

30 plus a day: Identifying the real issues in physical education and sport?

Bill Ussher

“The Ministerial Taskforce report “Getting Set for an Active Nation” (2001) questioned, among other things, the quantity and quality of sport and physical education programmes in our schools and subsequently the Minister of Education asked the Education Review Office to investigate the claim (National News, 2001).”

The Ministerial Taskforce report “Getting Set for an Active Nation” (2001) questioned, among other things, the quantity and quality of sport and physical education programmes in our schools and subsequently the Minister of Education asked the Education Review Office to investigate the claim (National News, 2001). My experiences as a classroom teacher and a lecturer in physical education indicate a wide variation in the quality of physical education programmes offered in primary schools, from no programme at all to the extensive and inclusive programmes children have been privileged to experience and learn through. Student teachers share the experiences they have while on teaching practice and overwhelmingly my feeling is that there are very few effective physical education¹ programmes being provided. Fitness and games substitute for learning opportunities.

Involvement in the writing team of the 1999 *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (HPENZC) has given me an insight and understanding of the intent of this statement. While I didn't ever feel that the work of the principal writers was totally accepted and affirmed by the Ministry of Education, the importance of the underlying philosophies and structure has been maintained throughout. My own research this past 3 years has investigated the influence of the curriculum statement in five schools. It is apparent that the philosophies and structure of the curriculum have been well received but with some reservation regarding the alliance of physical education with health education. A visit to several universities in the south-eastern United States during 2000

gave me further insight into physical education curriculum and teaching. In each of the areas that I visited children were taught physical education by specialist physical education teachers during the primary and intermediate school years. The teacher education programmes that I observed with colleagues was based on a four year degree that primarily involved study of physical education content and methods with some specialist or interest papers. Being able to experience these things first hand and having the opportunity to reflect on the state of physical education has enabled me to offer the following thoughts.

Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that physical education in New Zealand primary schools is more about health and wellbeing than physical activity. If teachers, principals and schools are truly honest about their physical education programmes (content and effectiveness) then the New Zealand public might begin to better understand the current situation. The time and commitment required for teachers to develop the necessary content knowledge and the additional pedagogical skills to implement effective physical education programmes is not well supported. Teacher development programmes are unable to reach out to all schools and teachers effectively. It is not feasible to place greater emphasis on numeracy and literacy and also expect generalist classroom teachers to keep up with the changes in areas such as physical education. I suggest it is time we did physical education a ‘favour’ in our primary schools and removed it from the curriculum. At least then teachers would not be blamed when the All Blacks, Silver Ferns, All Whites, Black Caps, etc. are not



Bill Ussher
School of Education
University of Waikato

performing to public expectations. Taking it out of the classroom curriculum would allow teachers to get on with teaching other essential learning areas and not feel culpable when leaving physical education until the afternoon for a break from study! Of course I agree with Stuart Middleton that “schools are not to blame” (Middleton, 2001, p.16) but this ministerial report and its recommendations gives schools the opportunity to “look anew” at physical education and sport.

Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand curriculum

The HPENZC statement requires that traditional boundaries in school structures will be crossed (Brooker, 1999) and that teachers can and are willing to move across and between such boundaries. In aligning physical education with health education the Ministry of Education specifications (1995) clearly required that the writers should ensure a suitable balance between health education and physical education. As the physical education principal writer, Culpan (1995) was clearly in accord with the literature that proposed such an alliance, while strongly opposed to physical education being captured within a health paradigm. Three teachers in my recent study (Ussher, 2001) also believed that physical education can have a positive impact on children’s lives through such positive health-related experiences. The writers intended that the new curriculum statement should integrate the health and physical education dimension but also ensure that each subject’s uniqueness and integrity be maintained.

This new curriculum statement challenges traditional approaches to teaching, and learning. Given the holistic orientation of this statement,

the implementation process must emphasise its learner-centred ideology. The holistic concept of the HPENZC statement appeals to those teachers who emphasise developmental approaches to learning, structuring the learning in a meaningful way (Eisner, 1994). For effective learning opportunities in an outcomes-based approach such as this HPENZC teachers must couch student achievements and programme content within the conceptual philosophies. The teachers in my study made positive comment regarding these philosophies. They considered the concepts of hauorä, health promotion, and socio-ecological perspective should be an integral part of the total learning environment for primary children. If the responses from the teachers in my study are typical, then most primary classroom teachers in New Zealand orient their programme and practices this way already.

In my research, four of the teachers suggested that the school learning programmes are generally guided or decided by the physical education strengths within a teaching team and school. Unfortunately the teachers who place value on physical education for its contribution to the children’s total wellbeing are often restricted by the value and disposition it is given in the school by the local community. Valuing physical education for its contribution to healthy living would better enable teachers to consult with parents in a more meaningful and constructive manner, to acquaint the school community with the valuable contribution that physical education makes to the overall education of a child.

