

Listening to primary schools: Australian Health and Physical Education (HPE)

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Introduction

This research project investigated Primary School Principals’ perceptions of Health and Physical Education within Government primary schools. Research suggests that the optimum time for children to learn and refine their motor skills and to be introduced to positive HPE experiences is during preschool and early primary school years. This project investigates the perceptions of Principals within the state of Victoria, Australia.

The research data was gathered using ex-post facto designed surveys completed by 138 government primary school principals from a cross-section of primary schools. Principals surveyed represented schools from seven Victorian regions and schools of various enrolment sizes (Table 1).

Table 1 Victorian regions represented by school principals surveyed

Victorian Region	Size of school enrolment				
	Small schools (less 100)	Medium (100-300)	Large (300 – 600)	Very large (more 600)	Total
West	7	4	0	0	11
Inner West	0	8	3	1	12
North Central	6	3	0	1	10
Inner North	3	3	2	0	8
Melbourne	1	25	33	6	65
Inner East	4	7	2	0	13
East	6	11	2	0	19
Total	27	61	42	8	138

The Context

Government schools within the state of Victoria are of particular interest, as Victorian official Government policy regarding graduate HPE specialist teacher requirements in schools do not support the socio-cultural perspective adopted by the last national curriculum reform (1994).

Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the federal government espouse the present national pedagogically-based curriculum reform, involving a newly designed national curriculum. However, implementation (including Government policies) of the present Health and Physical Education curricula has been inconsistent and may again be an impediment.

The purpose of the current national reform is to enable a socially just curriculum throughout Australia, a large country consisting of diverse school contexts. Australian academic education commentator and Professor at Sydney University, Ewing states ‘The most important driver for a National Curriculum should be about equity and social justice and improved learning outcomes for our most disadvantaged and isolated students’ (2010, p.127).

The socio-cultural perspective according to Cliff, Wright and Clarke (2009, p. 166) adopted by the HPE key learning area in the last ‘de-facto’ (1994) reform emerged “as a complex counter-discourse informed by critical pedagogues and critical pedagogy in Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand”. They state with clarity how this has changed the teaching and learning in HPE:

As a perspective through which to interpret HPE content and issues, it has important implications both for the work of HPE teachers and for how these teachers are prepared through pre-service teacher education programs; first, because its sociological and cultural studies underpinnings represent a significant departure from the predominantly medioscientific, biophysical and psychological foundations of HPE; and second, because its attention to social and cultural influences on health put it in opposition to notions that locate responsibility for health almost solely in the individual and his or her decisions. (2009, p. 165).

While the adoption of the socio-cultural perspective was national, the depth that this perspective filtered into the implementation of the HPE curriculum in each state and territory has differed considerably. For example, the New South Wales Institute of Teachers (NSWIT) Subject Content Requirements for teaching HPE in the state of NSW Primary or Secondary schools (Abridged) July 2010 policy document states that the minimum requirements for a Primary teacher and Secondary Teacher in the key learning area include academic study in physical education, health and personal development (equally weighted), underpinned by cultural and sociological perspectives. Furthermore the key learning area is named Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE):

Table 2 New South Wales Institute of Teachers HPE Secondary Teacher Requirements

Subject Area Years 7-12	Relevant areas of academic study for first teaching subject	Relevant areas of academic study for second teaching subject
Personal development, health and physical education	A major (three years of degree level study with at least 4 units at level 2 or above) in personal development and/or health studies (with a socio-cultural perspective) and/or physical education WITH	At least two years (four units) of degree level study in personal development and/or health studies (with a socio-cultural perspective) and/or physical education with at least two units at level 2 or above WITH

	<p>at least three units of study in health education including mental health, sexual health, relationships, drug education, child protection education, gender studies and risk taking behaviour</p> <p>AND</p> <p>at least three units of study in physical education including contemporary physical activities, dance, gymnastics, games and sport. Vocationally oriented courses, coaching certificates, umpiring/refereeing accreditation in sports and physical activities are not recognised as equivalent.</p>	<p>at least two units of study in health education including mental health, sexual health, relationships, drug education, child protection education, gender studies and risk taking behaviour</p> <p>AND</p> <p>at least two units of study in physical education including contemporary physical activities, dance, gymnastics, games and sport. Vocationally oriented courses, coaching certificates, umpiring/refereeing accreditation in sports and physical activities are not recognised as equivalent.</p>
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Hence, the NSWIT requirements advocate the principles of the 1994 HPE ‘de-facto’ National Statement and Profile and promote the socio cultural perspective. However, the same cannot be shared for the state of Victoria (Table 3), where the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) Specialist Area Guidelines policy (6 November, 2008) states:

