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Original article

SPORTS LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION AT INSTITUTE OF SPORTS TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Aim. This research was about sports leadership practices in physical education at institute of sports teacher education (ISTE) which had demonstrated success in the area of physical education (P.E). The overall research goal was to examine to what extent and how leadership-related practices impacted sports leadership practices in physical education at ISTE. A case study approach was used to explore four key sports leadership-related practices (supervision, curriculum, professional development, and knowledgeable leaders) and their impact based on P.E instructional strategies. The study participants included two leaders and fourteen lecturers from a single ISTE located in Perlis. To collect and analyze opinions of leader and lecturer behaviors, sixteen interviews were conducted. Qualitative coding techniques were used to develop common themes/ categories of information.

Conclusion. Analysis of the data provided two dominant categories that lecturer participants viewed as significant factors in her or his ability to successfully teach P.E and the influence of sports leadership practices and the impact of P.E instructional strategies. Overall, this study supports previous research on this topic in that if a coherent P.E framework is supported through the leaders' supervision; its foundation is a comprehensive curriculum; and the leaders, as well as lecturers, become knowledgeable of the framework through P.E professional development, then classroom instruction will be influenced and students will experience quality of P.E instruction. The findings from this study further add to the literature based by providing a deeper understanding of how leaders can impact P.E instruction.

Key words: Sports Leadership Practices, Physical Education (P.E), Institute of Sports Teacher Education (ISTE).

Introduction

Much research has focused on effective leadership practices, yet a number of research gaps as identified through the sports leadership practices in P.E at ISTE. These include a need to better understand how sports leadership based practices can impact student outcomes, especially in the area of P.E, including at-risk students.

First, Reeves' theory of how various types of sports leadership practices can impact the P.E comes from his significant research at the Center for Performance Assessment (Reeves, 2004). The author himself calls for application of his theory of student-centered accountability, citing the need to closely examine *how* the implementation of various best-practices, sports leadership-influenced practices actually impacts the work done within the classroom (Reeves, 2006).

Second, there are specific gaps in the research identified through the literature related to how effective sports leadership might lead to successful P.E outcomes within a given ISTE. A large number of studies have determined that effective P.E instruction entails modeling, an opportunity to have physical activities, conferencing, and sharing (Reynolds &

Teddle, 2000). However, a less frequent approach has been to study the actions of educators as they implement a model of P.E instruction, with such authors calling for more research in this area (Marzano, 2004).

Finally, much of the previous research examining the implementation of a comprehensive P.E curriculum has not included at-risk students in their studies, and the few that have included such variables focused on singular P.E classrooms (Schmoker, 2006), as opposed to ISTE-wide efforts. Since supervision, P.E curriculum, and P.E professional development have been shown to impact students at risk (Reeves, 2004), the examination of these variables will allow findings to be drawn from more diverse sports educational environments (Schmoker, 2006).

Objectives. The goal of this study is to examine to what extent and how sports leadership-influenced practices effectively impact P.E instruction within the context of a P.E program. Therefore, this study is about how one ISTE's leaders were able to influence their classrooms in such a manner as to successfully impact student success in P.E. The ISTE

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is the unit of analysis, and the educators provided data on how their classroom-level of P.E activities are influenced and effectively impacted by four sports leadership influenced practices: (1) systematic supervision, (2) comprehensive P.E curriculum, (3) supported P.E professional development, and (4) the leaders' knowledge of P.E curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Methodology

Research Design

Due to the subject matter and context of this study, the researcher employed a qualitative approach. The research took place at an ethnically diverse suburban ISTE, a natural setting wherein specific sports leadership practices were implemented and specific improvements within student's scores in P.E occurred. As a result, a qualitative methodology was appropriate, given the use of a purposeful sampling and a collection of open-ended data (Creswell, 2003).

Furthermore, due to the goals, limitations and focus of this study, the researcher implemented a case study approach. This qualitative framework was suitable because it has been utilized in an assortment of settings, including sports leadership (Stringer, 1999). The study participants in this research had all experienced the same leaders, similar understanding of student-accountability and training of a comprehensive P.E curriculum, as well as ISTE improvement goals. In addition, the study participants all shared this common experience at an ISTE with at-risk students as defined by income level. Another commonality is that, in working with at-risk students in all grade levels, the lecturers utilized similar lessons, assessments and student monitoring, and their at-risk students exceeded expectations in P.E, regardless of grade level.

