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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Health-Related Fitness: Preservice Physical Educators Attempt the Model

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study aimed to explore and describe the perceptions held by eleven preservice teachers regarding Health-Related Fitness as they learn to teach within the model to middle school students during an early field experience.

**Method:** Research questions included: (a) what are the perceived characteristics of a quality teacher and healthy teaching environment, (b) what issues do preservice teachers consider critical from their teaching? (c) what are preservice teachers' conceptions of teaching Health-Related Fitness? Data collected/analysed included observations, field notes, focus group interviews, and critical incident reports. It was hypothesised that issues brought up by the PTs at the beginning of the early field experience will be more self-centred (i.e., class management, preparation, curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge) and more student-centred toward the end of the early field experience (i.e., joy of student achievement, developing relationships).

**Results:** Most preservice teachers and middle school pupils ultimately "bought in" to Health-Related Fitness by the culmination of the early field experience and, in fact, most PT's focus did become ore student-centred.

**Discussion:** This exploratory study suggests that preservice teachers learn their conceptions of teaching Health-Related Fitness from a variety of different environments, contexts, and leadership figures. These personal experiences teaching Health-Related Fitness manifest themselves in preservice teachers understanding of how Health-Related Fitness content should be practiced in physical education. Physical education teacher education faculty can facilitate preservice teachers' self-exploration through introspective and reflective practices.

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## Introduction

A curriculum model gaining in popularity is the Health-Related Fitness model<sup>[1]</sup>. The aims and objectives of Health-

Related Fitness are to maximize physical activity during lessons and keep students moderately to vigorously active for at least 50% of class time<sup>[2][3][4][5]</sup>. Some sport pedagogy scholars and health professionals see Health-Related Fitness as a response to the growing concern of a public health epidemic, believing school physical education is the ideal setting for teaching youth the benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle<sup>[6]</sup>. In this case the physical activity impact is instant although critics suggest it may have a negative long-term impact as skill learning may suffer<sup>[7]</sup>.

Some regard the physical educator should be the physical activity champion of the school<sup>[8]</sup>. Most scholars agree that some general agreed-upon purposes of Health-Related Fitness in physical education are to promote a healthy and active lifestyle<sup>[9]</sup> by providing personally relevant, interesting, and enjoyable activities that positively influence adolescents to engage in these activities outside school<sup>[10]</sup>.

The theoretical lens used in this study was occupational socialization theory<sup>[11][12][13][14][15]</sup>. Occupational socialization theory is a dialectical theory of teacher socialization in physical education that examines the way in which individuals are recruited, trained, and socialized into the roles of physical education teacher<sup>[16]</sup>. This perspective indicates that the beliefs and values with which preservice teachers enter physical education teacher education programs influence the way they receive the knowledge and skills presented to them during coursework<sup>[17][18]</sup>.

Through occupational socialization theory scholars have explored the types of individuals that are drawn to the field physical education, how they are prepared to teach within teacher education programs, and the realities of teaching in schools<sup>[19]</sup>. The belief guiding the present study was that to socialize preservice teachers (PT) toward desired perspectives on teaching, physical education teacher education faculty must understand the effects of early field experiences on the feelings, attitudes, perceptions, values, and beliefs of PTs.

**Purpose.** This study aimed to explore and describe the perceptions held by PTs regarding Health-Related Fitness as they learn to teach within the model. Research questions include: (a) what are PT's perceived characteristics of a quality teacher and healthy teaching environment, (b) what issues do PTs consider critical from their teaching? (c) what are PT's conceptions of teaching Health-Related Fitness?

It is hypothesized that issues at the beginning of the early field experience will be more self-centered (class management, preparation, curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge) and more student-centered toward the end of the early field experience (joy of student achievement, developing relationships). Also, most PTs and pupils will ultimately "buy in" to Health-Related Fitness by the culmination of the early field experience.

## Method

Participants were 11 PTs enrolled in the Health-Related Fitness methods course located at a large research-oriented university in the Southeast United States.

**The Methods Course.** The course took place in PT's final semester before their student teaching internship. Content was specific towards effective teaching using the Health-Related Fitness model. The course was guided by the textbook

*Physical Education for Lifelong Fitness: The Physical Best Teacher's Guide*<sup>3rd</sup> edition. The course was divided into two phases: classroom and early field experience.

**Classroom.** For the first four weeks, PTs met on-campus once a week for 2 hours and 45 minutes. Topics discussed include how teachers can address sedentary-related illness, unit and lesson planning using Health-Related Fitness as a framework, incorporating Mosston and Ashworth's<sup>[20]</sup> teaching styles, and effective managerial and instructional practices. Assignments and coursework include a written statement describing PTs' perceived "ideal school", what PTs believed to be characteristics of an ideal teacher, and why they want to be a PE teacher.

**The Early Field Experience.** During the final ten weeks, PTs engaged in the early field experience component of the course, taking place at either an elementary or middle school near campus. Cooperating schools were selected by the instructor after receiving permission from the schools, and after considering a request made by PTs to be placed at either an elementary or secondary school. The demographic makeup of cooperating schools was diverse and representative of medium to low socio-economic backgrounds.