Table 3 Victorian Institute of Teaching Specialist Area Guidelines for HPE

<p>PHYSICAL EDUCATION (Primary Teaching) Major study in Physical Education</p> <p>The major study in Physical Education should include study in Human Movement (e.g. growth and motor development, exercise physiology, skill acquisition) and in the skill activity areas of aquatics, games, fundamental motor skills, fitness education, dance, athletics, ball handling and sport education</p> <p>A current first aid certificate (Emergency First Aid Level 2) AND a current AustSwim Teacher of Swimming and Water Safety certificate (or a current Australian Swimming Coaches & Teachers Association (ASCTA) - Swim Australia Teacher certificate) are required</p> <p>PHYSICAL EDUCATION (Secondary Teaching) One and a half years of study in Physical Education</p> <p>The one and a half years of study should include study in the following areas:</p> <p>(a) Discipline Study: Human Movement (e.g. anatomy, physiology, exercise physiology, biomechanics, growth and motor development, skill acquisition and psycho-social aspects of physical activity), Health and Nutrition</p> <p>(b) Skills: fundamental motor skills, ball handling, dance, games, fitness education, athletics, aquatics, sport education</p> <p>A current first aid certificate (Emergency First Aid Level 2) AND a current AustSwim Teacher of Swimming and Water Safety certificate (or a current Australian Swimming Coaches & Teachers Association (ASCTA) - Swim Australia Teacher certificate) are required</p>
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This policy has no evidence of a socio-cultural perspective and suggests there has been no departure from the predominantly medioscientific, biophysical and psychological foundations of HPE. Furthermore, the key learning area is titled Physical Education which Dinan-Thompson (2006) shares is the name referred to the key learning area pre 1994 National Statement and Profile. There is no presence of socio cultural health or personal development. Again, raising question over the level of curriculum change that resulted from the last ‘de-facto’ national curriculum reform.

Promoting social justice and equity in education through the HPE curriculum materials and the socio-cultural approach does seem to have led the way for other curriculum key learning areas. This is evident through the National Curriculum and explicitly within the goals established at the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (December, 2008):

- Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence
- Goal 2: All young Australians become:
 - Successful learners
 - Confident and creative individuals
 - Active and informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2008)

These goals have driven the national curriculum Framework, they support a socio critical pedagogy in education and are underpinned by the socio-cultural perspective.

Significance of Research

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) key responsibilities inform outcomes that the Department strives to achieve within its birth-to-adulthood learning and development agenda. The first listed outcome for Children 0 – 8 years is:

- Children have the best start to life to achieve optimal health, development and wellbeing (<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/departments/Pages/default.aspx>)

This outcome sits within and directly relates to the Health and Physical Education learning area:

In Health and Physical Education students develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to support them to be resilient, to develop a strong sense of self, to build and maintain satisfying relationships, to make health-enhancing decisions in relation to their health and physical activity participation, and to develop health literacy competencies in order to enhance their own and others’ health and wellbeing. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012, p. 2).

Health and Physical Education (HPE) as a learning area in Australia is embedded in phase three of the current national curriculum reform. This research investigates Principals’ perceptions of HPE teachers and specifically preparation of university pre-service primary teacher courses. Principals were probed for their opinions to a HPE course structural change, involving for the first time in Australia’s history, primary education pre-service teachers being gi-

ven the opportunity within their university courses to specialise in developmentally appropriate Health and Physical Education.

Principals' experiences and insights matter. "We know that school leadership must be at the centre of our reform effort. In our decentralised system where principals have a high degree of autonomy it is they who have the power to improve the quality of teaching." (DEECD, 2012, p. 3). Furthermore, such a course would be timely as there has been growing concern for universities improved preparation of teachers for the school environment (DEECD, 2012). A survey conducted by McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon and Murphy (2011) found that less than 30 per cent of principals felt that graduate teachers had acquired important skills for effective teaching and learning. It is pertinent that Principals are considered and opinions valued.

Literature Review

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) draft shape paper for HPE, espouses quality experiences for children and the importance of having these from the very beginnings of schooling. What is being accentuated within this shape paper is one particular aspect of quality HPE; that it is 'developmentally appropriate'. The priority for Health and Physical Education is:

