Freedman

From Teacher Preparation to the Public Schools:
Inservice Teachers Speak Out

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Few professionals in teaching physical education doubt the necessary relationship between the teacher preparation institution and the public school. Sometimes the relationship is strained, condoned only as a necessary evil. In other settings the ties prove to be productive and fruitful. In what is essentially still an apprenticeship model, one would hope the latter perspective can prevail. A key component of a successful field experience for pre-service teachers is the role of the cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher not only serves as a role model in shaping the behavior of interns and student teachers, but also as a transmitter of subtle messages about the culture of public schools.

An open dialogue is of critical importance between the cooperating teacher and university personnel who are responsible for teacher preparation programs. The following panel discussion between the writer and four experienced physical educators explored some of the problems and successes of field experience programs and teacher preparation in general.

John Emery has been teaching physical education for 24 years. He is currently the supervisor of physical education at East Brunswick High School in New Jersey. The second panelist, Shirley Schaffer, is also a secondary school physical educator with 10 years experience in Franklin High School, Franklin Township, New Jersey. Wayne Lewis is an elementary specialist with 9 years of teaching experience. He currently teaches a Truman Elementary School in Sayreville, New Jersey. The fourth member of the panel was Theresa Purcell, an elementary and movement education specialist at Brunswick Acre Elementary School, South Brunswick New Jersey. She has taught a total of 16 years.

This panel discussion took place on December 3, 1980 and focused on a great many issues, not all of which are included in this article. The conversation lasted nearly two and one-half hours.

Freedman: I want you to think back to when you started teaching. If you reflect on your preparation, what was missing from your program — in what areas did you feel unprepared to deal with the real world of teaching in the public schools?

Emery: Well, I have the longest time to think back upon, but I'll speak first. I'd have to say techniques for controlling the classes. I'll never forget that handling and motivating the students was my biggest problem. Actual knowledge of content was no problem.

Schaffer: For me there really wasn't a problem. I student taught in the same high school where I got a job. There were some racial problems and that frightened me a little bit, but the eventually blew over. Disciplin
Inservice teachers came easy for me, my cooperating teacher was rather strict, but fair with the students; I guess I picked up on that.

Freedman: Shirley, did you feel comfortable, did you get a lot of support from your peers?

Schaffer: Really, I was just like my cooperating teacher, my colleagues recognized that. Others said I was just like her. All she had to do was raise her voice an octave and the students were quiet. That technique worked for me too, and I didn’t learn it in my teacher preparation program.

Lewis: I had a good and bad situation. My first job was in a new elementary school and I was able to set up my own program, but unfortunately the building was not ready. I had to teach in five schools. I packed everything each day and traveled around the district, a real roadshow. I certainly wasn’t prepared for that at the university. As far as discipline goes it really wasn’t a problem. I yell maybe once a year. The students and I set and talk things through. The kids aren’t angels, but over the years we’ve established a good rapport.

Freedman: At no time in your teacher preparation was it suggested you’d have to work in five different schools each week?

Lewis: No, and to add to the problem I had to handle special education classes that I wasn’t geared for. I had to take a crash course. I couldn’t learn it through reading. It seems the books that are written are done by people who sit down and only write books, I found I couldn’t practice what they preached.

Furcell: My personal feeling was I never got to feel like a “teacher” as an undergraduate. We were always made to feel, instead, like the “student.” I never got a sense of control from my teacher preparation. Personally for me the transition was difficult. I student taught in three schools, also teaching mentally retarded, for which I was unprepared. My student teaching was not a good learning experience, my cooperating teacher was seldom in the building with me. I had a closet and a gym, that was it. When I reflect back upon it now, I realize my first year of teaching was my student teaching.

Freedman: Now I’d like to change the focus a bit. Undergraduates take a variety of courses in their preparation programs. Which do you feel should receive more emphasis, the theoretical courses such as History and Philosophy of Physical Education, or the practical courses such as Methods?

Emery: Maybe I’m over simplifying — let the students come out with “great expectations” of what they can do. Try to develop enthusiasm and good program ideas, but they must also learn to cope with the incidentals — preparation for classes, the disturbances that erupt. These are hard things to anticipate in any kind of college course, be it practical or theoretical.

Schaffer: At my college everything was ideal — equipment, facilities; everyone had a ball. Based upon what I experienced as a high school student I knew this wasn’t the case. We tried to tell our instructors of the practical courses you won’t always have 40 volleyballs and 4 courts to work with. On the positive side during peer teaching we had to regress, be second graders for instance. I liked that, it taught me to be flexible. Some of my best lessons are taught on the spur of the moment. Of course I have a lesson plan to follow general guidelines. My practical courses taught me to keep both feet on the ground, be flexible.