

Physical Educators, Distance Learning, and the Pandemic: Crisis Learning

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators across the country to immediately shift their mode of teaching to a distance learning format. While online education was already an option in all 50 states, it was a choice for students and teachers. Distance learning in physical education is an under researched area, and there is minimal guidance on best practices (1). Additionally, physical educators have struggled to apply instructional practices from the face-to-face environment to online delivery (2). The purpose of this study was to investigate how K-12 physical educators adapted and responded to the transition to distance learning during the Spring 2020 semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants (N=226) were EC-12 physical education (PE) teachers and data were collected by an online survey towards the end of the Spring 2020 semester. Not surprisingly, teachers reported that they did not have any training in distance learning pedagogies before the pandemic, and most received training as their schools transitioned online. Overall, there was a desire for PE specific professional development related to online learning. Teachers used a variety of learning management systems, videos from the internet, and applications (i.e., Flipgrid and edpuzzle) in their distance learning courses. Eighty four percent of teachers claimed that health related fitness outcomes were the focus of the distance learning curriculum, which is consistent with the online physical education literature. While the shift in educational mode forced teachers to learn new skills and alter how they delivered content, additional supports will be needed to teach the breadth of PE content online.

Key Words: Physical Education, Distance Learning, Professional Development, Pandemic

Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, school districts worldwide transitioned to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, COVID-19 cases began to spike in early March when many school districts began their spring break holidays. The initial response in some school districts was to extend spring break for a week in the hopes of returning to face-to-face (FTF) instruction. Unfortunately, cases continued to spike, and Governors across the country began to cancel FTF classes for the remainder of the school year as it became apparent that there was widespread community transmission of the virus. School districts and their teachers had a short time to plan and shift their courses online while trying to address access and equity issues. The pandemic created a situation in which brick and mortar schools were not adequately prepared, especially for prolonged closure (3).

During the Fall 2020 semester most K-12 schools in the United States were continuing to offer hybrid or fully distanced learning (4). There was significant investment in attempting to overcome the digital divide by providing devices and internet hot spots to students (5), however the issue of access to computers and stable internet has disproportionately affected poorer students (6). Additional side effects of the pandemic have resulted in increased student absentee rates, teachers working longer hours, larger class sizes, and a heightened probability that low-income students are more likely to experience fully distance learning (6). Additionally, schools struggled to train their teachers to instruct online with some teachers reporting they have received inadequate guidance, especially for students with disabilities (4). Before the pandemic, fully distanced education, or online education, was an option for teachers and students who opted in, with over 1 million students taking at least one course online (7). Some states require completing at least one online course to graduate high school (8) or have policies for e-learning days (7). During the 2018-19 school year, across 32 states, only 375,000 students were enrolled full

time in online schools with the largest enrollment accounting for no more than 4% of a state's K-12 student population (7). While online education has been around for over two decades, historically it only served a small percentage of K-12 students in the United States.

Distance Learning in Physical Education

Research on best practices in distance learning in PE or online PE (OLPE) is scarce, and there have been repeated calls for additional research (1, 9, 10, 11, 12). Before the shift to distance learning due to the pandemic, 31 states allowed students to receive credit for PE by taking an OLPE course (13), and most of the enrollment was at the secondary level (14). SHAPE America (15) provided guidelines for appropriate practices in K-12 OLPE, but little is known about how PE teachers use technology in their teaching or how PE is taught comprehensively online.

What is known is that OLPE curriculum focuses on health-related fitness and the cognitive domains of learning. Additionally, there are concerns about physical activity requirements and accountability in OLPE (1). Common forms of assessment in OLPE include journals, activity logs, and to a lesser extent student-created videos (9, 12). Encouragingly, studies have found that OLPE courses are being taught by licensed teachers (9, 12, 16). Regardless, OLPE research needs to be expanded to provide validated best practices applied in distance learning.

Technology and Professional Development in Physical Education

While technology skills are widely acknowledged as an essential skill and should be present in teaching, physical educators often lack the technology knowledge to implement their teaching effectively (17, 18). To date, there are no studies that examine how physical educators are trained, formally or informally, to deliver online content. Physical education teacher education (PETE) programs across the country do not consistently include technology pedagogies in their undergraduate coursework (19). Additionally, PETE programs have not successfully introduced or modeled best practices for technology use (20, 21). Given this, it is not surprising that physical educators struggle to conceptualize how to translate instructional practices from the FTF format to online delivery (2).

