Student teachers’ perceptions of the practicum in physical education teacher education in Norway

Kjersti Mordal Moen and Øyvind F. Standal

Introduction

Physical education teacher educators in the Nordic countries, as well as worldwide, have tried to have an impact upon student teachers’ beliefs and practices in different ways. However, research from the mid-1990s (Evans, Davies & Penney, 1996), as well as contemporary studies (Dowling, 2011; Larsson, 2009; Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012, 2014; Velija, Capel, Katene & Hayes, 2008) show that physical education teacher education (PETE) programmes often do not change students’ typically conservative beliefs about PE. Consequently, it has been suggested that newly qualified teachers seem to simply revert to the practices they experienced as pupils as soon as they begin teaching (Matanin & Collier, 2003). Nevertheless, one aspect of PETE that both student teachers and university tutors claim as playing a role in student teachers’ development as future teachers is the practicum.
Some research has been undertaken in the Nordic countries concerning PETE (Dowling, 2011; Larsson, 2009; Moen, 2011; Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012, 2014). Larsson (2009) has studied PETE in Sweden through a questionnaire for student teachers, interviews with teacher educators and essay-writing for both groups. Her main aim was to examine the student teachers’ encounters with a teacher education programme. Larsson found that the positive value of sport that students bring with them into education is reinforced during education, rather than challenged. Larsson study shows a distinction in the way students perceive theory and practice in education, where practice was about ‘doing’ (sporting activities) and theory was concerned with reading the literature. However, Larsson did not elaborate on the practicum part of the PETE programme in her study.

Dowling (2011) reports a focus group study of twelve PE student teachers in Norway who were in their final semester of a bachelor’s course in a physical education and sports (BAPE) programme. The aim of the study was to investigate what discourses about professionalism were currently prevalent in PETE in Norway. The study showed that ‘views about professionalism in PETE tend to be normative in nature, and are not founded on explicit theoretical ideas about “good” practice or theoretical understandings of the role of the teacher in postmodern schools’ (Dowling, 2001, p. 201). Regarding the practicum, Dowling claims that it only amounts to an apprenticeship of observation in which students learn to imitate their mentors. Dowling states that one reason for this is that the mentors emphasize the practicalities of teaching rather than reflecting on the broader social and ethical issues of teaching.

This is similar to what Moen (2011) and Mordal-Moen and Green (2012, 2014) found in a case study of PETE in Norway. The study included 15 one-to-one interviews of PE teachers’ educators as well as five focus group interviews of PE student teachers (with a total of 41 student teachers) from all three routes to becoming a PE teacher in Norway (see the Methods section below). The aim of the study was to establish in detail how PE teacher educators and PE student teachers viewed the nature and purposes of PETE in Norway. The study showed that the teacher educators, as well as the student teachers, viewed learning to teach PE much in the same way as they viewed PE itself: that it is as an essentially practical process revolving around the teaching and coaching of sport skills. Hence both teacher educators and student teachers’ reflexivity levels were relatively weak.

Studies by Dowling (2011) and Mordal-Moen and Green (2012) both report that students are more satisfied with their experience during the practicum than with all other aspects of the PETE programme. The practicum was considered as the setting where student teachers learned what being a PE teacher was really like. Both implicitly and explicitly, the studies highlight the prominent role of the mentor teacher in the student teachers’ development in becoming prospective PE teachers. However, the above-mentioned studies investigated PETE in general without a particular focus on the practicum part. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to acquire in-depth knowledge of the role of the mentor teacher in the student teachers’ development in becoming prospective PE teachers. However, the above-mentioned studies investigated PETE in general without a particular focus on the practicum part. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to acquire in-depth knowledge of the role of the mentor teacher in the student teachers’ development in becoming prospective PE teachers.
decades. Various aspects of the practicum process have been examined. Some studies have examined the cooperation between the university college and the practicum school (Chambers & Armour, 2012), while others have explored the experiences of the cooperating teachers during the practicum (Belton, Woods, Dunning & Meegan, 2010; Hynes-Dusel, 1999; Kahan, Sinclair, Saucier & Caiozzi, 2003; Tjeerdema, 1998). Sirna, Tinning and Rossi (2008) investigated the practicum environment, while others have investigated how alternative ways of organizing the practicum may enhance students' learning outcomes and levels of reflection (Jenkins, Garn & Jenkins, 2005; Lamb, Lane & Aldous, 2012; Ovens, 2004).