Case Study

The case study approach was also suitable given the goals of this study. Case studies value in-depth interviews with study participants (Creswell, 1998). These interviews give researcher the ability to gain more depth as to the details of the sports leadership practices and P.E classroom instruction. The opportunity to follow up with participants in the midst of the study allowed researcher the opportunity to better determine what factors go into the capacity to connect to sports leadership. This permitted the participants' experience to be divided into textural and structural categories so the researcher could examine both what and how of the experience in the ISTE. The study determined how the lecturers connect to their leaders instead of merely investigating the factors that caused them to connect to the sports leadership.

Participants

In-depth interviews with fourteen lecturers and two leaders were conducted in an attempt to further understand the experiences of these P.E educators and the degree to which, and how, the sports leadership impacted their ability to help all students, even those at risk, to be successful in P.E. Artifacts were examined, including the ISTE Improvement Plan, and checklists of instructional strategies that were used. The form used for the sports leader's evaluations of lecturers was studied as well as P.E professional development opportunities.

Results

This qualitative study endeavored to learn more about sports leadership practices cited by Reeves (2004) and others as having the potential to effectively impact classroom instruction within the context of P.E activities at a successful ISTE.

Sports Leadership Theme 1: Sports Systematic Supervision

Study participants were asked to reflect on whether sports leadership supervisory practices changed their instructional strategies. The leadership's impact through the supervision of a coherent P.E instructional program was expressed in two specific ways: through persistence and material support. Each of these sports leadership themes will be reviewed in detail.

Leadership sub-theme 1.1: Classrooms are influenced by leaders with persistent vision

Due to students scoring below grade level on state P.E assessments, ISTE staff acknowledged there was a need for changes in instructional strategies. A decision had been made to use a comprehensive P.E framework of instructional strategies called *Four Blocks* (Cunningham & Hall, 1998). Study participants were asked to identify how the leaders supervised the ISTE's reaction. The director indicated he/ she was determined that the ISTE would use *Four Blocks* strategies for the next five years and that he/ she would support it every way she could:

My role was to say ok we are going to do it (Four Blocks), do it 100% and what can I do to get us started and what can I do to help you ... we're not going to waffle. This is the direction we're going in for five years. And then we're going to evaluate if it works or not, and if it doesn't, then we are going to change. We aren't going to do it half-heartedly and then say, well, that didn't work.

(Leader 1/ 7.7.2014)



The P.E specialist stated the he/ she understood the vision for *Four Blocks* from a technical standpoint; therefore, he/ she was responsible for helping lecturers learn the strategies accurately and thoroughly:

He/ she (director) really was the leader who said we're going to go with this and we're not wavering here. I was the one that got to make that happen. I was the one who really had the technical understanding, and the principal was learning it right behind me ... the director had said, "We're going to do this. We're going to immerse ourselves in it and we're going to learn it and do it really well."

(Leader 2/ 8.7.2014)

Both leaders went on to say they supervised and supported this vision by being out in the building, continually checking on the learning and the progress.

Sports Leadership sub-theme 1.2: Leaders support the classroom by providing P.E materials

This theme emerged from study participants being asked to share about support for the vision. Eleven of the sixteen respondents reported the vision was supported through the provision of P.E materials and resources that were needed to implement new instructional strategies in the classrooms. Both leaders saw it as essential to provide materials for the new instructional strategies, the director referenced this:

I did get a lot of P.E books in ... I would pay for organizational things, like little book tubs that they could organize ... after P.E professional development when they were fired up about it and figured out to use it (professional development) themselves, then I would support that.

(Leader 1/ 7.7.2014)

Another six participants reported that they shared their materials with their colleagues often and cited this as an example of the collegiality of the building. A lecturer said: "We are very sharing here. This is his/ her book...we are always throwing out books to each other, throwing out resources, very open and sharing."

