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Romar, Jan-Erik; Pettersson, Linn

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATORS
THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING WITH FRIENDS.

Jan-Erik Romar, Linn Pettersson

Åbo Akademi University, jromar@abo.fi

ABSTRACT

Professional development has mainly been one-day, off-site, sport up-date 'courses' with little or no evidence of challenge. The data reported here are from a two-year project, where the goal was to provide formative qualification for mainly classroom teachers who taught physical education in schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine teachers' experiences from the program. Nine female and five male teachers with teaching experience from none to 20 years participated. All teachers were supposed to write an essay about their experiences and learning at the end of the program. Inductive analysis and constant comparison were used to analyze these essays and six themes were formed. This paper will focus on two themes; social partnership and active learning. The teachers pointed out that good group cohesion was formed during the course and it was encouraging to meet other teachers interested in teaching physical education. One important part of active learning was the possibility to have time to discuss and share their experiences from daily work at schools. The possibility to teach each other and to try out what they have learned in class with their own students made them active students.

Keywords: Professional development.



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INTRODUCTION

There are ongoing changes in educational systems around the world. One major component of these changes is teachers' professional development (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Never before has the need for continuous professional development in education received such recognition (Bechtel & O'Sullivan, 2006; Borko, 2004; Fishman, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003; Mouza, 2004). Different forms of professional development are critical components in almost all proposals on educational improvement and restructuring. Regardless of school form and structure, there is a need for renewal of the teaching staff's professional skills and abilities (Guskey & Huberman, 1995). Teacher training and teacher development is considered a necessary condition if changes in school will be achieved (Madsen, 1994). Improved continuous professional development of teachers is even viewed as a solution to the problems that exist in education (Armour & Yelling, 2007, Ashdown, 2002).

Professional development (PD) has mainly been one-day, off-site, sport up-date 'courses' with little or no evidence of challenge, progression or learning coherence (Armour & Yelling, 2004). Nevertheless, effective PD should enhance both teacher and student learning and need to be related to the day-to-day complexities of teaching. In addition, longer and more sustained PD has in many studies showed improvements in teachers' knowledge and understanding and better integration of theory and practice (Armour & Yelling, 2004; Day, 1999; Garet, Porter, Desimond, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2001).

According to Bechtel and O'Sullivan (2006), many challenges appears in professional development and in order to organize effective PD programs, these challenges should be considered both in planning and execution. Several researchers (Fishman et al., 2003; Madsen & Risberg, 1994; O'Sullivan & Deglau, 2006) argue that professional development should be based on teachers' experiences and needs and focus on teachers' learning, their changes in terms of knowledge, perceptions and attitudes that lead to the acquisition of new skills, new basic ideas and processes related to the work of teachers. In the PD context, it is important that a supportive climate is created where teachers have the opportunity to talk about their teaching and about their ideas and where the teachers know that their views are encouraged and appreciated (Bechtel & O'Sullivan, 2006; O'Sullivan & Deglau, 2006).

Guskey (2002) presented a model that suggests a sequence among the three objectives of professional development. The model proposed significant change in teachers' attitudes and perceptions mainly after they have received evidence of improvements in student learning. These improvements are usually a result of the changes teachers have made in their classroom practice. According to the model, the experience of the successful implementation will promote teacher change. Teachers think it works because they have seen it work and this experience shapes their attitudes and perceptions.

In addition, O'Sullivan and Deglau (2006) presented a model for professional development. First, they argue that teachers must be treated as "active teachers" who formulate their own opinions and their own understanding through active participation. By allowing teachers to have a central role in shaping and implementing the program they are encouraged to actively participate. Teachers cannot evolve passively; they must themselves be active participants in the development (Day, 1999). Teachers' thinking and action must be the result of an interaction between their life histories, their current stage of development, classroom and school environments and the broader social and political context they work in.

Secondly, teachers should be treated as professionals and as leaders. This means that they have substantial control of the content during the PD, through the sharing of ideas and by having time to learn from each other. O'Sullivan and Deglau (2006) pointed out that the focus must be on the specific knowledge.

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Teachers must be able to engage in meaningful knowledge that is related to their everyday work as teachers and embedded in classroom practice. An important part of teachers' professional development is to give time to allow teachers to share their experiences of teaching (Deglau & O'Sullivan, 2006). Teachers must be helped to share their ideas and talk to each other in ways that allow them to reshape their own and others' ideas about teaching.