Considering the student teacher perspective, Stidder and Hayes (2006) performed a longitudinal quantitative study of students' practicum experiences. Furthermore, Stidder (2012) has also studied the experiences of a female trainee teacher undertaking her practicum at a boy's school, while others have investigated student teachers’ experiences of implementing alternative teaching models into the practicum in PETE (Dunning, Meegan, Woods & Belton, 2011; McNeill, Fry, Wright, Tan, Tan & Schempp, 2012; Wang & Ha, 2012). However, it appears that few international studies have taken a qualitative approach in studying what students as a group think about what and how they learn in the practicum. In light of this, and the lack of Scandinavian research on the practicum in PETE, the aim of this study was to acquire in-depth knowledge of the student teachers’ perceptions by posing the following questions: What perceptions do student teachers have of what and how they learn in the practicum in PETE?

**Theoretical framework**

*Apprenticeship of observation* is a term employed by Lortie (2002), and has become an expression for the preconceived understanding of the teaching profession that prospective teachers bring with them when they enter teacher education. According to Lortie, pupils experience teacher behaviour in a similar vein to how an audience views a play. That is, they see only the onstage performance, not the ‘backstage’ behaviour, such as teachers’ professional intentions and reflections on events in the classroom. Hence, because pupils rarely participate in selecting goals, making preparations, or undertaking analyses of teaching performance, they do not place the teacher's actions within a pedagogically-oriented framework (Lortie 2002).

This means that mediated entry can be viewed as a form of apprenticeship which involves degrees of observational learning, but which also differs from the apprenticeship of observation described by Lortie (2002), and which prospective teachers have experienced in their schooling prior to teacher education. It is therefore necessary to look into other ways of conceptualizing learning that takes place through mediated entry. For that purpose we draw upon conceptual resources from situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). More specifically, the notions of legitimate peripheral participation, and community of practice, are valuable in order to facilitate interpretation and discussion of our research material.

Situated learning theory has inspired Nordic education researchers, for instance through the works of Klaus Nielsen and Steinar Kvale on learning as a social practice (Nielsen & Kvale, 1999; 2003). The theory
was developed through a series of studies on apprenticeship learning where Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the concepts legitimate peripheral participation and community of practice. Community of practice was defined as ‘groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’ (Wenger, n.d., p. 1). A central character of communities of practice is legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger stress the importance of taking the concept as a whole, because each of the components is indispensable in defining the others. Furthermore, Lave and Wenger proposed that legitimate peripheral participation is a ‘descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent’ (p. 35). This means that when applied to PETE, the practicum setting is a place where students take part in a social practice, i.e. the practice of performing the role as a physical education teacher. In addition to participation, it is clear that learning to become a teacher is integral to their participation in this social practice.

Legitimate peripheral participation can therefore be seen as an analytic viewpoint on learning, allowing us to analyse how newcomers are inducted into an existing practice, how they are allowed to participate, and what possibilities they have to move towards full participation in the community of practice. In particular, and due to the students’ roles as student teachers, the notion of peripheral participation is important. The reason for this is that Lave and Wenger see ‘peripherality’ as a favourable position for newcomers. Peripheral participation can give student teachers an overview, a sense of what is important and valued in the community of practice that they enter, and with time it can lead to full participation.

Whereas the notion of community of practice was ‘left largely as an intuitive notion’ by Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 42), Wenger (1998) subsequently developed the term. A community of practice is characterized by a group of people who share an engagement in something they do, i.e. they have a joint enterprise. In that process of sharing engagement, they develop specific ways of, for instance, solving common problems and of talking about their practice. Thus they ‘create meaningful statements about the world, as well as styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members’ (p. 83). It is important to note that this process which for newcomers is a process of moving from peripheral to full participation, is not necessarily harmonious and free from power struggles.

For our purpose, it is important to note that a driving force in the learning process is what Wenger terms negotiation of meaning. To negotiate in this context means to bargain with others in order to establish a meaning within the community’s joint enterprise. In other words, if we think of the practicum as a possibility for mediated entry into the community of physical education teachers, then students in the position of peripheral participants have the opportunity to make meaning out of what their future profession will look like.

