65 classes were coded live using this task-structure observation system. For further information on this system see the technical manual and the chapter by Siedentop, Tsangaridou, Ward, Doutis, and Rauschenbach.

Third, each teacher was shadowed by a data collection team member for one half-day during the winter grading period, though some stayed longer and one followed the teacher to her outside officiating duties. Field notes were kept on the nature of the teacher's work and with whom she or he interacted outside of formal instructional periods. A time line describing how the teachers' time was allocated was also recorded.

Documents

Several documents were gathered for information on the teachers' responsibilities, the physical education curriculum, and the teachers' expectations for students in their programs. These documents, where available, included the school district course of study for physical education, the teachers' yearly block plan showing the units to be covered for the academic year, the teachers' master schedules showing their instructional and noninstructional duties for each day for each semester, unit handouts for the beginning of the year and for their "strong" unit, and the school staff handbook. Lesson plans or graded materials that were used during observations were collected where available.

Questionnaires

All teachers completed three questionnaires. A fourth questionnaire was completed by teachers who held coaching and teaching positions. First, teachers completed the Value Orientation Inventory (Ennis & Zhu, 1991) to measure "the extent to which physical educators made consistent decisions concerning curriculum and instruction that reflected value orientations in their belief systems" (p. 33). Second, a questionnaire on assessment and grading was completed by each teacher. Several weeks later each teacher completed a third questionnaire dealing with their views on school discipline and discipline in their program. Content and construct validity for the assessment, discipline, and teacher/coach questionnaires were assessed and reviewed as part of instrument development and all were pilot tested. For further information, see the technical manual and chapters by Matanin and Tannehill (assessment and grading), O'Sullivan and Dyson (discipline), and Stroot, Collier, O'Sullivan, and England (coaching).

Two classes of ninth-grade students in each of the 11 schools and their parents were asked to complete a questionnaire that surveyed their attitudes and perceptions toward physical education in high school. Both survey instruments were developed specifically for this study. Further information on these instruments can be obtained in the technical manual and in the chapter by Tannehill, Romar, O'Sullivan, England, and Rosenberg.

Interviews

Each teacher was interviewed four times during the course of the study. The first two were individual interviews to access the teachers' perspectives on various aspects of their work and their values and beliefs about physical education and their programs (Patton, 1990). The third interview, a large group interview, was conducted at the end of the school year with all 11 teachers to discuss their

views on the nature of teaching high school physical education and how it has changed over time. This was our opportunity to follow up several issues from earlier observations at the schools, such as grading and assessment and the content and organization of the curriculum. The fourth interview was done on the same day as the third interview with the teachers grouped by urban and suburban school districts. The purpose was to follow up on issues relevant to their specific contexts, such as administrative and collegial support and concerns of working in their respective environments. There were several informal interviews with teachers throughout the year during our observations of their strong units of instruction. Prior to the interviews, each teacher agreed to have these interviews audiotaped. The audiotapes were later transcribed for analysis by one or more writing teams.

The purpose of this chapter has been twofold: to provide an overview of both the scope and purpose of the project and the strategies used and to introduce the reader to the 11 teachers in the study. We hope that as a result of this monograph we will have accomplished three things: first, that we have provided better and detailed descriptions for understanding the nature and scope of physical education programs at the high school, as well as the teachers, students, and parents who are affected by them; second, that the findings and discussion in this monograph will prompt others to engage in some substantive research and staff development efforts to improve the support and accountability for quality physical education programs at the secondary level; and third, that the ideas raised in this monograph will stimulate more frequent, genuine, and substantive communication between physical education teachers who work in high school and those physical educators who prepare prospective teachers to teach in those settings.

Copyright of Journal of Teaching in Physical Education is the property of Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.