

# Why Public Primary Schools need specialist PE teachers

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**P**hysical education (PE) in Australian public primary schools is often neglected despite the recommendations from the government and professional education associations. State governments have standards in place to ensure all children are provided the opportunity to participate in physical education classes, but these are rarely met due to the absence of a specialist PE teacher in many public primary schools. Specialist PE teachers have the knowledge and skills to ensure all children are exposed to a quality PE program and have positive and worthwhile experiences. Children need the value and habit of lifelong physical activity to be instilled in them from a young age. In some cases this is achieved through family, but more often it relies on the school to ensure physical activity is embedded in their lives. Students deserve meaningful PE classes that introduce a variety of movement experiences (e.g., sport, dance, fitness, aquatics and games) which set the foundation for lifelong physical activity. This is important from a health perspective and as a contributor to student learning.

## Mandatory hours are not being met

In primary school settings, the PDHPE/HPE KLA, incorporating both the practical and the theory components of the HPE syllabus, is most commonly taught by the generalist classroom primary teacher, who has very little specific training in PE. Researchers have found that primary teachers often omit the

mandatory PE hours from their week as a result of feeling pressured by other aspects of the curriculum. In fact, PE is mandated to make up 6-10% of curriculum time, but this time allocation is rarely met.

Teachers have a huge responsibility to meet the curriculum requirements and this places an abundance of pressure upon them. The introduction of NAPLAN and the My School website has placed further pressure and accountability at both the classroom and the school level. This heavy emphasis placed on improving numeracy and literacy has meant that many other areas are not afforded the allocation they require and PE is often the first to be forgotten. Furthermore, pressure on teachers will continue to intensify in the future, as teachers strive to meet the needs of the new National curriculum which will involve months of familiarisation and reprogramming.

Research has indicated a range of barriers that impact on the quality of PE and sporting programs within schools, including low levels of confidence from the teachers, poor facilities, inadequate resources and low levels of interest in PE in general (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). They also argue that many classroom teachers do not see themselves as good role models with regard to PE, as they are not physically skilled themselves: "Educators should have a passion for all that we teach. All it could take is a little research for teachers to feel a little confident in teaching PE. Who knows if it seems less overwhelming it may not be pushed aside so often" (UWS student, 2012).



It is upsetting to think that some children will lack in knowledge and/or experience regarding physical education because of time and financial constraints. Although teachers are under pressure, PE should not be overlooked because of the value it has on children's physical, social and emotional wellbeing.

If children experience positive and fun physical education lessons more frequently during their early years, there seem a greater likelihood that children may change their habits in the home i.e. from play stations to outdoor play.

A specialist PE teacher would be able to ensure that the importance of PE is not overwhelmed by these other emphases.

## Pre-service Education

On average, primary teachers complete about 10 hours of practical PE training in their initial teacher training. This limited exposure means university students only receive an introduction to PE (Warburton, 2000) and this is not sufficient to provide the confidence to teach PE.

Teachers often rely on their own school experiences with PE and sport, whether they were good or bad. Their own teaching of PE is a reflection of these memories, rather than from the knowledge gained in professional pre-service training. This emphasises the need for quality PE lessons within the primary school setting. Schools must also ensure that teachers are provided with adequate and ongoing professional development because professional development is a necessity when trying to improve the classroom practices of teachers, and influence their attitudes and beliefs (Guskey, 2002).

Most university teacher education programs endeavour to ensure pre-service primary teachers attain a functional level of knowledge and skill to teach physical education. However, pre-service input in PE during teacher education courses does not have the capacity to counter their previous experiences at school or their personal views about PE, given the limited time frame afforded to pre-service education in PE. Naturally pre-service teachers who undertake specialised PE courses over a four year period gain a broader skill set and often place a higher value on physical education and with this comes greater confidence to teach this subject. Hence, PE lessons will be of a higher standard.

## Quality Physical Education

As educators, we need to ensure we are engaging our students and encouraging them to value and enjoy PE. This will help students see the connections between the benefits of participating in physical activity and the positive impact this has on their own lives. Engagement in PE is viewed as a multi-faceted construct which operates at three levels: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). On a general level, cognitive engagement involves the idea of investment, recognition of the value of learning and a willingness to go beyond the minimum requirements. Affective engagement includes students' reactions to school, teachers and peers, influencing their willingness to become involved in school work. Finally, behavioural engagement encompasses the idea of active participation and involvement in academic and social activities, and is considered crucial for the achievement of positive academic outcomes.

When translated into a physical education context, engagement occurs when all three facets come together. This occurs when students are procedurally engaged during PE lessons and beyond, they enjoy learning and doing PE, and they view the learning and doing of PE as valuable and worthwhile experiences: "PE is so much fun, we play lots of games and get to have a say in the rules" (Tayla, Yr 5 student).