Methods and analysis

This paper presents findings from a larger study that investigates PE teacher educators, PE student teachers and mentor teachers’ perceptions of the practicum at three institutions providing PETE in Norway. In this article we explore the student teachers’ perceptions. Prior to outlining the methodological aspects of the study, it is necessary to provide some information about PETE in Norway.
PETE in Norway

In the academic year 2011/2012, when this study was undertaken, there were three different educational routes to becoming a PE teacher in Norway. The first was to acquire 30 or 60 credits in PE as a part of General Teacher Education (GTE). Another route was to take a Bachelor's degree in PE and Sports (BAPE), a three-year course studying PE full-time in which students acquired the title Subject Teacher in PE. The third route to graduating as a PE teacher in Norway was to take a bachelor's degree in, for example, sport science, outdoor studies, or fitness, and then complete a further one-year (60 credits) Practical and Didactical Education (PDE) qualification, which qualifies the students as Subject Teachers in PE. All three routes into PE teaching are based on the national curriculum for teacher education (Regjeringen, 2010; UFD, 2003a, b). The practicum period accounts for approximately 10% of the BAPE programme, 13% of the GTE programme, and 33% of PDE.

During teacher education, including the practicum, the national curriculum requires that student teachers reflect upon, as well as achieve, the five different teacher competencies: subject, didactical, social, adaptive and development, and professional ethics competencies (UFD, 2003a, b). In the national curriculum for GTE (Regjeringen, 2010) they have extended the competencies required to be achieved by a teacher during education. However, they still cover the five competencies mentioned above.

Considering roles in the practicum – in the BAPE and PDE (UFD, 2003a, b) – it is required that the institutions develop a plan for the practicum in cooperation with the practicum school. The responsibilities of the university teacher, the mentor teacher, and the students, have to be explored in the local curricula. In the national curriculum for GTE, the common responsibility between the mentor teacher and the university teacher is outlined concerning mentoring and assessment of the student teachers in the practicum.

Participants: institutions and student teachers

The institutions invited to participate in the study (called University College (UC) 1, 2 and 3 for anonymity), were chosen on the basis of i) providing at least two of the three routes to become a PE teacher in Norway in the academic year 2011–2012; ii) the size of the university college, including both small and large university colleges; and iii) geographical location, so as to include university colleges located in both urban and rural settings. The rationale for this sample was to cover the complexity in the Norwegian higher education system in PETE.

This paper presents the findings of six focus group interviews of student teachers. We undertook two interviews with GTE students, two with BAPE students, and two with PDE students. Following an oral presentation of the study, all students enrolled in the programmes were invited to participate. Among those who agreed to take part, a random selection of eight participants was asked to attend the group interview. These participants received an information letter about the project. Of the 48 student teachers invited to participate in the interviews, 37 (12 women and 25 male) actually took part in the study. The number of participants in the 6 focus groups varied from 4 to 8 in each group, which is in line with what Malterud (2012) suggests as an appropriate focus group size. We also tried to include a gender balance in all of the groups, but this was not achieved in all instances.
Interview procedure
For the purpose of the study, a focus group interview was chosen as an appropriate method, since all participants were required to have shared some common experiences from the practicum in PETE (Parker & Titter, 2006). Two key themes (and related questions) formed the basis of the semi-structured focus group interviews with the student teachers: their perceptions regarding PE and PETE, and their perceptions regarding the practicum in PETE. Five of the six interviews were conducted by the same researcher, while one interview was conducted by another member of the research group. The interviews lasted between 1 hour and 1 hour and 20 minutes. Four interviews lasted more than one hour. All interviews took place in a quiet classroom or meeting room, and were audio-taped with the student teachers’ oral consent. In one of the interviews, a member of the research group sat in as an observer, in order to learn more about facilitating focus group interviews.

Before commencing the interview, the interviewer gave a brief, standardized explanation of the nature of the research. Furthermore, all participants signed a consent form, in which they agreed that the information supplied could be used in publications by the research group, if anonymized. This is in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Norwegian Social Sciences Data Service, which has endorsed the project.