Purpose and Research Questions

The COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in terms of the mass shift to distance learning. It is crucial to investigate the circumstances surrounding the shift to distance learning and how physical educators were impacted. History tends to repeat itself, and it is in the profession's best interest to learn and adapt from this extraordinary educational shift. As such, the purpose of this study was to investigate how K-12 physical educators adapted and responded to the transition to distance learning during the Spring 2020 semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated:

- What were the types of supports and professional development school districts provided their PE teachers?
- How did PE teachers use technology to deploy their distance learning lessons?
- How did PE teachers adjust and modify their curriculum, instruction, and assessment strategies when they transitioned to distance learning?

Methods

This study employed a mixed methods questionnaire to address the research questions. This manuscript addressed the quantitative questions on that survey, some of which allowed the participants to write in additional qualitative information to offer additional options or to clarify their selection. For example, a question about which learning management system (LMS) they used provided a range of options but also allowed participants to write in a response if the LMS they used was not listed. The questionnaire was sent to current PE teachers during the Spring of 2020 after schools had shifted to distance learning.

Participants

Participants (N=226) were EC-12 PE teachers who were teaching in the Spring of 2020. The state SHAPE America affiliates in California, New Mexico, and Texas were contacted by the investigators and asked to email the survey link to their active members. These states were selected based on relationships between SHAPE America affiliates in each state and the primary investigators of the study. Additionally, California and Texas represent two of the most populous states and have diverse populations. The California, New Mexico and Texas SHAPE America affiliates sent an email with the survey to their membership. The university's IRB board approved the final questionnaire.

There was a total of 234 participants who responded to the questionnaire. Eight questionnaires were excluded, five of the respondents were not PE teachers, and three PE teachers declined to participate, leaving 226 completed surveys. See Table 1 for detailed participant demographics.

Data Sources

The mixed methods questionnaire contained 26 questions. Nineteen questions required teachers to select an answer (ex. multiple choice); seven questions had a drop-down menu and a fill in the blank option that allowed a teacher to provide additional details related to the question. The questionnaire contained three different sections. The first section contained seven questions that covered demographics. Demographic questions included age, gender identity, education, school location, Title 1 status, years of experience, grade level and class size. The technology section contained seven questions regarding teachers' background in instructional technology, the types of technology used for OLPE, the supports provided by school districts during the transition to distance learning, and the supports for students without a device or high-speed internet at home. The final section covered the OLPE curriculum. Twelve questions addressed domains and content areas, student engagement, assessments, and modifications for students with disabilities.

The questionnaire was based on previous research in online PE (9) and evaluated by experts in OLPE to determine the content and construct validity. Additionally, to further guide the questions a review of the literature related to online PE was conducted before developing the questionnaire and questions were guided by the investigator's experiences working with K-12 physical educators and teacher candidates who had been teaching online. The primary investigator created an initial questionnaire and then shared the document with the two other investigators. Edits to the questionnaire were made separately and were then shared and revised during a video conference. An additional round of edits followed that, and the survey was finalized during a follow-up video conference.

Data Analysis

Data from select response questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Seven questions allowed the participants to provide additional information to a select response question. Representative thematic text analysis was applied to the additional data as described by Popping (22). As Popping (22) suggests, codes were created from text fragments after an initial reading of the open-ended responses. Unique codes were created for each open-ended question. Categories of data from open-ended response questions were created a posteriori. Individual responses were coded and placed in a specific category. Categories were organized into themes for further analysis.

Results

The results are organized around the following topics: professional development, technology, distance learning curriculum, and students with disabilities. The professional development questions asked about pre and post COVID instructional technology training. The technology category questions covered websites, apps, video conferencing, and other types of educational technology that teachers used to deploy their lessons during the shutdown. The distance learning curriculum questions addressed PE content, assessments, and student engagement. Lastly, questions about accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities are covered in the Special Education/504 section.