to provide ongoing, developmentally appropriate opportunities for students to practise and apply the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to maintain and enhance their own and others' health and wellbeing. (ACARA, 2012, p. 4).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the HPE school curriculum within Australian schools was considered to have been in crisis (Tinning, Kirk, Evans and Glover, 1994; Dinan-Thompson, 2009). Curriculum research indicates that the 'crisis' was experienced at an international level also (Dinan-Thompson, 2009, p. 4). 'In-house' discussions of crisis at HPE conferences and in journals led to a Senate Inquiry (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) into the state of HPE within Australian Education systems. The findings in the report by the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) confirmed the 'in-house' discussions of crisis (Dinan-Thompson, 2009). Findings included that there was in fact a decline in the opportunities for quality HPE in Australian schools although paradoxically there was unanimous support for the learning area. The problems were mainly with resources and the time allocation to the key learning area which resulted in a drastic decline in children's skill levels and physical fitness (Tinning, Kirk, Evans, and Glover, 1994). Another major problem was that "suitably qualified physical education teachers are not being employed to teach physical education and school sport to all children" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992, p. xiv). There was also no required accreditation or formal training in physical or sport education as a condition of employment for graduating primary school teachers (Moore, 1994). Webster (2001, p. 1) recommended that "pre-service education of primary school teachers include mandatory units directly related to the content strands of the syllabus, with further opportunities for teachers to specialize in PE courses".

These issues, according to ACHPER (2011) still exist today. "It is true that some schools struggle to provide quality PE and sport, in particular in primary schools". Furthermore, some graduate teachers are to this day completing teaching degrees without studying any units in Health and Physical Education and are then responsible for implementing this learning area in

schools. Health and Physical Education primary specialist teachers are only employed sporadically within primary schools across Australia with, according to Dinan-Thompson (2009, p. 48) questions often raised about “who is teaching HPE, and who is deemed competent to teach HPE in schools”. Hence, the recommendations of a Senate Inquiry made 20 years ago appear to not have been achieved.

A study released recently (March, 2013), ‘The wellbeing of young Australians’, conducted by Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) involved over 3700 people. This study evidenced that Australian children and youth are not doing as well as they should. Australia ranked in the top third of OECD countries for around one-quarter of the indicators (12 out of 46). Areas of concern where Australia was ranked in the bottom third included “jobless families, infant mortality, incidence of diabetes and asthma, young people in education, 3-5 year olds in preschool and carbon dioxide emissions” (ARACY, 2013, p. 4). Despite the rhetoric about children wellbeing and social justice, this report indicates that there has been no improvement in the majority of areas from the previous report in 2008. The report summary states:

if we want to change – to improve – we need to measure and report on the things we believe are most important for a successful Australian society. Few would disagree that one of the most important of these are the environments we can influence to help parents and others ensure our children have the opportunity to be healthy and to develop well. (ARACY, 2013, p. 26).

It is axiomatic that primary schools’ play a key role in children’s health and wellbeing. Hence, Health and Physical Education teachers (specialist or generalist classroom) need to be able to deliver quality Health and Physical Education lessons across all strands, which include Physical activity, Health and Personal/Social Development. This involves the teacher having the knowledge and understanding of the various pedagogies that exist in HPE and the awareness to choose the most appropriate for each particular learning experience (Tinning, 1999). This often involves choosing critical, socially just pedagogies rather than the traditional dominant science and performance-based pedagogies for HPE. Critical socially just pedagogies will necessitate teachers being trained and educated in this mode of teaching (Tinning, 2004).

Physical Education (PE) courses specifically tailoring to children in the 3-11 age range, where teachers are qualified generalist classroom teachers with a specialism in PE are offered in the United Kingdom. What is sometimes offered in Australia are quasi HPE courses where pre-service primary teachers may be able to choose electives in general sport often relating to industry or secondary physical education. While these offer opportunities for enthusiasts to study areas of interest, ideal candidates for primary HPE specialists, unfortunately they lack the ‘developmentally appropriate’ key aspect that the draft paper emphasises. Hence, specialist HPE teachers working within primary schools are often not qualified generalist classroom primary teachers (often secondary trained), and may not have had opportunities to develop pedagogy specifically for teaching children in the Primary school sector, or they are generalist classroom teachers with no HPE specialisation.

Summary Report

This study indicates two key findings:

1. Principals in Victorian government primary schools of various sizes and locations, strongly desire to have specialist HPE teachers in their schools
2. Principals in Victorian government primary schools want HPE specialist teachers who are interested and want to be working with primary aged children. Furthermore, HPE specialists who are able, willing and qualified to teach as generalist classroom teachers
 - 88.2% of principals surveyed (120 out of 138) preferred to have HPE specialist teachers in their school.

Within small schools (less than 100 children) many Principals stated that it was not possible or financially viable to have HPE specialists due to their rural, regional or remote location. Therefore there was a much higher percentage of Principals in small schools who answered ‘no’ to this question.

The comments supporting HPE specialists in primary schools were many and suggested that quality was provided through expertise, knowledge of the subject, priority of the learning area, skill development, motivation, community relations, sport coordination and to enable a developmentally appropriate and consistent program. Also, it was mentioned that some classroom teachers are not able to take HPE classes and that it provided release time for classroom teachers.