Data analysis
The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and subjected to an explorative, thematic analysis (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). This was performed jointly by the two researchers. The starting point of the analysis came from the research questions for the project as well as the main themes in the interview guide. The first step was an initial analysis of two randomly selected interviews where we independently read the transcripts and met to discuss recurrent themes in the interviews, in order to decide on a tentative categorization for the main analysis. This procedure corresponds with what MacQueen, McLellan, Kay and Milstein (1998) suggest as appropriate when researchers undertake team-based qualitative research. The next step was for the researchers to independently re-read all interviews, before we met again to discuss the analyses. In this process, some categories were omitted and others became more refined (i.e. several sub-cate-

Table 1. Information relating to students participating in the focus group interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study programme</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Female students</th>
<th>Male students</th>
<th>Total number of students from each study programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GTE</td>
<td>UC 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTE</td>
<td>UC 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAPE</td>
<td>UC 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAPE</td>
<td>UC 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDE</td>
<td>UC 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDE</td>
<td>UC 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The refined set of categories corresponds with the headings in the next section (i.e. Organization of the practicum, Observing and being observed and Finding one's own way). Thus, these headings were generated abductively (Fangen, 2009), that is, a process by which a joint discussion of theory and empirical material guided us towards the realization of these categories.

The findings presented in the following discussion correspond to what Fangen (2009) calls an interpretation of the first degree, where we have tried to render what the students expressed in their own words, but adding our analytical categories. We also perform an interpretation of the second degree (Fangen, 2009), where we discuss the meanings and implications of the findings in light of previous research and the theoretical framework.

**Results**

In this section, we first present the findings relating to student teachers’ perceptions of the organization of the practicum. Thereafter we explore the student teachers’ perceptions of how and what they learn in the practicum in the sub-sections observing and being observed and finding one’s own way.

**Organization of the practicum**

When asked who they saw as being responsible for the practicum, many student teachers replied in similar terms to the way one student expressed it: ‘The university college is responsible for the practicum in PETE’ (PDE, UC 2). However, the respondents also reported that over and above the organization of the practical implications of ‘which schools we were going to in the practicum’ (BAPE, UC 3), the university colleges played a minor role both before and during the practicum. Actually, our material shows that the students experienced a lack of involvement by the university tutors during the practicum:

> It was as though he [the university tutor] took a lunch break when he visited us, and that he wanted to talk about the weather. He had little to contribute. He watched the class, and thought it was okay and nothing more (PDE, UC 2).

All-in-all, it seemed as though the students experienced the intention of the contact teacher’s visit was to ‘observe the place [the practice school and mentor teacher], not necessarily us’ (PDE, UC 1).

One consequence of the absence of the university college and university tutors seemed to be that the students experienced the mentor teachers to be those who really were in charge of the practicum, both regarding the content and its practical implementation. That is, they viewed the mentor teachers as those who determined what the student teachers should do during the practicum period as well as how to ‘deliver’ the practicum to the students. The following quotation reflects this:

> I feel the practicum is very dependent on the mentor teachers. At the school I am now I get the freedom to try out different ways of doing things – doing it my way. Compared to the previous practicum where I was told how she [the mentor teacher] would have done it. So it all depends on the mentor (PDE, UC 1).

In other words, an important finding was indeed that what happened in the practicum seemed to ‘depend entirely on luck regarding what kind of mentor teacher you get’ (BAPE, UC 3). For example, the mentor teachers’ timetable decided how many PE classes the student teachers would actually teach during a practicum period: ‘It depends on what school you are placed at … and how many PE classes your mentor teacher has’.
In general, our findings show that in the view of the students, there seems to be a lack of formal agreement between the practice school (mentor teachers) and the university college on how many hours each student was expected to teach PE, observe peer students’ teaching, or how much they were supposed to participate in the everyday life at school during the practicum period. Regarding this last point, some student teachers mentioned that they ‘took part in teacher meetings about the class, the school’s further priorities and such. We obtained a good insight into many of the things that happen outside the classroom’ (GTE, UC 1). However, the overall focus in the practicum ‘was on the subject and didactics, how to write a plan for the lesson, and undertake the practical teaching, not much besides that’ (PDE, UC 2).