While physical activity in itself may be regarded as important, in the primary years the social skills such

as communication, safety, expression and caring are given greater emphasis. While there is an identified need for a pastoral, health promoting perspective to primary school learning environments, the nature of the individual children and the schools is also significant. For example in my study Teresa² taught in a school where she considered the children in her class very tactile learners and lacking in ability to concentrate for any length of time as often required in a fully academic environment. She acknowledged that the children she worked with needed to learn how to care for themselves and cope with competition more appropriately. The teachers in my study suggested the identified health needs of the learners dominate the intent of the HPENZC statement and subsequent learning programmes, a possible capture by a health paradigm warned about by Culpan (1995). It was felt by the teachers in my study that classroom programmes and teachers would be held accountable for HPENZC learning through health education assessments rather than providing physical activity for learning.

Physical education within the school curriculum today

The value of physical education is recognised and acknowledged by many for its social, physical and moral development and is associated with national fitness (Stothart, 1995), but the idea of achievement in such areas as motor skills, behaviour and sport does not appear to be sufficient. Kirk found that for many the value of physical education is for its contribution to sport (1997). The fundamental value of physical education as a learning area for all five teachers in my research was for its physical activity and skill learning



components through purposeful games playing. In many school programmes fitness, games and sport have become a substitute for effective physical education programmes (Ross & Cowley, 1995). For many teachers physical education continues to be daily fitness only, a run in the open spaces for the class to perhaps develop and maintain regular exercise and fitness (Glover, 1993).

Communities at the schools of the teachers in my research (Ussher, 2001) advocated that they value and respect physical education as a learning area but not to the same extent as the four 'big' learning areas - mathematics, English, science and technology. Physical education is respected by many schools for its contribution to a child's health and education, the concept of healthy schools (Lawson, 1993) but for most it is valued for its contribution to sport. Past programmes in New Zealand have emphasised a 'preparation for sport' disposition, with the school as the training ground for children to learn and understand how to play specific sports.

Past practices are often difficult to change and to be expected to deal with curriculum change as well as content change has been difficult for schools and teachers. There have been major changes in New Zealand curricula and it has been the classroom teachers burdened with the task of implementing each change. The culture of physical activity and recreation in our society has also undergone change, in many instances it has taken forms that have been difficult for teachers to reproduce in classrooms without major change to the culture and structures within the school (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998). The Ministry of Education's booklet, *Jumping In!* (1999b), anticipated that schools would have little difficulty in the development and implementation of the curriculum, building on changes already implemented. Like Young, (1989) teachers in my study considered that aspects of their work and their school's culture, such as the local environment,

professionalism, teacher interest and community support, were not neutral but so influential that it was often very difficult to instigate change for the children. Teachers need time and support to construct meaning from new statements for change to occur through teacher development programmes. As Bell and Gilbert (1996) demonstrate, all those involved in change must be empowered and take personal responsibility for change and development to be effective. Stewart's (1999) findings in the Waikato implementation contract the teachers in this study also identify planning, assessment and policy implementation and development as a considerable demand on them. Having to consult with community adds to the already heavy demands placed on them by curriculum requirements.

Classroom content and programmes are generally guided directly by school policy statements which are influenced by specific national curriculum statements. The teachers in my study understood the curriculum statement as a guide to school policy and classroom programme coherence. In some schools a written school-wide or syndicate programme was available to guide teachers while in others each teacher was individually responsible for the writing of his/her own specific class programme. Where there was a lack of leadership in policy and programme setting, it was felt by these teachers that programmes in the schools often lacked an overall coherent approach, creating gaps in children's learning that often required attention before the 'real' programme could be implemented (e.g., lacking in fundamental skills). The influence of long-serving teachers was profound in relation to setting 'appropriate' programmes, and they considered that traditional teaching styles and content had remained unaltered in many classrooms for some time. In one school the board of trustees and the parents also had a major influence.

In New Zealand the local community has always had a healthy

interest in primary school curricula and programmes (Codd 1991). Parents strong perceptions of the importance of sport influence the school and classroom programme in most schools. Curriculum change is often a difficult and controversial process for teachers in the face of opposition from their local community. For many local communities, indication of physical education success is sport participation by the students and success at inter-school competition. From my study it appears that communities consider the task for teachers and physical education programmes is to prepare the children for immediate participation in local activities and events, such as playing sport and successful involvement in intra- and inter-school games and sporting events. Preparing children for their local environment has a major influence on the physical education programme and this includes children's ability to be involved positively in the local sporting community and available opportunities for physical activity (Haywood, 1991).

