

SUMMARY REPORT OF KEY FINDINGS

NT Government Primary Schools

How are Primary Education Health & Physical Education (HPE) teachers' best prepared?

Dr. Timothy Lynch – Monash University, Faculty of Education.

The Context of the Research

This project investigated Primary School Principals' perceptions of a University Pre-service Teacher Education course where the graduate teacher is qualified as a generalist primary classroom teacher and a Health and Physical Education specialist. Health and Physical Education (HPE) as an Australian curriculum learning area is associated with holistic lifelong health and wellbeing.

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 such research through the perceptions of Principals within the context of Northern Territory (NT).

The overarching research question is:

1. What are Primary School Principals' perceptions of a Bachelor Primary Education (Health and Physical Education) course and testamur? (A course where graduate teachers are generalist primary teachers and specialist Health and Physical Education teachers).

Supplementary research questions that generated data included:

1. Who teaches HPE in Primary schools?
2. If a HPE teacher is employed, do they have HPE specific qualifications?
3. Do Principals prefer to have a HPE specialist teacher to teach HPE?
4. Would a testamur/ certificate that read "Bachelor of Primary Education (Health and Physical Education)" course assist Principals with the employment of staff?
5. Do Principals find a course that qualifies teachers to be generalist classroom teachers and HPE specialists of value?

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/department/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. There is potential for the national framework currently being developed to enable curriculum change and quality HPE for all children across our geographically large country. This research investigates Principals' perceptions of a structural change within university pre-service primary teacher courses. Such a structural change would involve for the first time in Australia's history, primary education pre-service teachers being given 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:

Principals in NT government primary schools of various sizes and locations prefer to have specialist HPE teachers in their schools.

- 100.0% of principals surveyed preferred to have HPE specialist teachers in their school.

Not one of the small sized schools (less than 100 children) indicated that they had a qualified HPE specialist, whereas the only specialist HPE teacher within a school was in the largest of the three participating schools, the medium sized school (between 100 and 300 children). Regardless of school size, all Principals preferred to have an HPE specialist.

The comments supporting HPE specialists in primary schools suggested that quality was provided through knowledge of the subject area, skill development and enabling a developmentally appropriate, safe and consistent whole school program.

- No principals, believed a course that qualifies teachers to be generalist classroom teachers and HPE specialists would not be valuable, with 66.7% stating that it would be valuable

No	0	
Maybe	1	(33.3%)
Probably	0	
Yes	2	(66.7%)

- No principals believed a testamur/ certificate that read “Bachelor of Primary Education (Health and Physical Education)” would not assist with the employment of staff?

No	0	
Maybe	2	(66.7%)
Probably	0	
Yes	1	(33.3%)

- Two principals (100.0%) stated that their HPE specialist did not have specific qualifications. This question did not apply for the third school as it had no HPE specialist role.
- When employing staff, all principals (100.0%) indicated that they look at the university degree certificate/ testamur of potential staff.
- When employing staff, two principals (66.7%) 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 eight responses were:

HPE subject knowledge & dev appropriate pedagogy	2 (mentions)
Cater for all learning needs (empathy & support)	1
Engage students	1
Always positive	1
Rapport /communication and management skills	1
Planning/ assessment and flexibility (organised)	1
Introduce a variety and range of physical activities	1
Integrated with year levels	1

- No school Principal provided details of HPE being outsourced (100.0%)

An alarming finding within this study was the limited responses to the survey. There were 62 invitations/surveys posted to Principals of government schools in the Northern Territory for three Principal participant returned surveys, 4.8% of the school Principals invited. This raises question as to why the majority of Principals in NT did not want to share their professional opinion.

Principals surveyed represented schools from two NT regions and schools of various enrolment sizes (Table 1).

Table 1 NT regions represented by school principals invited and surveyed

NT Region	Size of school enrolment						Total invited	Total participated
	Small (less 100) invited	Small (less 100) participated	Medium (100-300) invited	Medium (100-300) participated	Large (300-600) invited	Large (300-600) participated		
Darwin	9	0	8	0	3	0	20	0
North	14	2	7	1	8	0	29	3
South	12	0	1	0	0	0	13	0
Total	35	2	16	1	11	0	62	3

Recommendations

It is recommended that pre-service primary teachers have the opportunity to specialise in HPE, specifically developmentally appropriate for the primary school. Having opportunities for pre-service teachers to become generalist classroom teachers and specialise in HPE is supported by all principals surveyed. Such a course enables teachers who want to teach primary aged children, have a developmentally appropriate pedagogy and holistic health understanding, and are passionate in Health and Physical Education to be employed in schools throughout NT. This would be a directional step towards the DEECD outcome 'children having the best start to life to achieve optimal health, development and wellbeing'.

Furthermore, this would enable schools of various sizes and geographic locations within NT to have a HPE specialist teacher and thus have the same opportunities as the larger sized schools, which data suggests 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 surprising the percentage of HPE specialists in this data who are not qualified as specialists working in NT government primary schools, and the percentage 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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