Professional Development

Ninety-one percent of teachers (n=196) did not have any formal training regarding distance learning for K-12 students before COVID. However, teachers did report using instructional technology with their FTF classes (see Table 2). The most common forms of pre-COVID technology training were using Learning Management Systems (LMS) in the FTF classes. Additionally, teachers identified they had received professional development on how to use Blackboard, Canvas, Google Classroom, Flipgrid, and Nearpod.

Data suggests that some PE teachers were given very little or no direct support from their school district. Twenty-nine teachers said “none” or N/A in response to the professional development or support question. Five teachers said, “not much” or “nothing really,” and eight responded that they did not receive any PE specific instruction or support. One teacher reported that they received training on using Google Classroom, but they did not receive any online pedagogy training. A lack of support from the district was also mentioned at the administrative level. A district-level PE specialist noted he was told to prepare the district’s PE teachers even though he did not have any OLPE experience.

Several teachers created formal and informal groups to support one another. One teacher reported that they were part of a committee of PE teachers that created resources for other teachers and uploaded them to a district-level website. Others used online resources and Facebook groups to develop and share lesson ideas. Another teacher created a list of PE resources for parents because the district did not initially provide PE resources.

Technology

Teachers used LMS’s, video conferencing, and various communication technologies to deploy their lessons remotely (see Table 3). Teachers identified they primarily used YouTube to find videos for their students. Teachers also created class channels on YouTube and uploaded self-produced videos to their channels. Teachers produced their videos using iMovie and other video editing software, and conducted live sessions using Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Microsoft Teams. Teachers reported that not all students had access to technology. The most common method for educating students without a device at home was to use a school district provided laptop or tablet.

Teachers also created PE lessons using Microsoft Office software (ex. Word and PowerPoint), Flipgrid, Ed Puzzle, Kahoot, and Class Dojo. Teachers used Google Sites with Google Forms and word processing applications for assessments. Teachers used the integrated LMS communication features, email, the Remind App, text messages, NEO, and ParentSquare to contact parents and students. A few teachers (n=19) reported that their districts provided funds for subscriptions to PE websites or fitness apps. The websites and apps mentioned were PE Central, PE Express, GoNoodle, Gopher Sport, Pure Edge, PLT4M, and Welnet.

Distance Learning Curriculum

Teachers created PE content in multiple domains which included the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains and lessons which centered around health-related fitness (see Table 4). SHAPE America (23) recommends that elementary schools provide 150 minutes of instructional PE per week for elementary students and 225 minutes for secondary students. A vast majority of the teachers reported that they did not meet those. Teachers reported a mixed approach to grading and assessments. Some school districts continued to assign grades, and others froze grades after the transition to distance learning. Several teachers reported that grades could go up but not down.

Because health-related fitness was where most of the content was focused, it is not surprising that the most common domain assessed was health-related fitness followed by the affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains. Physical activity logs were the most common form of assessment followed by journals and videos (see Table 5). Teachers also reported that they used online quizzes, surveys, data from fitness trackers, article summaries, discussion boards, project-based learning, and pictures. One teacher reported assessing the psychomotor domain using a video-conferencing application.

Students with disabilities

A majority of the teachers (n=188) had students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)/504 plan in

their general PE classes. Teachers accommodated their students' needs during distance learning by modifying the types of activities (n=106), modifying the duration of activities (n=72), and creating individualized lessons (n=32). Teachers provided students with the written text of video assignments. Some teachers did not modify assignments because the assignments were optional, the IEPs were not shared with them, or the IEPs did not contain PE objectives. Others reported that co-teachers, adapted PE teachers, case managers, and parents modified the activities. Only one teacher reported that they had options and modifications for all students.

Discussion

Educators worldwide were in crisis mode because of the pandemic related shutdown. Understandably school districts were not prepared for teaching 100% of their students online. Adding to the complexity online learning was a small part of K-12 education landscape (7), and the research literature does not currently define best practices for distance learning in PE (9, 10, 11, 12).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, OLPE was an option in 31 states (13), and most of the students were at the secondary level (14). That changed dramatically, and almost every K-12 student in the US finished their semester through distance learning. The profession was not prepared. Only nineteen of the participants responded that they had received training in distance learning for K-12 students, and there were also indications that teachers were not proficient in the use of technology in PE because teachers expressed the need for additional professional development. After the pandemic, there will likely be students who choose to attend online schools in many states. Teachers will also need or want to continue incorporating technology into their FTF classes.