The data reported here are from a two-year project, where the goal was to provide formative qualification for mainly classroom teachers who taught physical education in schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine these teachers' experiences from the PD program.

METHODS

Nine female and five male teachers with teaching experience from none to 20 years participated in this program. While the teachers worked full time, the PD program consisted of contact weekends, activities through internet and assignments to do at home. Contact weekends were approximately once a month and lasted three days and contact weeks lasted five days in the summer.

Four basic principles guided the PD program. *Shared learning* was described as interactions and discussions where participants were expected to help each other in learning. *Teachers learning in work* meant that teachers should try theory in their practical work. Third, the *dialogue* ought to be open and respectful, even with sharing their personal experiences. Finally, teachers were expected to *challenge* both their own thinking and the PD program as well.

The PD program was divided into four different parts (see Figure 1). The PE teacher consisted of theory related to sport pedagogy. The theory was discussed in seminars and the teachers had to present results from their assignments; such as video analysis of their own teaching, implementing teaching models and written homework in PE. The wellness expert part contained content related to adapted physical education, motor learning and exercise science. The teachers also implemented theory into practical projects.

The learning diary had a central role in teacher growth and here teachers were expected to write after each contact weekend. They responded to specific questions but were also supposed to do a general reflection about their learning and could post questions to the university teacher. In addition, teachers had work with group processes, both in theory and practice.

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Figure 1. The structure of the program

Teaching PE consisted of methods courses in different sports. These were organized into three categories; ballgames, outdoor and indoor activities. Based on an entry self-evaluation, teachers were assigned to one expert content group in each category. Before every single sport, the participants had to make an E-miniplan about learning needs and expectations. These were used by the content expert groups in their planning. If possible, one sport was divided into three contact weekends with an introduction by the university teacher during the first part. The content expert group was in charge of the main teaching and finally the sport was summed up one month later with all teacher's experiences.

The final assignment for the teachers was to:

- *Write about your own experiences of program and how it has affected your job as a teacher. It is important that you consider yourself both as a student and as a teacher.*

They were instructed to write a three-page paper but it was not part of the final grading. Inductive analysis and constant comparison were used to analyze these essays and six themes were formed.

RESULTS

The teachers wrote a reflection essay about their experiences and learning from the PD program. Six themes were formed during data analysis; teacher development, structure of the program, active learning, social partnership, physical education in school and challenges during the program. This paper will focus on two themes; social partnership and active learning.

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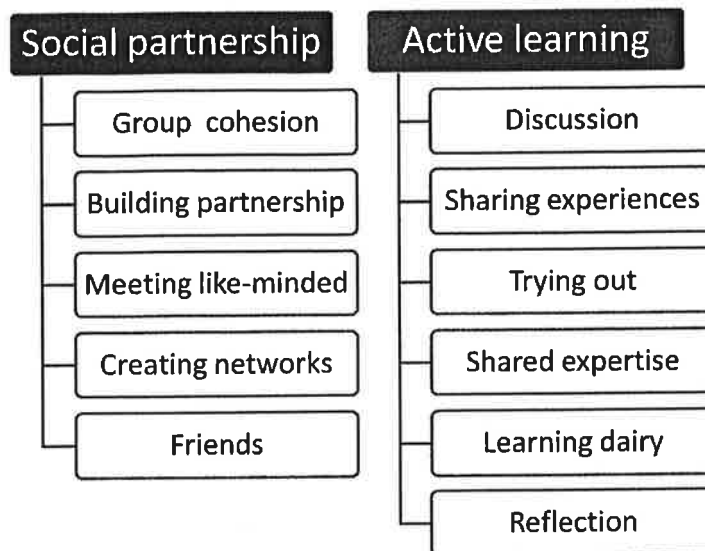


Figure 2. Aspects of the themes social partnership and active learning

Social partnership

One major theme was social partnership which was described in five aspects (see Figure 2). The teachers wrote about **group cohesion** and the possibility to meet other teachers. The group cohesion was described as good and several teachers expressed that they looked forward to the next contact weekend to again meet up with the group. It also appeared that everyone in the group was enthusiastic and excited and everyone had an interest to learn more.

A crucial piece was also that the group was quite incredible. We were all very different but complementary to each other in a good way.

Several teachers emphasized that the group was supportive and helped when they had hard times.

Some I've come really close and we have encouraged and supported each other when it has felt difficult.