Considering supervision during the practicum, our material indicates that the students had different experiences. However, the most common way to organize the supervision after teaching was to ‘talk after the lesson: first the person who has had the class talks, then the peer students, and then the mentor teacher’ (BAPE, UC 3). Beside this common way to organize supervision, we also found examples where the students used their peers strategically as supervisors in the practicum, although in an ad hoc way:

I think is beneficial to be two [in the practicum]. Carl [pseudonym] and I discussed a lot in the car back and forth from the practicum school. Things we had seen and experienced. Carl had often seen things from another perspective if he had observed me teaching, and I had observed something when he was teaching. And we might become more conscious about these issues when we talk about them. Because as he (Carl) says, if we do not get time to think about these issues or discuss them, they are likely to be forgotten (BAPE, UC3).

Observing and being observed
Despite the view that the content and delivery of the practicum seemed to depend on chance, one of the clearest findings in this study is the value the student teachers assign to the practicum. The participants in our study state that it is through the practicum that they really learn what it is like to teach PE. The student teachers also contrasted the practicum with other parts of the PETE programme that were taught at the university college in a way that one might suspect that they left behind their roles as students, or that the role of a student took on a new significance: ‘[In the practicum] we are kind of like apprentices, I feel’ (PDE-UC1). When asked what was meant by being an apprentice in this context, the answer was that it was to learn the profession from ‘someone who knows it, and to get a lot of practical advice’ (PDE-UC1). Observation of the mentor teacher and their peers, as well as trying out teaching themselves, were considered as key learning processes by the student teachers.

The most common way to be introduced to the practicum was to observe the mentor teacher teaching his or her class. It was reported that this form of observation was commonly followed by a meeting in which the student teachers expected that the mentor teacher ‘justified the choices made during the lesson. That we go through the lesson together and he explains his thoughts behind what he did, for instance organization, as well as dealing with conflicts if that arises’ (GTE-UC1). While observing, both the mentor teacher and peers, the students took notes: ‘You make notes of what he is doing, positive things, but also if you find negative things. And then you talk about it afterwards’ (BAPE-UC3). However, it also appears from the material that this kind of feedback between students and mentors did not always take place; sometimes they just
continued on to the next lesson without much comment.

Though some of the students seemed to value the introduction through observing the mentor teacher, others saw it differently:

As a start, I had one week of observing the mentor teacher. But, I really think we should just be thrown into it and observe each other. We have all been taught, and seen a teacher do it [i.e. teach]. It is about feeling it yourself (BAPE-UC3).

Most of the time, the student teachers came to the practicum in groups. Hence they were either given a shared responsibility for a lesson, or they divided the lessons between them, so that one was responsible for conducting the whole lesson and the other(s) could observe from the sidelines. Generally, the student teachers experienced having sole responsibility for a lesson as rather stressful, but that having a peer observing them helped in processing what had happened in the lesson:

When you are responsible, your sole focus is on the lesson and trying to convey what you want the pupils to learn. Then you lose the overview, you know, seeing the whole class. That is very difficult for a new teacher (PDE-UC2).

Conversely, observing a fellow student teacher was a situation with less stress:

'It is much easier to sit on the outside and see minor errors or things you would have done differently yourself … You learn just as much from that' (BAPE-UC2).

As the last quotes allude to, the object of observations, i.e. what the student teachers are concerned with while observing their peers, is primarily the didactical aspects of teaching and issues concerning class management, in particular behavioural challenges. The focus of their attention is ‘the lesson plan and the time. To get everyone through. We do not have much time and keep in the back of our minds that we must try to get everyone through the lesson, giving their best effort’ (PDE-UC2). It is the practical aspects of getting through a lesson with which they are most concerned and that they exchange feedback on in post-lesson discussions.

The student teachers in our material assign much importance to the process of learning by observing others. However, it is also clear from our analysis that what they really want to spend their time on is teaching themselves. ‘The most relevant after all is to teach by yourself; because that’s what the working day will look like later’ (PDE-UC1). The student teachers acknowledge that sharing lessons (i.e. co-teaching) and observing – or being observed by – peers is not what their regular work day is like when they enter the teaching profession. On the other hand, they also realize that this is a learning opportunity they will not have access to in their professional life, so ‘getting the opinion on what works from others and getting different views on things is important’ (GTE-UC3). Despite this, it does appear that the major purpose of the practicum for student teachers is to get a sense of what it is really like to be a PE teacher. Thus, several mention that towards the end of their PETE programme they want to have lessons where they are alone, without being observed:

It is good to have lessons all alone, where the mentor teacher and student peers are not present; that they are not watching from the sidelines at all. I had a couple of lessons like that in the last practicum. … It works and gives you a different sense of responsibility (PDE-UC1).

