

## **Running a field or running a programme? Issues confronting physical education in primary schools today**

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*This article raises issues about the teaching of physical education in New Zealand primary schools today. These include (i) provision of resources, (ii) media influence, (iii) curriculum squeeze, and (iv) changing society. With an apparent undermining of physical education in primary school programmes and the imminent implementation of a new curriculum document that integrates Physical Education and Health Education there is a need to acknowledge these issues. This article aims to promote discussion of the issues amongst teachers, teacher educators and pre-service teachers.*

### **Introduction**

Students on teaching practice encounter varying degrees of physical education in classroom programmes ranging from no active physical education at all, to a fitness and/or sport programme only (with no skill or concept teaching), through to a full and effective programme. It is not unusual for the physical education periods to be given over to the student teachers because they are considered young and to have fresh ideas. These experiences support the research of Ross and Cowley (1995) that the place of physical education within schools continues to lose ground. When asked, a majority of teachers today agree with Salter's (1995) view that,

*Physical education is ... of crucial importance in the primary years to satisfy the need for physical activity, to provide the foundations of a life-long interest in physical activity, and to contribute to the broader aims of education, for example, moral, social and cognitive development (p.205).*

This agreement, however, appears contrary to actual practice in schools. Teachers who include physical education in their programme frequently allocate a short period daily to fitness or exercise out of the classroom. This is intended as a means of engaging children in high levels of activity. Unfortunately, such activity tends to have little focus, purpose or challenge.

This retrenchment of physical education comes at a time when, as a society, we are more conscious of (i) recreation and its place in our lives, (ii) the potential benefits from participation in physical activity, (iii) mental health problems, (iv) student behavioural management problems, (v) unemployment, and (vi) the increasingly sedentary nature of employment.

Australian educators also face the dilemma of how to accommodate a realistic yet effective physical education programme into their schools - while maintaining a balance between the demands of the sports fraternity, recreational organisations, the health promoting schools lobby and the wellness industry.

With the impending release of a draft *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* document for discussion, teachers will need to consider the issues involved, particularly those which impact on their school and classroom programmes. It is up to concerned professionals in the field to communicate such issues to classroom practitioners. Currently, only teachers who have a special interest in physical education tend to view physical education as “in crises”.

## Issues

A number of issues are addressed under the headings: *Changes in Society, Media Influences, Provision of Resources and Curriculum Squeeze*. While reading this article consider Item #12 of *Schedule C- Policy Specification for a National Curriculum Statement in Health and Physical Education*:

*In developing the curriculum statement ... ensure there is a suitable balance between health education and physical education components, and between present and future requirements to establish and maintain patterns of active healthy living (Ministry of Education, 1995).*

Ask, “How active are our children *presently* in physical education?” and “What will *future* requirements for an active healthy lifestyle involve?”

## *Changes in Society*

New Zealand in the 1990's is a rapidly changing environment as we follow the rest of the world along the information and technology highways, and as our towns and cities transform in size and population. Businesses, schools and families rely more and more on technological advances as they go about their daily lives. Computers are in common use in most companies and institutions, including schools, where there is a need for rapid access to and processing of information. The recently released *Technology in the New Zealand Curriculum* has signalled very clearly the importance now placed on technological skills. The options available to children have increased with the growth in the electronic media of television, cinema, video games and computers. As these have become more accessible, there have been changes in the way children spend their leisure time. A 1988 USA report found that children spend 12.5 hours per week on average watching television or, if spread over the course of a year, equivalent to the time spent in school (Brock, 1994).

Growing urbanisation has brought about changes to children's participation in leisure and recreation activities. As our towns and cities change and the space available for parks and play areas diminishes and becomes more dispersed children are faced with smaller and more remote areas for outdoor activities. There is a lack of safe “room to move”. Rising crime and violence has also meant changes in the way our children go to and from school and in the places they play. Parents have to be increasingly more

careful and concerned about where their children are, and the amount of freedom they allow.