Sports Leadership Theme 2: Leadership Plays a Significant Role in P.E Curriculum

Study participants were asked how and to what extent the leadership influenced the P.E curriculum being taught as defined in the state *Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs)*. Each of these sports leadership themes will be reviewed in detail.

Sports leadership sub-theme 2.1: Leaders support P.E curriculum by providing time for discussion

Knowing the P.E curriculum was listed by a majority of the study participants as a challenge facing lecturers. Eleven of the sixteen study participants credited discussions with colleagues at staff meetings and P.E professional development meetings that were planned by their leaders as assisting them in understanding the state P.E curriculum as defined in the *GLCEs*. The impact of the *GLCEs* discussions at the professional development meetings was evident when participants were asked how the *GLCEs* helped instruction. There was a wide range of responses including interpretation, expectation of mastery, time and assessment, and focus in P.E. A lecturer said:

When I think about the GLCEs and P.E Professional Development, they go hand in hand. How am I going to get there? Here are some ways. Here's what's happening. Here's the newest trend. Here's what we've done, we're going to streamline.

(Lecturer 4/ 9.7.2014)

As the lecturers learned about the *GLCEs*, seven of the participants stated that they used their time differently. The director noted a conversation with lecturers who came to the realization that they were spending too much time on one *GLCE*, the leader recalled:

They came to this realization on their own, I remember the lecturers said we spent four weeks on the body ... it is only one GLCE! I remember laughing because I had been thinking it for a year. This is one GLCE and they are spending four weeks on it, and then they came to me with the light bulb on in their head.

(Leader 2/ 8.7.2014)

Sports leadership sub-theme 2.2: Leaders support P.E curriculum through report card alignment

Alongside the benefit of the discussion of the *GLCEs*, however, the alignment of the curriculum as P.E in the *GLCEs* with the report card was listed as another significant influence on the effectiveness of P.E classroom instruction. Nine of the sixteen study participants commented that the alignment between the P.E curriculum found in the *GLCEs* and their report cards supported their ability to do their job. The leaders used charts from the P.E curriculum office to make sure the report cards were aligned with the *GLCEs*. The director said:

If we were doing what we were supposed to be doing on the charts showing alignment, then we were aligned. We would also do a lot of work when we got the results back,

looking on the strands. We did not do well on enumeration or measurement, so let's look at the GLCEs and see are we missing something and if our P.E curriculum missing something. Do I need to get you something?

(Leader 1/ 7.7.2014)

The impact of the P.E curriculum alignment with the report card was reiterated by several other individuals. One of the lecturers reported that the aligning of the report card enabled him/ her to meet the state standards: "We always try to align our teaching up with the state standards. The *GLCEs* have helped, too, because they are a little bit more visible, they're there, and we align our report card to follow that." Alignment was also listed by a lecturer as a way to help lecturers in the classroom. "One little tiny report card item covers a pretty deep range of items on the *GLCE* and so we try to get to the essence of that and we try to see what is the important piece for kids."

Sports Leadership Theme 3: Supported Professional Development of P.E Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment.

When asked whether P.E professional development had changed their instruction, all sixteen study participants stated that P.E professional development prepared lecturers for the challenges of teaching new instructional strategies. This finding may have been expected given that the ISTE is bound to ensure lecturer certification as documented through credits from classes or P.E professional development. In addition, staff must complete a set number of hours of P.E professional development for the ISTE. However, participants identified P.E professional development as playing a significant role in this area of impact and made clear distinctions how their P.E professional development impacted their classroom. Both lecturers and leaders were influenced by the focus they had in the meetings, the progression of the P.E professional development, modeling both within and outside the classroom, the continuity, and the conversations about the P.E professional development. Each of these P.E professional development themes will be reviewed in detail.

Sports leadership sub-theme 3.1: Classrooms are influenced by focused P.E professional development

Participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the P.E professional development they had received and how it had influenced classroom practice. When asked about learning new instructional strategies through P.E professional development, nine out of the sixteen participants responded with

statements that clustered around two areas which included the focus and effort that change requires. A lecturer stated:

We were concentrating on a block for a chunk of time. That is what our staff meetings were about. We had Reach Days and we were spending them on that. We were very focused on understanding a particular block. Staff meetings were very much P.E professional development from the beginning.