Finding one’s own way
According to our analysis, the students held that knowledge about what it is like to teach cannot be acquired at the university college as efficiently as in the practicum setting. In
addition, the student teachers see the practicum as a possibility to find out whether being a teacher is something for which they are suited:

I think the practicum should be very similar to everyday life as you’d experience it, so that you know what you are getting into and how you react to real situations. If you apply for a position, begin working, and haven’t had a real insight into it, and suddenly find out that it is not for you, that you don’t function as a teacher, you’re not able to deal with the responsibility. … It would be better to get [this insight] in the practicum. Then you know if this is an occupation that suits you or not (PDE-UC1).

In addition to finding out whether teaching is something for them, the practicum also enabled the students to find out what kind of teacher they could become. ‘I expect to get constructive criticism from the mentor teacher on how I am as a teacher’ (BAPE-UC2). Others mention that they want to ‘find out how I best function as a teacher; how I can develop personally as a teacher through the practicum when I have a mentor teacher to support me’ (PDE-UC1).

Clearly, the mentor teacher is viewed as a person who can guide the students in finding their role as teachers. However, the students said that they did not merely copy their mentor teacher’s style or behaviour. As mentioned, they noted what they considered to be the negative sides of their mentor teacher, and thus seemed to learn what not to do. In addition, they also said that the style that they were developing through the practicum was a kind of personal synthesis.

The first year, I was with a mentor teacher who had worked for many years… and who had routines for everything. This year I am with a younger teacher who more takes it as it comes. Both worked very well, and I guess that’s how we are going to become – finding our own styles when we have finished the education (GTE-UC1).

Whereas finding a personal style as a teacher appeared to be important, some students also said that they picked up and synthesized didactical tools from different teachers ‘like smart ways of dividing the students [into groups] without creating havoc; you pick up things from mentor teachers and others you’ve been with’ (BAPE-UC3).

Our material shows that the students also emphasized the wish to find strategies to handle the stress they experienced in teaching situations. Not only was the responsibility for conducting lessons a source of stress, but they also wanted to learn ways of handling the overall workload: ‘If I were to work as I do now in a full-time PE teacher position, I would hit the wall after three months. One is really stressed. … So, [I need] some tips and tricks to make it less stressful’ (BAPE-UC2). Others had a more pragmatic outlook on this situation and realized that all the planning they had to do for preparation was something they didn’t have to do when they became teachers.

Discussion

Our findings show that the way the practicum is organized can be described as highly variable both between and within the different UCs in our material. Beyond the number of weeks spent in the practicum, the students expressed the view that the practicum was organized in different ways at the various schools they had attended. Hence, the students in our material did not experience a common structure for the practicum. From a normative standpoint, this finding suggests that more should be done to ensure uniformity in students’ opportunities in the practicum. On the other hand, standardizing the practicum so that all student teachers re-
ceive a very similar quantity and quality of practicum education is probably impossible. The schools that the students are sent to have a degree of independence in terms of how they are organized. Consequently, differences in what they can offer student teachers are bound to occur. In addition, the UCs are at the mercy of the specific mentor teachers who actually sign up to do the job. The situation is that more often than not, UCs cannot choose but have to accept those who are willing to be mentor teachers. This puts constraints on the UCs’ possibilities for formulating guidelines that mentor teachers may find difficult to accept (Sirna, et al., 2008).

Without exception, the student teachers’ experience was that the university college left the responsibility for the practicum to the mentor teachers. Similar to previous studies, the student teachers’ experience was that the university tutors occupied a relatively distant role during the practicum (Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012; Velija et al., 2008). If they visited the school, the students thought they were checking the mentor school rather than making a contribution to the students’ learning process. A consequence of this marginal involvement from the university tutors is that it places the responsibility for what and how students learn during the practicum upon the mentor teachers.

