Enhancing Professional Development of Student Teachers by Including Staff-Tutoring in the Physical Education Teacher Education Program

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Objective

The aim of the study was to address the question of how to develop student teachers into reflective teachers and to foster their professional development through staff-tutoring. The study involved examining characteristics of the supervision process between a staff-tutor and her 11 tutees in Finnish Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE).

Introduction

In the summary of the anticipatory project to investigate teachers’ initial and continuing training needs Luukkainen (2000) pointed out that teacher training should be reformed to develop teachers’ personal growth and new competencies. It was hoped that teacher training would provide future teachers with the ability to understand different subcultures, religions and values, and to cooperate in multi-professional networks. The main practice established to meet these demands in teacher education has been that of equipping teachers with research-based knowledge and with an aptitude for collaborative learning (Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006).

The primary objective of PETE is to educate reflective teachers. Critical reflection is an especially important tool for thinking and problem solving (Van Manen 1997). Teachers are expected to be active in raising serious questions about what and how they teach and in participating in public debates and decision making processes which may affect their school and the wellbeing and physical activity levels of their pupils.

A common theme in students’ evaluation of the PETE program is the lack of connection between the stages of teacher education on one hand and the different physical education modules on the other. In order to give students a more complete picture of the PETE program, and to meet future demands of teachership, a new staff-tutoring system was constructed. The new model attempts to help to build students’ own teacher identities through the use of personal study plans and by supporting their reflective thinking. The staff-tutoring system is based on social construction (Prawatt 1996) and dialogue is the preferred method of communications. Ideally, a reciprocal discussion takes place in a constructive atmosphere of trust.

Methods

The aim is to identify the main features and phases of the process of supervising the growth of physical education student teachers. This study describes and analyzes the tutoring process between 11 students and their staff-tutor, a senior lecturer of didactics and pedagogy, during their five years in PETE. The data were collected using qualitative research methods during the years 2000-2005. Different data sources were used: staff-tutor’s diary based on personal and group discussions, students’ written reflective analyses of their teachership, and students’ evaluation feedback after graduation. The data were analyzed by triangulating all data sources for common and consistent categories.

Results

During the five-year process the staff-tutoring included eight group sessions and 5-10 personal meetings. The assignments of the student teachers and staff-tutor were organized under three different main themes: educational and professional orientation, the learning and studying process, and psycho-social support and group dynamics. In addition, the role of the staff-tutor is discussed.

Educational and professional orientation

Students’ reflective abilities were developed through structured tasks and verbal discussions in seminar sessions and peer collaboration. Questioning was a crucial way to encourage the students to reflect on themselves and others. For example, after the first week of teaching practicum, one male student reported “occasionally I did not know how to motivate pupils and they became restless”. In the discussion between the student and staff-tutor questions were asked to find out why there was a restless atmosphere in the teaching practise lesson: What kind of instruction was given? Was the reason outside of the actual situation? In this way many other aspects of teaching and learning could be included in the discussions. To increase the awareness of students about their assumptions and beliefs, more questions were asked such as: What do you need in order to become your ideal teacher? The staff-tutor and students also added theoretical knowledge from other courses, such as psychology, to the discussions. The students’ professional theories and personal teaching philosophies gradually took shape through this reflective practise.

Over the five years, the tutoring discussions began to centre on what it means to teach PE in the school nowadays. Students were surprised at the low status of PE, “sport is something that is not so important” and they both criticized and
appreciated the content knowledge and skills they had received from the studies at the department. One male student commented:

The department concentrates on too many different sports, but the teaching has been very nice and of a high level! But we need to know what is happening in the world around us.

A female student was sure she could deal with changes in society, "multicultural pupils and pupils with special needs are richness". The same student and eight others were interested in receiving further education after completing some years of work in a school.

Supervising learning and studying

Every semester the students discussed the guided curriculum of the faculty and reported if they had missed courses. They also planned the next semester. The staff-tutor tried to communicate the aims of the whole curriculum and future courses and invited other staff members of the faculty to tell about possibilities and requirements of the university. After five years of study, students reported that “it was important to regularly follow what was done and what was coming in the future”. However, the desire “to get more information on possible studies for their future teaching career” was also mentioned many times in the students' final evaluations. Most of the students reported that it was helpful and important that in the last meetings with the staff-tutor they received advice on applying for work, how to present themselves and their studies to schoolmasters and what may be looked for in an applicant.

Three of the students were unsure of their career choice at the beginning of the studies. With them other possibilities and feelings were considered. One student reported:

I shiver when I remember the teacher I saw with the group of girls in the field and when I thought that I myself have to be PE teacher'.

In the conversation between the staff-tutor and the student the situation was analyzed; what caused the feeling? The pupils, teacher, or circumstances? Also, other interests and possible PE teacher careers were discussed, such as teaching older pupils or in a place other than in school.

Psycho-social support and group forming

From the beginning of the education, the group of students studied together quite intensely, during the forth and the fifth year more occasionally. One of the themes discussed during the group meetings was the dynamics of the group. Also, the theoretical model of stages and the features of any group forming process (forming, Storming, Norming, performing, adjourning) from start to finish were considered (Oystila 2002). The group determined together at what stage they may be. In the final evaluation all students expressed the importance of a good group:

It was good that so many of us reached the last courses in training school; it is so nice to be with persons you know well.

Students missed each other at the end of the studies. They asked the staff-tutor:

Do you know anything about Hanna (their group member who was already working), is Janne still in Denmark?

The main aim was to foster fruitful cooperation between student teachers. Teacher professionalism means more collegial collaboration, also in schools, more sharing of the responsibility of growing children together.

The staff-tutor tried to create a relaxed open atmosphere where everybody could express feelings without being afraid of others’ reactions. Although an open atmosphere allowing all opinions was maintained, a systematic structure was used to ensure space for both the development of teacherhood and discussion about study plans and the curriculum. Occasionally, students also shared negative feelings and study difficulties with the staff-tutor. The aim was a dialogue through which students could understand interactions with other people and their own responsibilities now and in their future careers.

Challenges for the staff-tutor

The staff-tutoring process influenced the professional growth of both the student teachers and their supervisor, impacting teaching and the wider educational community. It was a privilege to follow students’ lives and their development over five years. The whole PETE program opened up from the students’ viewpoint and the staff-tutor could place her courses in the context of other studies. Conversations with other staff-tutors helped at critical points, such as when students did not feel they should study in the PETE program anymore. However, all eleven students are now registered teachers, one in the area of foreign languages.

Conclusion

The staff-tutoring process has proved to be very useful for both the students and the staff-tutor. These results show that the dialogical relation between the staff-tutor and students may result in deeper learning for both of them. The staff-tutoring process allows student teachers to translate personal experiences into more systematic conceptual thoughts.
References