(Lecturer 6/ 9.7.2014)

Sports leadership sub-theme 3.2: Modeling is an important aspect of P.E professional development

During the process of reflecting on how he or she came to understand the new strategies, five respondents indicated that the modeling played a significant role in their P.E professional development. The director indicated that, while planning P.E professional development, his/ her goal was to model during the meetings that the purpose of the meeting was to clearly focus on the strategies he/ she expected to see in her classroom observations. He/ she stated:

So when I did a staff meeting or P.E professional development, I wanted it to be crystal clear, this is what we are doing and why, today we are really going to work on P.E, how you do a P.E lesson, what is the before, during, after, why do you do it. We will get down to why you connect it and everything else, later but let's do it right.

(Leader 2/ 8.7.2014)

Sports leadership sub-theme 3.3: P.E professional development that impacts classrooms is continuous and on-going

This theme emerged from study participants as they were asked to discuss their purpose in participating in P.E professional development. Eight of the study participants told how they were life-long learners and that as professionals they knew they always had to learn more and enjoyed doing so. Having leaders who provided continuous and on-going P.E professional development opportunities was important. A lecturer echoed how incredible it was that the leaders provided an abundance of P.E professional development which gave his/ her time to implement strategies:

The ISTE leaders provided us oodles and oodles of in-service and speakers and the ability to go somewhere and listen to it. It was fantastic. It slowly gave us time to implement it. It wasn't like you are doing this right now. It was like take a breath until



you feel comfortable with it and go with it until finally you are on board.
(Lecturer 8/ 12.7.2014)

Sports leadership sub-theme 3.4: Sharing after P.E professional development supports new strategies

During the process of reflecting on how she or he came to implement new knowledge from P.E professional development experiences, participants reported that the P.E professional development was influential in changing their strategies. Ten of the

The P.E as far as I'm concerned... is an expert at Four Blocks. He/ she truly is. You could ask him/ her any question. He/ she has gone to enough sports leadership type, P.E professional development, to find out exactly what we need to know. So that's a huge part in it, is having somebody that is knowledgeable about P.E. And the director, he/ she went to all the blocks. I don't think it was necessarily a principal P.E professional development time, but he/ she chose to go and find out as much as she could so that he/ she could help us in anyway.

played a significant role in their use of the new strategies. A lecturer stated:

We work together as a team really, really well. If I don't understand something, I am going to ask. I am not going to sit here and flounder through the whole thing. And most of the time, as students find out, when you ask a question, there are about five others who have the same question. Sometimes I feel like I am just hanging on by a thread, but we support each other. We talk before ISTE a couple of times a week just informally and I find that we are pretty supportive of each other. Have you come up with any bright ideas for this?

(Lecturer 10/ 13.7.2014)

The study participants also believed that sharing at staff meetings held them accountable as the principal asked them to report on their experiences with learning about and using the strategies. One went on to say that attendance at the P.E professional development, combined with reporting responsibilities, served individuals and colleagues well.

Sports Leadership Theme 4: The Leaders Knowledge of P.E Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

All study participants were asked to reflect on the P.E success in terms of the knowledge of their leaders about P.E. The sixteen study participants acknowledged the leaders had to be and were knowledgeable sources for answers to their questions about P.E and used them as resources. The impact the knowledgeable leaders had on his/ her implementation of new strategies was noted by a lecturer. Knowledgeable leaders had not been part of his/ her past experience, he/ she stated:

I cannot imagine not having my leader be knowledgeable. He/ she had the vision, he/ she has information. I have worked for principals that have not known the knowledge, the subject matter of the P.E curriculum. And they leaned on us. Well, he/ she made it his/ her business to go out, that's the key. He/ she didn't expect me to do something that he/ she had no knowledge of. And if I had a question, he/ she's another resource. That's a big one, too.

(Lecturer 12/ 14.7.2014)

Knowledgeable leaders were also identified by a lecturer as a significant support in the process of learning new strategies. He/ she mentioned:

(Lecturer 14/ 15.7.2014)

Discussion

There are several suggestions for further research that can be generated from the results of this study. A similar project could seek to identify the P.E strategies used with at-risk students in ISTE and follow their P.E progress through semester one. It would allow for deeper reflection about these strategies since there would be a greater length of time for study participants to reflect on the strategies that would help the students. Attempts were made in this qualitative research to add depth to the interviews by providing questions in advance to participants and allowing for member checking, but the data could be improved through interviews that could continue throughout the years as lecturers became more confident with their use of the strategies.