These changes in the activities children are involved in during their leisure time are likely to have a significant effect on their total wellbeing, especially as the number of physical activities and/or the amount of time spent in them are reduced. With many parents spending more hours involved with work and their own leisure, the time spent in active recreation with their children is decreasing. It is important to recognise and acknowledge these changes and to consider whether our programmes are addressing the current needs of children, particularly the need for healthy physical activity. If Physical Education, as the 1987 syllabus states ‘... is most important for physical growth and the improvement of fitness and health...’ (p.5), then teachers and teacher educators need to consider the value and importance currently placed on physical education in schools. Further, the *New Zealand curriculum Framework* (1993) suggests that learning in this Essential Learning area ‘enables students to learn about themselves and their abilities, and to approach learning with energy and application’ (p.16).

In today’s society it is the accepted right of every child, irrespective of gender, culture, ability or religious background, to have access to equal educational opportunities. Schools are expected to provide programmes which cater for the individual needs of their students and which do not discriminate in any way against particular groups. Although teachers recognise this and attempt to present programmes which are not biased in any way, Talson (cited in McManus and Armstrong, 1996) points out “... the school is a known primary enforcer and reinforcer of gender stereotypical behaviour particularly in the physical domain...” (p.34). In physical education this can present problems for teachers who are less than confident for whatever reasons. Teachers who lack the skills, confidence and knowledge are more likely to opt out of teaching physical education. Te Reo Kori, a recognised component within physical education, is one example of an aspect of physical education which might be threatening to teachers who already lack confidence in teaching physical education and similarly lack confidence in things Maori. The thought of teaching something about which you have limited knowledge can be quite threatening.

The effects of programmes which do not consider gender equity or cultural perspectives have far reaching consequences. As Butt & Pahnos (1995) and Chalmers (1992) point out, teachers are very strong socialising agents of, and role models for, students. “As teachers, we have an immense effect on our students’ lives. We help shape how they view and respond to the world” (Butt & Pahnos, 1995, p.48). If teachers are not supported with opportunities for professional development and upskilling in physical education they will continue to avoid teaching physical education. The messages being sent to children and the community by these teachers are not helpful to the development of physical education.

There are two main schools of thought concerning physical education. The one prevalent in the community considers that physical education is about the body only (and does not involve the mind), while the other considers that physical education involves body and mind together. These differing schools of thought also affect the value that is placed on physical education, and therefore impact on the quality of programmes offered in New Zealand primary schools. Programmes which consider physical education as encompassing the physical body only are less likely to meet the total needs of the children - their physical, personal, social, emotional and cognitive needs.

Physical education programmes operating in many schools today reflect the first of these views; they are based around daily exercise and modified sports. The focus is on the health related benefits of physical exercise and specific skills associated with the differing sports. While these programmes may *appear* to fulfil the requirements for physical education, and keep the children 'busy, happy and good', they raise concern in the minds of physical educators because they focus only on the physical and scientific; they do not recognise the scope of a balanced physical education programme for the development of the child's total wellbeing. Culpan (1995) believes this has come about because the body has been likened to a machine which can be measured for productivity in terms of input and output. He suggests that physical education,

*... is characterised by a very strong scientific base - anatomy, exercise physiology, biomechanics, exercise, nutrition, etc. This scientific functionalism, of course, has served more than one purpose in the development of physical education. Firstly, it has provided the platform from which the profession can claim academic credibility as in other curriculum areas, secondly, it can clearly demonstrate some sort of added value to the individual by developing fitness and health and thirdly, it almost totally ignores the view that the body can be viewed as the site of where personal social issues are grappled with and overcome so that one can achieve personal meaning and identity (p.14-15).*

We subscribe to the second view that physical education involves mind and body together and benefits the development of the whole child. Tinning, Kirk and Evans (1993) also argue that "... the mind and body are not separate, but that we act knowingly and intelligently, and learn in and through movement" (p.38).

### ***Media Influences***

With children involved with the electronic media of television, cinema and games, in addition to their consumption of magazines, posters, comics, books and newspapers, the impact of post modern culture via the media has a much greater influence on lives than does schooling. Children continue to have encounters with these agents of society, agents which adults tend to consider mere entertainment. Teachers tend to assure themselves that children take only literal meaning from each encounter with the media above, and indeed consider that this exposure will benefit the

school curriculum and children. Tinning (1994), for instance, has observed that physical educators regard media attention to physical activity, fitness and sport as '*a boon to their profession*' (p.21).