**Data Collected.** (a) instructor observations, (b) ten critical incident reports per PT, (c) a focused group-debriefing following one observation in the early field experience setting and one lead-teaching opportunity, (d) a peer-assessment after four days of lead-teaching, (e) one cooperating teacher assessment after nine days of lead-teaching, (f) one formal assessment made by the course instructor between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> day of lead-teaching, (g) a teaching portfolio including: ten lesson plans, a unit plan, other relevant documents collected during early field experience, (h) a written description of what each PT believed qualities an ideal teacher would possess, (i) a written description of each PT's hypothetical ideal school in which to teach, (j) a written statement describing why they wanted to be a physical education teacher, (k) a final focused group-debriefing at the culmination of the early field experience, and (l) multiple researcher memos made after observations of teaching and each focused group-debriefings.

**Data Analysis.** Written data were analyzed through open coding then selective coding to identify a "core category" and relate it to other categories and themes common to occupational socialization theory literature. Analytic induction was employed while documenting negative cases.

## Results

### Themes Relating to Health-Related Fitness

Three themes regarding Health-Related Fitness emerged from early field experience critical incident reports: (1) teaching the model, (2) PTs buying into the model, and (3) pupils buying into the model.

**Teaching the Model.** Most PTs voiced confidence in their ability to teach Health-Related Fitness and welcomed the experience.

- *"I felt very comfortable with the material I was going to be presenting to my class.* PT1

- *“This unit of Health-Related Fitness is definitely up my alley!”*PT2

However, not all PTs shared confidence in the ability to teach Health-Related Fitness.

- *“I was a little nervous about teaching something [Health-Related Fitness] I never taught before.”*PT3

**PTs Buying into the Model.** The majority of PTs expressed instances where they began to value principles prominently held by the curriculum model.

- *“I stepped up by putting on my personal trainer face and ended up running with the students to encourage them.”*PT4
- *“Helping students figure out how to achieve better form and seeing them find out how that made it easier was certainly one of the best experiences.”*PT1
- *“If I encourage a student to eat healthy and they encourage their parents to eat healthy, I have maximized my objective to its fullest potential.”*PT5

**Pupils Buying into the Model.** The PTs also shared instances where they observed pupils illustrating a “buy in” of the Health-Related Fitness experience.

- *“I feel that one of the most critical things I noticed was the excitement of the students to be exercising.”*PT2
- *“There were a few times [a student] called me over to help her with a certain exercise because she wanted to make sure she was doing them correctly to be able to do them at home.”*PT6
- *“My students enjoyed my Health-Related Fitness lesson. My students loved what I was teaching, and they wanted to learn more.”*PT7

However, negative cases against pupils “buying in” also occurred.

- *“Another takeaway is how severely a few girls in my class resent [Health-Related Fitness].”*PT3
- *“I still have some students who think exercising is dumb.”*PT8

## Themes Relating to Occupational Socialization Theory

Exercises exploring PT’s values and meanings of physical education were assigned during coursework and analyzed. From them, the following three themes emerged: (1) PT’s reasons for teaching, (2) quality teacher characteristics, and (3) ideal school characteristics. Furthermore, themes congruent with occupational socialization theory literature from early field experience critical incident reports include: (4) from self- to student-centered, and (5) cooperating teacher as a socializing agent.

**Shifting from Self- to Student-centered.** Early during the early field experience, PTs expressed a self-centered focus.

- *“I had to sit about 10 kids again to show the rest I wasn’t messing around. However, I continue to feel confident about being in control and about handling classroom and behavior management.”*PT9

Later in the EFF, PTs expressed a student-centered focus.

- "... this showed me that even when I am frustrated and things do not seem to be going right, I am impacting students." PT10
- "They are all wonderful who are dying to actually learn something in PE. I want to be that teacher for them and make their time worthwhile." PT11
- "... when I asked why she replied with "I am too fat to workout" ... I want to work with her this semester to have better confidence about her about herself and working out." PT9

**Cooperating Teacher as a Socializing Agent.** The PTs suggest that their cooperating teacher relationship was paramount in their early field experience success.

- "I have really enjoyed working with [Mr. C.] and getting feedback from him. He has given meaningful feedback." PT2

## Discussion

This exploratory study suggests that PTs learn their conceptions of teaching Health-Related Fitness from a variety of different environments, contexts, and leadership figures. These personal experiences teaching Health-Related Fitness manifest themselves in PTs' understanding of how Health-Related Fitness content should be practiced in physical education. Physical education teacher education programs could provide more direct opportunities for PTs to develop a braider understanding of Health-Related Fitness content and field experiences allowing them chances at successful model implementation. I believe this is a gap in content knowledge that can be filled by university physical education teacher education programs.

Richards and colleagues<sup>[21]</sup> propose that physical education teacher education programs can be more effective by understanding the values recruits have on the meaning of physical education. To change PTs' subjective theories regarding any aspect of physical education, teacher educators must provoke them to reflect on and question their current beliefs and values. I echo the recommendation and sentiments proposed by Richards and colleagues for physical education teacher education faculty to facilitate PTs self-exploration through introspective, reflective practices.

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