Building partnership was another aspect and the social partnership developed during the course. The teachers pointed out that the winter course with skiing was a good experience where the group got to know each other better. Other opportunities that have been part of the creation of the partnership were outdoor activities like canoeing and sailing, which was held at the beginning, and also the five day meetings during the summer.

It started very well with the canoeing. Although I doubted that we would use so much time on this sport, I was very happy, because then we became a group

Sport was a common interest for all teachers and they noted how rewarding it was to **meet like-minded** people who share your interests and that both does and thinks along the same lines as yourself.

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I have met new people that I have learned a lot from, like-minded people who share the same thoughts as yourself, who you can discuss sports, school sports and other earthly things.

Another aspect of social partnership was **creating networks**. The teachers stated that they now have a network with connections to teachers with different skill and abilities.

I know I will have contact with some and that I can always turn to them and ask the help during my PE teacher's career.

Finally, teachers made **friends**. As the group during more than one and a half years has met at regular intervals and because the participants share a great interest, friendships were created. Several teachers also hope to continue to keep in touch with the other participants after the course.

Well, I have among others made friends for life. Some of them I will keep in touch with. I have learned a lot from these people not only about the job as a teacher.

Active learning

Another major theme that emerged in the reflections was different aspects that had to do with learning during the course (see Figure 2), which was structured so that participants would actively participate.

First, **discussion** was a central agenda in the program. Although several teachers felt there was not enough time for discussions, virtually all teachers wrote that the discussions had been of great importance. Some perceived discussions even as the best thing in the whole program.

What I perceive to have given me the most is probably all of our discussions where we exchanged ideas, opinions and gained aha-experiences but also confirmation that what we're doing in our schools is something sensible.

It was important for the teachers to discuss and reflect on various exercises, experiences, perception of the teaching profession, and to exchange views and ideas. Three of the respondents were carpooling five hours to the contact weekend and they enjoyed having an opportunity to continue the discussion in the car.

... We had some interesting discussions in the car home. We had a super opportunity to immediately ventilate and analyze after each meeting.

One teacher claimed that what has made these discussions so good was that everyone has always been honest. Another teacher suggested more opportunities for discussions in all professional development programs.

Another aspect was teachers **sharing experiences**. They liked to hear how other teachers work in their schools, which equipments are used, distribution of lesson and how colleagues view teaching physical education. Especially the less experienced teachers liked the access to more experienced teachers' wisdom and views.

We come from different regions so it's nice to hear how all schools are working.

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Teachers also mentioned that **trying out** was part of active learning. Several teachers wrote that they have experienced it as good to have been able to work between the meetings and thereby try out different things they learned. After that they were able to discuss with other teachers how different exercises had worked in practice.

It's been fun and rewarding to get back to work and try new ideas that I gained.

Shared expertise was one basic principle and as part of the program, teachers have been teaching each other. Several teachers emphasized this and it was generally seen as a good approach. However, especially in the beginning, there were teachers who were skeptical that they would teach each other. Some teachers found it difficult to plan and carry out their plans because the entire group had so different ambitions.

Although initially it was dissatisfaction that it is us who will be teaching so I think it's been a good thing ...

Some teachers expressed that the shared expertise has worked well because everyone had so much knowledge and experience and that the method has welded the group together.

That we have been experts for each other has worked perfectly, at least I have experienced what I have got was carefully prepared and well structured ...

The teachers perceived the **learning dairy** as a way to remember tasks and ideas. In addition, it helped the teachers to develop as teachers when it was a place to reflect and to receive feedback.

What to do is one thing. You do and you forget. Make and type. Read what you did and you remember. Do - write - teach, then you know what you should remember.

I think the diary has been one of the best tasks. It has been good but also necessary to write down my thoughts / reflections and then get feedback from supervisors.

Finally, **reflection** was an aspect of active learning. The teachers pointed out that they have begun to reflect more on their own teaching. They also became more critical of their actions during the lessons and the teachers have taken a more reflective approach where they were thinking more of their own teaching.

I have not previously in my work reflected on many of the things we have covered in the program but which I now begun to reflect more and thought more of my teaching methods and my way of being a physical education teacher, ex. variation, levels and a diverse content.

Discussion and conclusions

This study was designed to explore teachers' experiences of a physical education professional development program. Findings from this study confirmed the importance of teacher active involvement in a

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supportive climate where teachers have the opportunity to talk about their teaching and about their ideas and where the teachers know that their views are encouraged and appreciated.