- 82.6% of principals, believed a course that qualifies teachers to be generalist classroom teachers and HPE specialists would be or would probably be valuable

No	2	(1.4%)
Maybe	22	(15.9%)
Probably	30	(21.7%)
Yes	84	(60.9%)

- 62.3% of principals believed a testamur/ certificate that read “Bachelor of Primary Education (Health and Physical Education)” would assist or probably assist them with the employment of staff?

No	13	(9.4%)
Maybe	39	(28.3%)
Probably	37	(26.8%)
Yes	49	(35.5%)

- There were 102 schools (73.9%) where a HPE specialist teacher was responsible for part or all of the implementation of the learning area

This included:

Specialist HPE teacher	52	(37.7%)
Classroom & HPE specialist	42	(30.4%)
Classroom & HPE specialist & outsourced	5	(3.6%)

A generalist classroom in HPE role	2	(1.4%)
HPE teacher & outsourced	1	(0.7%)

- 62 principals (59.0%) stated that their HPE specialist teacher was a qualified specialist, 43 principals (41.0%) stated that their HPE specialist did not have specific qualifications and 33 did not answer the question.
- When employing staff, 98 principals (72.1%) indicated that they look at the university degree certificate/ testamur of potential staff and 38 (27.9%) stated that they did not.
- When employing staff, 74 principals (53.6%) said they do not peruse university transcripts.

This is problematic when transcripts are needed to evidence Health and Physical Education units successfully completed under the current courses offered.

- Principals' commented on key attributes of a good HPE teacher. The top six responses were:

1. HPE curriculum knowledge & dev appropriate pedagogy	54 (mentions)
2. Planning/ assessment and flexibility (organised)	49
3. Passion/ interest/ enthusiasm (children)	35
4. Rapport /communication and management skills	32
5. Cater for all learning needs (empathy & support)	20
6. Engage students & fun	12

- 121 schools gave no details of HPE being outsourced (87.7%)

HPE being outsourced included Gymnastics, Swimming, sporting organisations, Bluearth program, Active After School Community (AASC), Tennis and Dance.

- Principals' thoughts on quality HPE for children in schools

Within small schools (less than 100 children) many principals stated that HPE was an extremely important learning area and felt that it was undervalued. They believed more could be done through funding and Professional Development (PD) and some stated that they were disadvantaged in this learning area. Principals' suggested that HPE specialist teachers who were good classroom teachers would be beneficial. Having a HPE specialist enables for a regular and sequential program to be implemented and physical education (physical activities) is an area that some teachers struggle with implementing. Many of these schools are located in rural, regional or remote locations.

Principals of medium sized schools (100-300 children) believed that all schools should have a HPE specialist with knowledge of correct pedagogy for maximising participation, enjoyment was optimised and being developmentally appropriate was desirable. It was important that the program was inclusive and catered for various interests and needs. Qualifications and ability to teach in the primary classroom and have a developmentally appropriate understanding was

accentuated. One Principal wrote ‘We need people with classroom and pedagogical skills not just jocks!’. They expressed difficulties in smaller schools to employ a HPE specialist and that money was again a problem. HPE as a learning area was viewed as important although such importance was often lacking.

Principals of large schools (300-600 children) and very large schools (larger than 600 children) emphasised how pertinent it was to have HPE specialists with developmentally appropriate and inclusive pedagogy. They stressed the need for all schools to have HPE specialists and the power of implementing quality HPE as part of children’s early experiences. Again, the qualifications and ability of HPE specialists to be good primary classroom teachers was affirmed.

Recommendations

It is recommended that pre-service primary teachers have the opportunity to specialise in HPE, specifically developmentally appropriate for the primary school and with a socio-cultural/ inclusive perspective. Having opportunities for pre-service teachers to become generalist classroom teachers and specialise in HPE is supported by a high majority of principals surveyed. Such a course enables teachers who want to specifically teach primary aged children and are passionate in Health and Physical Education, to acquire a developmentally appropriate pedagogy and holistic health understanding. This, along with an updated HPE specialist graduate teacher Government requirements policy would be a directional step towards the Victorian DEECD outcome ‘children having the best start to life to achieve optimal health, development and wellbeing’.

Furthermore, this would enable schools in rural, regional and remote Victoria to have a HPE specialist teacher and thus have the same opportunities as metropolitan schools, which is currently not the case. This directly relates to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) and the recommendations of the Gonski Report (ABC, 2012). It is alarming the number of HPE specialists who are not qualified as specialists working in Victorian government primary schools and the number of principals who do not check for evidence of HPE units successfully completed. However, it is understandable as no specific primary HPE specialist course exists in Australia. Bachelor of Primary Education (Health and Physical Education) course and testamur would assist in improving this situation and is the second recommendation.

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