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ABSTRACT

This paper examines issues fundamental to educating thoughtful, competent, intelligent teachers by highlighting arguments against out-of-field teaching in physical education teacher education programs. It discusses the inaccurate notion among some people that a good teacher can teach anything, noting what actually constitutes a good teacher in physical education teacher preparation. The paper explains that physical education teacher education programs have the potential to fall under the guise of out-of-field teaching. Teacher preparation programs house an array of courses from the applied sciences and allied fields of physical education, which can stand alone as separate fields of study yet are possible out-of-field teaching assignments. People who are pursuing employment in predominantly undergraduate institutions within physical education teacher education programs must be able to teach within several content areas, yet more than half of the doctoral degree granting programs in physical education-pedagogy offer only specialized curriculums. When teachers are assigned to courses outside their area of study, the curriculum is weakened by fragmented content knowledge. Departments should make every effort to help faculty develop the content knowledge necessary to suitably teach out-of-field assignments. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

# A Good Teacher Can Teach Anything?

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## A Good Teacher Can Teach Anything?

**Scenario:** Ms. Wilson, previously Coach Wilson, and now most recently Dr. Wilson has just accepted her first university tenure-track position with a state university as an assistant professor of pedagogy, teaching within the physical education teacher education program. She previously taught physical and health education at the secondary level for two years in the public schools. She has one year of flawless performance in a fast-track Master's degree program and has spent three years specializing in pedagogy where she supported herself teaching sections of aerobic dance, taking attendance in weight training courses and observing student teachers in the public schools.

Her new job? Typically, young assistant professors, like Dr. Wilson, regardless of where they might find themselves, will agree to teach anywhere from 6-12 credit hours per semester. With any luck, these loads will be broken down into two, three or four, 3 credit-hour courses. If, on the other hand, Dr. Wilson is assigned to teach activity courses as part of her load, she might very well find herself teaching more than a dozen different courses throughout the school year. Even though such a teaching schedule might seem like a step-up when compared to the heavy demands of being both teacher and student in graduate school, the most recent wave of reforms in education, as well as current trends toward departmental downsizing, now require that Dr. Wilson's teaching load exhibit the kind of depth expected by state departments of education and professional accrediting bodies and a breadth that continues to make the delivery of existing curricula viable with fewer faculty within her department.

While all of the courses that Dr. Wilson will be assigned to teach do fall within the domain of teacher preparation in physical education (her field of specialization), there is a better than average chance that she will find herself teaching one or more courses for which she has little specific background or possibly even interest. Perhaps, given the broad dimensions of content encompassed by undergraduate curricula in physical education teacher education programs this has become a necessary, if not reasonable, consequence. But even if we can convince ourselves that regardless of manpower issues the show must still go on, how do we justify the morality of accepting a student's trust and tuition for something we may or may not be able to appropriately deliver? What do circumstances such as these say about the esteem in which we hold the content we maintain is so necessary to the curriculum of physical education

teacher preparation? And what of our concern for Dr. Wilson as a person? Have we carefully thought through the long-term implications of reducing a bright, well-educated individual into an interchangeable part, a part that serves as a model for the coming generations of teachers we leave to her care? The purpose of this paper is to examine arguments that are fundamental for the education of thoughtful, competent, and intelligent teachers by bringing to light arguments against *out-of-field teaching* - the lack of fit between a teacher's field of study or training and their teaching assignments (Ingersoll, 1998) - as it exists in physical education teacher education programs.

**Feel-Good Cliche, Words of Self-Deception or Chalkboard-Hegemony?**

There exists a notion among some that " a good teacher can teach anything." As a self-affirming proclamation, this cliché is among a number of others that can be heard in physical education teaching circles whenever our marginalized status in an indifferent society becomes an issue. The point being made is that even though our subject matter may be discounted by society as somewhat less important or less "academic" than others, a good teacher, by virtue of his/her professionalism, is able to transcend the limitations or stereotypes associated with content. As this line of reasoning goes, a good teacher, whether they teach physical education, social studies or language arts could step into just about any instructional situation and see to it that the lesson that needs to be taught is taught. How can we be so sure? We're sure because a good teacher knows how to teach. At least this is the point some would argue.

And it is a clever argument. Essentially, however, the argument of the "good teacher", used in this way, appeals less to reason than to the prevailing sentiments of the teaching profession regarding teaching experience. Viewed through this lens, good teaching is a construct from at least two basic dimensions. One of these dimensions has to do with knowledge of subject matter (content knowledge) and the other is defined as the procedural knowledge or methods, organization, and management strategies used by teachers. Perhaps due to socializing variables linked to class rearing, teachers have traditionally held procedural knowledge, shaped by experience, in somewhat higher esteem than content expertise. Perhaps this is because the notion and value of professional experience is a local construction, whereas content expertise often requires an external examination of ability by an authority above and beyond the

immediate politics of the school. Or, perhaps the pursuit of subject matter expertise is seen as a self-serving and alienating endeavor whereas practical experience is more institutionally oriented and essentially the common ground of teacher labor. Or, perhaps being an "expert" carries with it negative ramifications associated with elitism or intellectualism in the practice-oriented world of teaching. Whatever the motivation, a conceptual framework that privileges procedural knowledge over subject matter knowledge is more likely to support the notion that a "good teacher" can find a way to teach just about anything.