Teachers pointed out the importance of social partnership and that a good group cohesion was created during the course. They felt it was rewarding to meet other teachers interested in physical education. In addition to several friendships created during the course, teachers also indicated that they now have a network of contacts. This was pointed out as positive because teachers now can turn to each other for help in their work as physical education teachers.

O'Sullivan and Deglau (2006) described the importance of a supportive climate. The group has in other words an impact on how professional development will affect all participants. Based on the experience from these teachers, the group has been very good and has meant a lot. Several teachers describing how the participants helped each other and that it was rewarding to talk about their teaching.

Several teachers have also indicated what has contributed to that they came so close to each other. A contributing factor highlighted was the long, the five day meetings during the summer and the winter course with skiing. In addition, they described outdoor activities like canoeing and sailing, which was held at the beginning as a factor to strengthen the group cohesion. That the program was spread over such a long time has also affected the social partnership. Then the group members had time to get to know each other properly during the year and a half years of PD. Group dynamic activities was part of the program and the teachers noted that it helped in building a positive atmosphere.

The group cohesion that emerged during the program had great significance. Although the group consisted of teachers with different background and experiences, the teachers got well along. The atmosphere in the group was such that everyone could express their opinions and everyone supported and helped each other. Several teachers said that the support from the group helped to carry out the program. The group and the group cohesion has had a significant role and all 14 teachers did complete the program.

Madsen and Risberg (1994) also emphasized how important the composition of the group is for the development of competency. It is central that the group is composed of individuals with different knowledge and experiences that can complement each other. In this case, all teachers had different work experience, and it appeared also that their knowledge and skills were diverse. When they were skilled in various disciplines they could complement each other.

The professional development program in this study was designed that the teachers actively participated during the program. Active learning meant to the teachers a possibility to discuss, to teach and to share experiences with each other. Research (Armour & Yelling, 2004, Bechtel & O'Sullivan, 2006; Day, 1999; Garet et al., 2001) has showed that modern PD programs have gone through major changes and moved from individual seminars or days to now become a prolonged process. In addition, a common feature of new forms of PD is that the teachers are given more responsibility in developing their own competence and that they should actively take part in the program.

According to Day (1999) and O'Sullivan and Deglau (2006), teachers cannot evolve passively, they must themselves be active participants in the development. Furthermore, teachers should have the chance to share their ideas and learn from each other. An important part of teachers' professional development is therefore to provide time for teachers to share their experiences of teaching. This is important because development is limited if teachers only learn from their own experience.

These teachers confirm in their reflections the importance of active learning. The discussions were in particular described as a learning source and important for their own development. Many teachers described the possibility to benefit from others experiences. The opportunity to discuss with other teachers and to share ideas and experiences with each other teachers has enabled teacher development. Especially the teachers who

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had less work experience expressed that it had been useful to listen to the experienced teachers. By sharing each other's knowledge and experience, teachers are able to complement each other. All teachers have had different strengths and weaknesses and all have thus had something to contribute. In addition, teachers stated that it was important to test their new knowledge in practice and then to discuss how the various tasks and exercises have worked. This confirms O'Sullivan and Deglau (2006) emphasis that teacher PD need to be rooted in classroom practice which has been easy to achieve while these teachers worked full time during the PD program.

One part of active learning was shared expertise, when teachers taught each other in activity classes in different sports. Teachers felt that the shared expertise was valuable and a good way to learn because all teachers had different skills to share. Deglau and O'Sullivan (2006) indicated that an important part of teachers' professional development is that they are provided time to share their experiences of teaching. This study showed that although time is limited in PD, providing enough time for teachers is important which they also recognized.

Several teachers expressed that they over time had begun to reflect on their teaching. Their learning diaries had served as an important tool where they could reflect upon their own learning and their own experiences. This confirms Madsen and Risberg (1994) arguments for active participation in continuing education, which include reflection and discussion relevant to learning, the importance of being able to draw conclusions from own experience and the opportunity to examine what has been learned in practice.

As a conclusion, this study also support Guskey's (2002) model about the sequence among different parts of professional development. Teachers should have an opportunity to try out and share expertise in order to start to think about their teaching. This experience of teaching in different ways will promote change in teachers' attitudes and perceptions. Changes in teachers' instructional strategies can then result in improvements in student learning.

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