In a climate of increasing accountability expectations that teachers understand and demonstrate high quality teaching in Australia



are reflected across a range of government initiatives. At a state level these include the New South Wales (NSW) Quality Teaching Framework (QTF), the Victorian 'Professional Learning in Effective Schools' guiding principles and the South Australian 'Teaching for Effective Learning' (TfEL). These are also evident at a national level in the 'Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership as a key strand of the cross-sector 'Smarter Schools National Partnerships'.

There is pressure on physical education teachers to demonstrate valuable academic learning. Any inability to respond with suitably high quality teaching widens the gap between physical education and the 'academic' curriculum, reinforcing the perception of it as a non-academic subject distant from the 'real' school curriculum. This then reduces physical education to justifying its place in the curriculum as a tool for fighting lifestyle diseases such as obesity when research suggests its potential for realising valuable intellectual learning through movement when appropriate pedagogy is adopted (Griffin & Butler, 2005; Light & Fawns, 2003).

As Australia moves towards a national curriculum there is a pressing need for high quality pedagogy that highlights the possibilities for learning through physical education. This isolation of physical education from the academic curriculum is exacerbated by the remarkably resilient, 'traditional' pedagogy for teaching the practical aspects of the curriculum that focuses on sport skills with relatively little attention afforded to intellectual learning. The generalist teacher often struggles with the concepts of the traditional PE approach because it is very skill based. The lack of confidence they feel in teaching skills and their feelings of inadequacy with their own physical prowess impact on their ability to provide quality teaching in this area.

## Game Sense

Game Sense pedagogy and other similar approaches such as TGfU (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982), offer the basis of high quality pedagogy in physical education beyond the teaching of games.

These approaches are more enjoyable for both teachers and students and the pressure of skill and technique focused PE is removed which gives non specialists the confidence to provide a variety of experiences and allows them to integrate other concepts (Light, 2012).

Game Sense pedagogy provides relevant and significant knowledge for students outside games and sport. Game Sense generates an increase in expectations as to what it means to be physically educated and involves students learning about themselves, forming a personal identity and learning how to live in society.

Physical education teachers using the Game Sense approach will be able to meet the requirements of, the NSW Quality Teaching Framework (Curry & Light, 2006). In doing so they will also be able to provide high quality learning experiences for students and make a start toward making physical education a truly valuable educational experience in schools in Australia.

Learning to play any game involves a range of cognition including perception (pre-cognition), problem solving, decision-making and responding to cues (Kirk & MacPhail, 2002). They also provide opportunities for collaborative problem solving and the social interaction from which meaningful and lasting learning emerges (Light & Fawns, 2003).

## Challenges and Recommendations

What we are seeing more often is the outsourcing of physical education to private organisations. Although I agree that these provide opportunities for students to participate when often they would have no PE, there are many issues associated with employing external service providers to deliver PE within primary school settings. The costs associated with outsourcing PE is my greatest concern as students in low socio economic schools may not be in a position to afford this service. Therefore, equality is lost. Schools and parents should not be put under financial pressure to meet the needs of a physical education curriculum that is mandated. When considering cost implications, a specialised PE teacher could be shared among 2-3 schools over the week.

My beliefs about employing specialist PE teachers in primary schools are often challenged. For example, some have suggested that we would require specialists in other subjects such as the arts, languages and music. My justification here is simple. We are educating students to function in a society where lack of physical activity is a major contributor to the many prevalent health issues. PE has the stronger argument for specialisation due to the fact that PE contributes to improved holistic health, thus improving life expectancy, decreasing morbidity and providing a better quality of life for Australians. In the long term this would take some pressure of our health system. I see the primary years as vital for instilling good habits and values toward physical activity through quality physical education.

Another concern is the increase in mental health issues, especially in children. We need to ensure the link between physical activity and health issues is recognised and promoted. There is no greater investment in our future education than to develop fully our children's social, emotional, physical, mental and environmental well being, and overall health and attitudes towards life which could be achieved by employing specialist PDHPE staff.

PE has the potential to enrich students' lives through sporting experiences, developing their skills and identifying students with particular, possibly hidden talents, or those requiring additional support. It allows students to improve their social skills



and provides opportunities for teamwork. There is no better teaching and learning vehicle to assist the next generation with skills to combat prevalent issues such as obesity, bullying, peer pressure, depression and fundamental movement skills than through primary school HPE programs. Specialised PE teachers are confident and passionate about PE and continue to stay informed of new trends as they only need to focus on this one speciality area. With the implementation of the new National curriculum, the specialist teacher can focus only on PE and is best placed to meet the challenges that may arise through these curriculum changes.

## Take Action!

Independent and Catholic schools have recognised the importance of employing a specialist PE teacher and it is imperative that the public system follows. I encourage all educators and parents to contact their State and Federal education ministers to fight for the recognition that PE deserves and to ensure that people are leading healthier, happier lives from a young age.

## References

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