The use of technology and pedagogical strategies for using technology in FTF and distance learning classes should be addressed in PETE programs. According to the Department of Education new teachers should be proficient in incorporating technology into the classroom once they complete their educator preparation program and they should not require remediation in this manner from their school districts (24). Additionally, SHAPE America's National Standards for Initial Physical Education Teacher Education state that teachers should use technology to plan and implement learning experiences, analyze motor skills and performance concepts, and for the promotion and advocacy of PE and physical activity (25).

Currently teacher education programs do not offer the opportunities or experiences to integrate technology into their field work experiences (26), and many pre-service teachers have not experienced technology integration or OLPE during their own K-12 PE experiences which may limit their receptiveness to using technology in their own teaching (27). Current PETE students will have experienced OLPE so it is up to PETE programs to rethink how they address technology in PETE curriculum.

Wyant et al. (28) studied the effectiveness of a single course designed to integrate instructional technology into a PETE program. The course increased teachers' technological knowledge and technological pedagogical content knowledge however, it is not clear how many PETE programs have a required content specific technology course (26). Programs that do not currently have content specific technology should consider adding them because pre-service teachers cited university faculty, prior coursework, and knowledge and comfort with technology tools as contributing factors to incorporating technology into PE classes during student teaching (29).

During the transition to distance learning, teachers, in some cases, were provided support and professional development from their districts. However, it appears that most of the training was on the nuts and bolts on how to use the different types of instructional technology and there did not seem to be a significant amount of online teaching pedagogy or PE specific professional development. Teaching online is more than uploading lessons and grading assignments, and teachers needed to be trained to teach online in their content area. Teaching PE online has its challenges, and teachers tried to meet those challenges with training and solutions designed for classroom teachers. However, teachers will need content-specific online pedagogy training so they can be effective teachers if they are required to teach online in the future.

In the FTF environment, PE teachers tend to focus their curriculum on the psychomotor domain. However, the shutdown made teaching in that domain more complicated, and this forced

teachers to focus on other domains. Teachers mostly created assignments in the cognitive and health-related fitness domains because that is the strength of online learning and where there are more tools readily available to assess these domains. The focus on these domains is consistent with prior literature regarding OLPE programs (9). Many teachers created workout sheets, workout videos, or linked to previously created workout videos. The students then watched the videos and completed workout journals or activity logs.

Not surprisingly, but still concerning, activity logs were a primary form of assessment. Activity logs have been used in OLPE courses before the pandemic, however significant concerns about the level of honesty and accountability remain (9, 10). Other concerns that come from the results of this study are that PE teachers often teach large classes, which is not easy to manage in the online learning space. Also, many of the teachers in this study did not have learning experiences that included enough physical activity requirements resulting in only a small portion of children accumulating the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day. While scheduling and even the ability to assess students was outside of the teachers' control, physical activity is certainly something that needs to be integrated in the design of OLPE courses.

A majority of the teachers reported that they had students with an IEP or 504 plan in their distance learning classes. Encouragingly, most of the teachers modified tasks and assignments accordingly. However, some teachers did not modify their plans because the IEP/504 Plan modifications and accommodations were not related to PE or the school district did not require graded assignments.

Conclusion

This study was conducted at the end of the Spring 2020 semester when teachers were dealing with the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty of how to finish out the Spring 2020 semester, while simultaneously wondering what the educational system in the Fall 2020 would look like. The data from this study indicate that PE teachers needed more support from their school districts. Many teachers were exposed to distance learning for the first time, and not every teacher received the training and logistical support that they needed to be effective teachers. This can partially be excused by the chaotic nature of the pandemic and the rapidly changing conditions on the ground. Additionally, it was unknown how long the pandemic would force schools to remain closed to in-person learning. School districts should have provided more content-specific professional development when it became clear that schools would remain closed, and it was possible that students would not be able to return to in-person learning in the Fall.

