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Is 'Health' a club?

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Dr Tim Lynch

by **Tim Lynch**

Is 'health' a club? There are many sporting or physical activity clubs people can join and be among others with similar interests. If you don't happen to share such physical interests, you may feel excluded. But can that sense of exclusion also apply to health education in schools, and health generally?

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I suggest that inclusive teaching of 'Health and physical education' for all children in schools can be better. Specifically, teachers need to be prepared for teaching health in the Faculty of Education at universities. This has two advantages: one, health and physical education will no longer be experienced as a different club (faculty) that either you are, or are not a member. Two, being prepared for teaching within the faculty of education is innately better.


Health education is important and should start as early as possible. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood's first stated outcome for children under eight is to 'have the best start to life to achieve optimal health, development and wellbeing'. Throughout Australia, and internationally, health and physical education (HPE) rightly have considerable significance.

But although it is a key learning area, HPE is the only discipline not always embedded in education faculties. Pre-service teachers with interests in health often study in separate faculties, such as the faculty of health, science, exercise science or sport, which are in name and physical location separate from education. The association with science faculties dates back to the 1960s when the discipline had to prove its academic rigour.

Other discipline areas have at times been situated within faculties other than education, but it was found to be problematic to be continuing studies in a discipline rather than learning how to be a teacher of the discipline. Content and concepts are essential but so too is understanding how to teach. Pre-service teachers do not study English literature in preparation for teaching reading in the early years. Nor do they study physics and chemistry in the Faculty of Science in preparation for teaching science in primary school.

Often managers in university faculties only know the separation of 'phys eders' model and when it comes to cost saving exercises, no questions are asked about why this tradition exists. In many institutions, students studying their sporting interests have formed a club, often identified by separate 'hoodies' and annual balls held exclusively for the students known as the 'jocks'. However, it is time that questions were asked about what is in the best interest of children's health.

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The wellbeing of young Australians' study released in March 2013 was conducted by Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) and involved over 3700 participants. When compared with the other 33 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the results suggest that Australian children and youth are not doing as well as they should when it comes to health. Areas of concern where Australia was ranked in the bottom third included incidence of diabetes and asthma, young people in education and 3-5 year olds in preschool. Despite the rhetoric about child wellbeing and social justice, this report indicated that there has been no improvement in the majority of areas from the previous report in 2008. With no improvements being identified perhaps it is time we looked deeper into the messages being portrayed in teacher preparation.

If future teachers are immersed in a separate health club at university, that fact alone sends a clear and meaningful message. Messages and preparation of teachers for HPE was addressed by the University of Queensland's Professor Richard Tinning last year at the University of Auckland's (Faculty of Education) first Dean's lecture. Tinning questioned how a degree in exercise science provided prospective health and physical education teachers with the necessary background knowledge for teaching the subject? Furthermore, Tinning challenged universities to consider what holistic HPE means in practice. Holistic and inclusive education are terms synonymous with the Faculty of Education.

Tinning's insight was supported by data gathered in a recent survey I conducted. The survey involved 376 primary school principal participants from a cross-section of Australian government schools. The participants were asked what qualities HPE teachers' required. The fifth most mentioned attribute was that they were good teachers and quality classroom teachers (73 mentions). Furthermore, there was a clear theme of inclusion and that HPE specialists were perceived as teachers first, valuable members of school teaching teams and not seen as separate.

In conclusion, may I suggest that at times health is perceived to be a club that not everyone will feel part of, including children in schools. Health and Physical Education being situated within Faculties of Education may be a valuable step in the right direction in improving young people's health. Furthermore, HPE

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teachers need to be identified and perceived first and foremost as teachers. This will send the inclusive message to children as early as possible that health is for all, regardless of where interests lie.

Dr Tim Lynch is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University.

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