Another finding in this study is the degree to which the student teachers emphasize the reality aspect of the practicum, i.e. that the practicum is where they really learn what teaching is all about. Together with the absence of university tutors in the practicum, this implies that mentor teachers may have a greater impact upon the teaching behaviour and attitudes of student teachers than the education they receive at the UCs (Behets & Vergauwen, 2006). In other words, the mentors may be seen as playing a more substantial part in student teachers’ professional socialization than their university tutors do (Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012; Velija et al., 2008). The reason for this may be vague and contradictory goals in plans, as well as superficial criteria for assessment, which make the student teachers dependent on their mentor teacher (Sundli, 2007). Thus, one might question whether this personal and incidental practice will lead to educating skilled PE teachers in line with what the national curriculum prescribes. This all leads to the suggestion that, similar to earlier studies (Moen, 2011; Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012; Penney & Evans, 2005), our study has identified a conflict between current practice in PETE and the intentions of the national curriculum (UFD, 2003a, b; Regjeringen, 2010); it is an example of ‘slippage’ (Penney & Evans, 2005) between policy and practice.

Interestingly, some of the students explicitly referred to their practicum role as that of apprentices. Added to this, the students saw the practicum as giving the most valuable and realistic insight into what it is to be a teacher. Whereas student teachers probably see themselves more as students than teachers at the UCs, our findings suggest that they see themselves more as apprentice teachers than students during the practicum. Thus, the student teachers appear to adjust their identity from being students towards that of being teachers.

One of the features of Lortie’s use of the concept ‘apprenticeship of observation’ is that pupils only see the ‘onstage performance’ of the teacher without seeing the preparations and deliberations before and after teaching. Even though the students in our study clearly emphasize the importance of the teaching experience, i.e. the onstage performance, they are also required to provide arguments for their choices of goals and teaching strategies. In this sense, they are not apprentices of observation in the same way as the pupils in Lortie’s (2002) original study.
On the other hand, student teachers will have been exposed to hundreds of hours of contact with a PE teacher prior to entering teacher education programmes. Consequently, one might assume that they enter PETE programmes with strongly held beliefs about teaching that are built on years of experiencing education as pupils (Behets & Vergauwen, 2006; Chen & Ennis, 1996; O’Byant, O’Sullivan & Raudetsky, 2000). In addition, PE student teachers are influenced by their participation in youth sport, where they have experienced different coaches. Research indicates that they tend to copy the coaches’ behaviour, applying this to their own PE teaching (Green, 2003; Næss, 1998).

For Lortie (2002), the practicum is an example of mediated entry characterized by protracted engagement with the teaching profession, through a series of steps from simple to complex. As indicated by the findings, the students seem to want to rush their development towards full participation. For one thing, the value of observing their mentor teacher is questioned. Also, even though they clearly appreciate sharing responsibility for a lesson with a peer student, as well as having the opportunities to both observe and be observed, our material suggests that students want to ‘be thrown into it’ and get a taste of the realities of teaching.

In terms of situated learning, this would imply that students do not take advantage of the possibilities of peripheral participation. Peripherality in situated learning is seen as an advantageous vantage point from which students can learn about the demands and requirements of the profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This position is advantageous also because it relieves the students of the responsibility and stress of full commitment. As the results show, the students also report that they actually become very stressed by the demands of teaching. Therefore, we suggest that the students could benefit from a more structured and protracted progression than that found in our material. One might wonder whether it would help their learning process to have close to full responsibility in earlier stages of their practicum.

In the literature on apprenticeship learning, observation and imitation are important resources for learning (Nielsen & Kvale, 1999). Due to the organization of the practicum in student groups, the students report that they spend much time observing each other teach. Even though they prefer to teach themselves, it is a clear finding in this study that both observing and being observed are valuable for the students. It is easier for them to observe and evaluate others’ teaching performance than their own, and they feel that they learn from watching peer students. The student teachers also report that they use their peers strategically in the sense that they ask them to observe and provide feedback on specific aspects of their teaching performance. However, it seems that also this form of cooperation between students occurs to a large degree by chance and as a result of the students’ own initiative, that is, they create their own community of practice in which they negotiate the meaning of what they do in their practicum. This has two implications. First of all, students organize themselves in order to improve their own learning. This happens in addition to, and possibly even in spite of, the intentions of their mentor teachers and university tutors. Thus, students are not passive recipients of learning during the practicum, but are active constructors of knowledge. Second, given that this learning is unsystematic, one might ask whether it would not be possible to assist the students better in this learning process.