More research related to OLPE is needed. While there is a dearth of research into best practices in OLPE it is possible that some positive things regarding OLPE could emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers gained new technology skills and it is unclear how they are using those skills since they returned to FTF instruction. Additionally, the profession now has thousands of PE teachers who have experienced teaching PE via distance learning. While there are questions about the quality of this experience, these experiences will allow educators and researchers to collaborate to refine the best practices that can be applied to future OLPE courses.

The lack of professional development by school districts in preparing PE teachers to deliver quality PE in an online format was apparent in this study. Additionally, PETE programs need to reflect on how they integrate technology competencies for their pre-service teachers. This study has shown that teachers were in dire need to receive specific training in online teaching methods and PETE programs may be the remedy to be able to offer some of that guidance. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for PETE programs to integrate more technology-based content, including online pedagogies, throughout teacher education programs.

While this study targeted populous and diverse states, a limitation of this study is that experiences of teachers in smaller states, less diverse states, or different regions may have been different. Future studies should seek to expand upon the knowledge-base related to teachers and students' experiences in distance learning, including a more in-depth analysis of the types of lessons and assessments teachers created to inform best practices.

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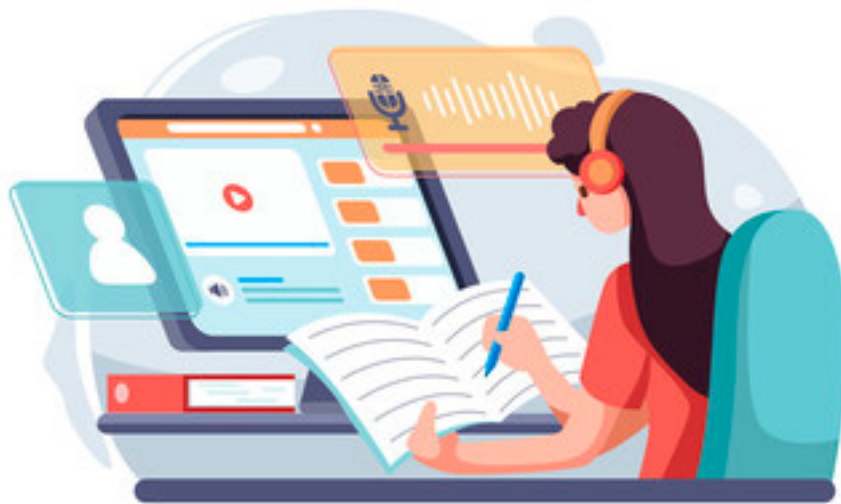
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Tables

Table 1 Demographics

Gender (N=216)

Female	134
Male	79
Non-Binary	3

Educational Level (N=211)

Bachelors	83
Masters	127
Doctorate	1

Level (N=219)

Elementary School	43
Middle School	82
High School	56
Multiple Levels	38

Location (N=213)

Rural	23
Urban	53
Suburban	137

Title 1 School (N=)

Yes	109
No	94
Not Sure	22

Class Size (N=223)

<20	7
21-30	54
31-40	56
> 41	106

Table2. Professional Development

Statement	Possible response	F	%
What is your background in using technology for teaching and learning?	I've learned on the Job	186	86
	I've had professional development	130	60
	I've taken classes	52	24
	I've gotten certifications	24	11
	I've gotten a degree in educational technology	7	3

Table 3. Technology

Statement	Possible Response	F	%
What types of technology did you use to deploy your online lessons?	LMS	189	88
	Video or Web Conferencing	151	70
	Email	142	66
	Phone	47	21
	Other	28	13

Table 4. Distance Learning Curriculum

Statement	Possible response	F	%
What types of distance learning activities are you assigning your students?	Handouts	79	37
	Online videos I produced	90	42
	Online videos I found on the internet	160	74
	Online videos – live sessions	72	33
	Other	68	32
Which physical education content areas are included in your distance learning lessons?	Motor skill development	137	64
	Cognitive development	127	59
	Health related fitness development	180	84
	Affective Development	147	68

Table 5. Assessments

Statement	Possible response	F	%
Which domains were you assessing?	Affective	45	38
	Cognitive	64	55
	Psychomotor	47	40
	Health Related Fitness	100	85
	Journal	38	32
What types of formally graded assessment activities did you assign your students?	Video	49	42
	Activity log	90	77
	Other	43	37