In addition, further research on successful ISTE could focus on each sports leadership practice in isolation along with the implemented P.E strategies. A consistent theme in this study was the impact of four sports leadership practices in combination on participants' instructional strategies. A significant amount of research has been done on each sports leadership practice (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006). However, little attention has been given to the independent impact of each as it relates to the P.E instructional strategies. Further research could



concentrate on the impact of each sports leadership practice on each of the particular classroom strategies. A third area for future research could focus on each individual instructional block of strategies in isolation coupled with the sports leadership practices in P.E at ISTE. Previously each block of instructional strategies has been studied (Beck & Murphy, 1993) and deemed unable to impact all learners. However, the sports leadership practices have never been acknowledged or examined and the question remains if lack of sports leadership was the missing link.

In addition, this study could be repeated in three years with the same group of educators to determine if they were still being supervised with the same sports leadership practices, and if they maintained the P.E instructional strategies and gains over time. This process could bring further clarity to the themes that emerged from this study or provide additional insights on the experiences of the participants.

Finally, an additional study could be done to examine the P.E instructional practices of lecturers whose students were not successful. Further research could be conducted on those individuals whose students did not achieve mastery to determine whether or not their lecturers were using the *Four Blocks* instructional strategies proficiently and why or why not. Implications of P.E Practice at ISTE. The individual experiences of participants demonstrate that the components of Reeves' model were present within the experiences of educators at the ISTE in this study. Sports leadership-related practices were found to interact with the ISTE's instructional practices, which impacted the P.E for students. While confirming Reeves' model, these findings also provide insight into instructional practices in regards to P.E instruction. In addition to emphasizing the impact instructional strategies have on the P.E success of students, including at risk, this study also demonstrates that a significant amount of sports leadership impact was felt from experiences lecturers had outside the classroom. These findings should cause institutions to think about innovative ways to get leaders intentionally committed to a plan to supervise a coherent P.E framework, clarify the P.E curriculum, provide P.E professional development, and obtain knowledge about P.E instructional strategies within the balanced framework they seek.

Finally, the strong theme regarding sports leadership and P.E instruction influences on at-risk students could be used to rethink how specific P.E leadership-related strategies and P.E instructional practices influence classrooms with at-risk students. This study demonstrates the difference P.E leadership-related practices and P.E instructional strategies can have on such students. Decisions surrounding the

supervision of a P.E framework, P.E curriculum work, P.E professional development and leaders' knowledge level about P.E curriculum, P.E instruction, and P.E assessments could be reviewed to determine how at-risk students are best taught. The at-risk students could benefit from confident leaders and lecturers who were able to use a variety of P.E instructional strategies with expertise. Students who are at risk could gain from available materials on their level and from a variety of P.E materials and P.E instructional strategies that appeal to all learning styles.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the applicability of Reeves' (2004) theory of student-centered accountability, and Cunningham and Hall's (1998) P.E instructional framework, on the classrooms of an ISTE which was successful in the area of P.E. This qualitative research adds on successful P.E instruction by placing the study within an ISTE where sports leadership-related practices were combined with an instructional framework. Fullan (2003) called for research to help leaders build high-performing ISTE in an age of accountability when ISTE systems are moving away from obsolete 20th century models of sports leadership.

This research allowed for in-depth learning about the applicability of sports leadership-related practices to an ISTE where the sports leadership behaviors were very transparent, and the participants indicated they were impacted by particular sports leadership practices. It was interesting to note that some participants indicated they aligned with the leaders because they knew that the institution had low P.E scores, thus they needed to change course. This finding points to the possibility that participants may have been especially receptive to new sports leadership-related practices and classroom strategies due to their previous experiences with sports leadership and strategies, as well as the low achievement of the students. The responses indicated that these educators went through a process of accountability for learning which demonstrates that Reeves' model of student-centered accountability is indeed applicable to this type of P.E educational environment.

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