An obvious criticism of this form of learning is that it merely involves a repro-
duction of current practice. With the prominent role ascribed to the mentor teacher, one could suspect that student teachers learn little more than to imitate and adopt the practice presented to them by the mentor teacher (Dowling, 2011; Sirna et al., 2008). However, our material suggests that student teachers are able to think critically about their mentor teachers. They observe their mentors and note both positive and negative aspects of their teaching practice. Also, during their education, the students experience a range of different mentors, and within this process, they try to find their own way of being a PE teacher. Therefore, the apprenticeship of observing the mentor teacher is not an uncritical imitation, but rather a form of synthesis of different styles which requires reflexivity. Again, we can understand this as a form of negotiation of meaning, which according to Wenger (1998) is a driving force in the learning processes of communities of practice. However, these experiences seem to be informal in the sense that these are discussed among the students and not taken up with the mentor teachers or the university tutors. Beyond providing the practicum, little seems to be done to assist the students in finding their own way of being a teacher.

Similar to Sundli’s (2007) study of Norwegian GTE, our study suggests that mentoring is an activity dominated by mentors’ personal plans and values rather than curriculum guidelines and theory. The mentor teachers’ main focus in the supervision was to guide the students on the content and management of the lessons. This is exemplified by the central position assigned to the lesson plan in the practicum. The students who are required to make this kind of preparation put much effort and energy into making the plan, and the post-lesson supervision takes the plan as the starting point for supervision. The student teachers also said that it was the lesson plan and their actual teaching performance they wanted feedback on. As shown in earlier studies (Booth, 1993; Moen, 2011; Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012; Sundli, 2007), the mentor teachers were seen as having the role of passing on practical advice to student teachers about the day-to-day demands of teaching PE. Despite some of the students wishing to learn about the daily work in schools in a broader sense than just teaching PE, the practicum was mainly viewed as a practically-oriented process with a focus on conducting PE lessons.

A weakness in our study is that we have not visited the practicum site to obtain an insight into what actually happens in the practicum. Thus, we can only refer to the student teachers’ perceptions of the practicum. In order to broaden our knowledge and understanding of the practicum in PE-TE, we believe that there is a need for observational studies of the practicum as well as longitudinal studies along the lines of those reported by Stidder and Hayes (2006), following student teachers through their PETE programme and into the first years of teaching. In addition, quantitative studies of teacher educators’, students’ and mentor teachers’ perceptions of the nature and purpose of the practicum would be valuable.

By using the concepts of apprenticeship and community of practice as lenses through which we made sense of the students’ stories and perceptions, we have been able to show that and how students do not merely imitate and copy their mentor teachers. The concepts allowed us to make sense of the various ways that students see themselves as apprentice teachers during the practicum. Understood this way, apprenticeship of observation is a learning process that is generative for students’ development. Thus, contrary to previous research (e.g. Dowling, 2011; Sirna et al., 2008) our study has found that the student teachers were able to think critically about their performances as prospective
teachers in the practicum, i.e. how to plan and deliver lessons. In addition, they were also thinking critically about the mentor teachers’ style of teaching. At the same time, however, our study shows that the students received little systematic help or support from mentor teachers and university tutors during the practicum in order to utilize this potential for reflexivity so as to enhance their development as prospective PE teachers.

Conclusion

The study indicates that the university tutors occupy a distant role during the practicum. This leaves the responsibility of what the students experience during the practicum on the mentor teachers, thus making the students very dependent on their mentor teachers and their personal plans and values. In addition, we suggest that our study has identified an example of ‘slippage’ (Penney & Evans, 2005) between policy and practice in PETE. There is a need to make this gap smaller.

Even though our study supports earlier findings about the lack of critical thinking concerning broader pedagogical issues, we have also found that students are able to think critically about their mentors and their own teaching performances during the practicum. Thus the students in our material are not passively socialized into a role as future PE teachers. Rather, they are active constructors of knowledge. At the same time, our findings suggest that more can be done to assist the students on their course to becoming PE teachers.

Note

1 By practicum we refer to those periods during the teacher education programme when student teachers acquire teaching practice experience in primary, secondary and/or upper secondary schools, supported by a mentor teacher. By ‘mentor teacher’ we refer to the teacher working in the school and supervising students during the practicum. In other words, a mentor teacher is the same as a cooperating teacher.

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