In reality, how far from the mark is this view of teachers' work and their resourcefulness? Daily, teachers draw upon their procedural knowledge and institutional savvy to help them make the best of limited supplies and equipment, inadequate facilities, ineffectual administrators, pie-in-the-sky-flavor-of-the-month curriculum requirements, and, of course overcrowded teaching situations. A gymnasium environment portrayed as "busy, happy, and good", by all accounts, demonstrates a "good" teacher in the eyes of administrators as well as the teacher. Why couldn't a good teacher draw upon this pedagogical knowledge and experience to compensate for his or her lack of content expertise, that of which is a necessary prerequisite of a "good teacher" (Council for Basic Education, 1986; Ingersoll, 1998; Ingersoll & Gruber, 1996; Shulman, 1986)? Besides, don't we learn our subject matter best when we teach it? Content knowledge, the heart of understanding subject matter, allows teachers to help students learn. It stands to reason that in order to effectively foster student learning, one must also have a sound understanding of the content. Can a "good teacher" teach anything, even if their knowledge of the subject matter is deficient? Perhaps. But, are students learning? Probably not (Shulman, 1986).

From another point of view, the "good teacher" who can teach anything is much like the good salesperson who, on charisma alone, can sell anything. But in this case, to accept such a clever witticism as truth we must also be willing to believe that deception for the teacher is not only plausible (i.e., he or she can get away with it) but is also morally acceptable (i.e., he or she can still live with themselves after getting away with it). Unfortunate for the student and the profession, such deceptions are basically dishonest; unfortunately for the teacher, they often indicate just how little respect they have for the content, their students and their colleagues who righteously teach the subject matter in question as their area of specialization.

Even if it is true that stepping beyond the bounds of one's area of expertise and into the position of "teacher" includes subtle elements of deception, it is probably a bit strong to suggest that such misrepresentations are motivated by malicious intent or personal arrogance. More likely, the "good teacher" phenomenon, where it exists, evolves through institutional relationships, between faculty and their managers, founded on perceptions of necessity (what needs to be done), compromise (what can be done) and finally self-deception ("How hard can this stuff be to teach, anyway?" "Surely, I know more about the subject matter than the students.").

Because teacher education inherits much of its culture from public education, our institutional ancestry may play an important role in defining what a "good teacher" can and cannot do. In a world where "teaching" more commonly indicates a division of labor rather than an instructional process defined by the end result of learning, "good teachers" can teach anything in the same way that "good employees" can do what the boss or the job requires of them. In this instance, the "good teacher" phenomenon reflects the power relations leading to hegemonic decrees internalized by teachers that shape their practice (Fernandez-Balboa, 1992; Fernandez-Balboa, 1993). While it is bad enough that "good teachers" are seen by their employers as unproblematic and useful employees who serve, when necessary, as interchangeable parts in the curriculum, it becomes particularly painful to acknowledge the extent to which such politics have become thoroughly infused in the ways teachers reflect upon what it means to be a "good teacher."

So, who are the "good teachers" in physical education teacher preparation? Are they the most knowledgeable? Are they the best managers? Are they the most fit? Are they the most skilled? Or are they simply the most willing/available? How many times will young, newly-hired, assistant professors of pedagogy be asked to teach a motor development or motor learning course? And how many times will they agree to such responsibilities without so much as a minor in either of these areas of study? Closer to home, how many times will a physical education major be taught weight training, dance or cross-country skiing by a teacher who lacks specific content-related expertise but demonstrates good classroom management and organizational skills? To what extent would similar circumstances be acceptable to our brethren in the exercise sciences? Is it because there are no "good teachers" in exercise science?

A "good teacher" can teach anything, you say? Perhaps the chalkboard should instead read, "Those who can, do; those who *understand*, teach" (Shulman, 1986, p. 14).

**Conclusion**

Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs have the potential to fall under the guise of out-of-field teaching. Teacher preparation programs house an array of courses from the applied sciences and allied fields of physical education, those of which can stand alone as separate fields of study, yet are possible out-of-field teaching assignments for the pedagogist. Understandably, individuals who are pursuing employment in predominantly undergraduate institutions within physical education teacher education programs must be able to teach within several content areas (Rowe, 1996; Wood & Goc Karp, 1997), yet more than half of the doctoral degree-granting institutions in Physical Education-Pedagogy offer only specialized curriculums (Zakrajesk & Pierce, 1993).

So, let's assume that doctoral institutions offering degrees in Pedagogy in Physical Education remain unchanged in their specialized curriculum programs. Let us also presume that an increasing number of individuals are teaching in physical education teacher education programs who, for some reason or another, are assigned to teach courses outside their area of study, teaching the next wave of new physical education teachers. Although they may be filling the needed gaps within curriculum course requirements, the curriculum is weakened by fragmented content knowledge, content knowledge that supports quality teacher preparation programs. Departments, wise to the notion that out-of-field teaching is seen as the plague of educational accountability and teacher professionalism by downgrading the quality of instruction (Council for Basic Education, 1986; Ingersoll, 1998; Robinson, 1985), should make every effort to help faculty develop the content knowledge needed to suitably teach those out-of-field assignments, rather than 'fit a wheel with broken cogs'. With an understanding that out-of-field teaching assignments are a probability in many college and university PETE programs, efforts must be made to maximize the likelihood that those who *understand* are teaching, that quality instruction, including a sound base in content knowledge, is being provided to the future leaders in physical education.

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