School communities must be educated about educational changes. A curriculum that has new ways of viewing old material requires consultation with and education of the broad spectrum of each school community. While the professionals may be responsible for developing and implementing the programme, mediating forces such as the community can have a crippling effect on teachers' endeavours to make innovative change. In many communities a local geographic feature such as a nearby river may impact on the culture of the school and its presence may motivate the teachers to include this as an important part of the programme. Schools favoured with a hall, pool, courts and field may feel there is an expectation that teachers will provide a physical education and sport programme that keeps the children active and the resources well utilised.

Teachers rely on a range of resources and supporting material to

implement an interesting programme. Traditional activities and local events also play a major part in curriculum setting, such as school camps, gala days, inter-school events and parent evenings. Syndicates, teams, individuals, principal, board of trustees, and policy statements all impact on the programme design and hence the perceived value of physical education in each specific school. Indulging the influence of all these factors may create the perception of a large, eclectic curriculum lacking in coherence but the final interpretation and implementation of the statement will still rest with the classroom teachers.

Physical education in the classroom curriculum

The teaching of physical education may well be left to look after itself if teacher knowledge in this curriculum area is considered not significantly different to the public knowledge of sport. The most effective method of teaching physical education is a practical approach, providing the opportunities for students to "...learn to move as they move to learn". When taking children into the outdoors, teachers often feel vulnerable to critique by principal, peers and passersby (Fejgin et al., 1995) in this highly visible situation. Children in the outdoors are significantly more difficult to manage than in a classroom, consequently there is greater awareness by observers of the non-participants and apparently undisciplined behaviour. Avoiding taking children out of the classroom regularly for physical education may be the result of pressures including the curriculum, the community, safety and the pressures of accountability.

The introduction of a curriculum document will not transform the learning of children. Learning is affected by the curriculum, teacher understanding of and commitment to goals, and teacher expertise (Jefferies & Ussher, 1997). For the teachers in my study it was a battle to fit every aspect of the total

national curriculum into the classroom programme. This crowding of the curriculum was forcing changes in their practice. Such pressures prevent some teachers from seeking opportunities to explore and experiment with new ideas, and reflect on their practice. Providing teachers with the opportunity to talk about what they think and do is important for their development rather than allowing the crowded curriculum to be the driving force that motivates change. A frequent consequence of this overload, and the lack of confidence to teach physical education, is that there are times in every teacher's classroom programme when no formal physical education learning is scheduled for the class. It remains a battle for teachers to fit every aspect of the total national curriculum into the classroom programme, with time management being a big issue.

...having the time to work out where it fits. It's the time thing for me. And the organisation. I mean I just find I chase my tail all the time... and there's so many other things (Teresa)

A teacher's pedagogical content knowledge plays a significant function in the status of physical education in primary schools. Teachers who know the developmental progressions and have the subject content knowledge as well as the pedagogical skills give a feeling of excitement to their teaching of physical education. For the brief interactions between teacher and students in physical education lessons to be constructive and helpful formative assessment, the teacher requires a sound knowledge of the curriculum, pedagogy and content. Teachers collaborate in and for physical education teaching. Those that are successful, involved, competent or confident with sport and/or physical education help those that are not so motivated. This help fundamentally comes in the form of sharing and maintaining equipment and other resources, scheduling and care of facilities, advice on children's skill and development, and often taking

the "too-hard" content such as gymnastics or te reo kori. Teachers in my study felt that some of their colleagues required a lot of support in planning and practices in physical education, placing pressure on them. It is the view of these five teachers that those teachers who lack confidence and knowledge 'appear' not to like physical education, as indicated by their reluctance to provide worthwhile experiences and thus the children in their classes do not get the opportunities to develop skills, knowledge and positive attitudes.

Pedagogical issues

A significant part of today's physical education curriculum and programmes is the development of skills, knowledge and understanding leading to a physically active lifestyle (Rink, 2000). Physical education is respected by many schools for its contribution to a child's health and education, their total wellbeing. All five of the teachers in my study utilise physical education in their classroom curriculum to provide learning opportunities that will allow children to develop their interpersonal skills, understandings and attitudes. While physical education is not the only learning area that provides these opportunities it is an important one and this aspect continues to be a strand within the new curriculum. However, according to all five teachers, sport continues to play the most significant role, influencing most school and classroom programmes. These teachers all work in schools that have a strong community focus on sport.

The learner-centred approach inherent in this new HPENZC statement originated in the Policy Advisory Group's specifications (Ministry of Education, 1995). My study found that these teachers operated learner-centred programmes and looked to provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences, endeavouring to make knowledge personal and have content focused on individual needs, helping the learner



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understand their own existence and to have greater control of their own learning and future. If a learner-centred approach is to be successful, teachers must be willing and able to provide individualised learning time for their students. Three of the teachers felt that difficulties associated with learner-centred programmes are often created through large class numbers and diversity. One concern for these teachers was that this new curriculum statement promotes the concept of learner-centredness without the necessary adaptations to system structures such as class sizes. Also while sport continues to have a significant role, influencing the school and classroom programme, activities are mostly centred around team sports that provide for large group participation. These teachers all worked in schools that had a strong community focus on sport.

The important process of determining the most appropriate learning programme for a class involves time for the teacher to identify the children’s learning needs, locating the desired achievement outcomes for their class, then turning to the Key Areas of Learning for guidance on content and structure. National curriculum statements and school policy statements are the foundations of essential learning. Consistent with Beane’s thinking (1995) the teachers in this study understand HPENZC statement as a curriculum that guides and holds school curriculum policy together as a whole. Rather than a directive the teachers felt that

the statement ensures that the parts of school curriculum are unified and connected. All this activity, while important, takes time and knowledge. The more knowledgeable a teacher is about the sources of curriculum, the quicker they will be in the decision-making process. Teachers lacking the breadth of knowledge may well give up - either offer no physical education at all or offer deficient learning experiences.

Conclusion

While I consider that this is an opportune moment in time to reconsider the inclusion of physical education in the classroom curriculum, I stop short of suggesting it should disappear from the school’s curriculum. In recent media headlines following the release of the ministerial taskforce report, various writers have suggested that “Kids need [a] longer school day to get physical” (*The Evening Post*, January 30, 2001) and “Teachers reject longer school days for sport” (*The Press*, January 31, 2001). If in fact children do need a longer day to get physical then we should be reconsidering how physical education learning is provided. I believe most children in New Zealand require physical activity provided outside of the family but teachers are not necessarily the ones to do this.

The ministerial taskforce recommendation that schools provide “more effective prescribed time for physical education, recreation and sport” (p.11) places

pressure on schools. Like Middleton (2001) I feel that schools have been unfairly blamed through the media for everything and anything. Now is an opportune time to consider removing physical education and sport from the primary school classroom curriculum and provide for this important learning another way. Issues associated with physical education, sport and schools must be given careful and considered thought.

- Changing the length of the school day will not in itself solve the problem as I have identified it. Additional time allocated to classroom curriculum would continue to be utilised for learning areas such as numeracy and literacy by teachers who lack competence and confidence in physical education.
- There are far too many influencing factors for the 30-minutes suggested to be successful, such as the different physical activity involvement between rural and urban children, the continuing problems associated with teacher curriculum content knowledge and “any decision to lengthen the school day [should] be based on educational aspects, not the recommendations of the recent taskforce report on sport, Education Minister Trevor Mallard says” (Rivers, 2001, p.4).
- Many classroom teachers are already taking the fun out of physical activity and sport. Real change requires teacher competence and confidence. Unless teachers are provided with opportunities to refine and extend their knowledge base of physical education content, they are unlikely to develop the confidence required for an effective learning programme.
- Much of the physical education currently observed in primary schools could be organised, managed and supervised by a coach.
- Children need to be active and they need positive movement

experiences. If schools are no longer able to provide these learning opportunities in the classroom curriculum then as a society we need to address the issue thoughtfully.

- With assessment in physical education emphasising children's behaviour, effort and care aspects, removing physical education for a more movement, physical activity and sport focus will not have a significant impact for the hinengaro and whanau dimensions of hauorä.

I applaud the idea of 30 minutes extra each school day. It is time for school principals, teachers and educationalists to reconsider the purpose and place of physical education in the curriculum. The extra time could be used by teachers for planning and reflecting while the children are "active, challenged and happy" in their physical education programme. Alternative approaches must be considered in providing such opportunities. Employing specialist physical education teachers to develop and implement programmes across a range of classes and schools would be an option. We could also give due thought to others in our society and whether it would be appropriate for others to be involved. For instance the regional sport trusts receive taskforce attention, suggesting they "must be refocussed to lead and unify..." (p.11). They could be more formally involved in the provision of physical education and sport in schools. Elite and professional sports people over the years have become increasingly involved in school programmes. Perhaps a part of their contracts could be the development of skills and attitudes of school children. Others in our communities such as those receiving financial support (such as for unemployment and retirement) could be utilised within physical education programmes. There are many valuable community members who have skills and knowledge appropriate to apply to help our

students improve their learning. We know our classroom teachers are under pressure to meet the demands of the school curriculum so "looking anew" at the systems we have in place are due. We could easily assign each of these suggestions to the "too-hard-basket" but if we truly want our schools to be the best for our children then let's begin now.

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¹I use the term physical education here deliberately as related to and defined by the 1999 Health and Physical Education curriculum as different to the idea of sport. These two terms are frequently used interchangeably in New Zealand. In the ministerial report it is not always clear that the two ideas are considered as distinct entities.

²One of the five pseudonyms used by the teachers in my research. - Aroha, Mere, Teresa, Pamela and Wendy