However, children receive some powerful messages from the media. Marketing of body image and physical activity in today's information society is unrestrained. Even basic television advertisements feature metamorphic bodies and include subtle suggestions of associated good life through physical activity. Assuming that children are simply passive observers of these aspects of body culture is misguided. Research by Hickey (1995) found that the "healthy" concept promoted through the media was present in children's attitudes. When confronted by photographs of "out-of-shape" people, children described them as "unfit, lazy, lacking in commitment and discipline." Associated victim-blaming accompanied their comments. This deliberate exercise attitude is now a prevalent part of our society. Students are encouraged to "do" fitness because of the inherent good for them, just as it is now respectable to be running, jogging or working out at the gym. Ross (1996) says this exhortation to exercise is part of the free market political environment that encourages everyone to take personal responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. But this is an adult value. Children are not adults, do not understand the purpose of fitness tests and subsequent activity, and do not have the thought processes nor the attention span to consider the long term value of such activity. An important aim of education is to develop lifelong attitudes and behaviours so our physical education programmes should include choice, meaning and fun. Current programmes are unrelated to the development of students in today's environment. It is the media which guides children's learning and thinking - sporting heroes such as Christian Cullen, Philip Taturangi and Bernice Mene influence their thinking and behaviour more than our physical education programmes.

According to The Hillary Commission (1995, p.1) "Sport is an integral part of New Zealand's culture" so it is not surprising that a number of agencies have responsibility for maintaining, organising and conducting sport. These agencies utilise the media to promote the dominant ideology of sport - that involvement in sport naturally develops positive attitudes to healthy lifestyles for all participants. The media portrays elite athletes as a benchmark for all to aspire to, and consequently communities hold high expectations for athletes at all levels. In their first draft of *A Policy for Junior Sport in New Zealand*, (The Hillary Commission, 1996) the writers include primary schools as important agents for the development of sport. They suggest in the rationale that "sport, when presented and organised properly, is an important educational and developmental area that offers benefits to both the individual and society" (p.2). In 1990, Evans suggested that if Australian "teachers were to continue as providers of sporting opportunities for young people then urgent steps [would] need to be taken to educate teachers about their roles and responsibilities" (p.8).

Currently the programme at The University of Waikato for Diploma in Teaching (Primary) includes no compulsory courses to prepare teachers for teaching sport. This is largely because those who develop policy - teachers and academics together - consider that there is no place in the curriculum at primary school level for sport in its pure form. Teachers are therefore faced with something of a dilemma with respect to sport in school. Many have limited knowledge of subject matter to plan and implement meaningful programmes; their children frequently have more extensive knowledge than they do of the common sports; they possess little confidence to attempt new sports; they feel vulnerable regarding the increased risk of injury to children in the outdoors, and subsequent litigation; they see the availability of outside agencies to implement sport programmes. While the media promotes sport and competition as vital, to primary school teachers it remains a dilemma.

Competition, as promoted by the media, is an adult perception involving winning and losing. Researchers such as Grant, Tredinnick and Hodge (1992), Tinning (1994) and Hickey (1995) found that when playing a game, children did play to win but were more interested in moving to the next engaging activity. Research carried out in New Zealand by Grant et al. (1992) observed children's attitudes to competition and found that success was determined more by being a valued participant than winning. While emphasis on competition varies with the composition of teams, children organise competition to be fair so that everyone has the opportunity to experience success and enjoyment. The media, on the other hand, presents athletes playing only the sport they are best at and often in a "win at all costs" environment. "Winning is paramount for sporting elites on TV" (Ross, 1994, p.11) and its presentation involves observers, including children, in the triumphs and dramas as they unfold on the screen. This highly competitive environment is a reflection of the politics of the time, of the free-market environment of big business and the consumerism that is driving our society. Our media promotes highly competitive social institutions (e.g, sport, Lotto, casinos) as if anyone, particularly through their own efforts, can win - but there are few winners! The dilemma for teachers is whether to ignore competition altogether, accept the media perspective, or embody competition in an appropriate programme where every child's safety is protected but still allows for opportunities to learn about good competition.

### ***Provision of Resources***

One need only turn on the radio or television, or read a newspaper or magazine, to know about the funding crisis facing schools. Decreasing budgets and rising resource costs have meant that schools are unable to adequately resource all programmes. It is this scarcity of resources which affects the quality and type of programmes offered in New Zealand primary schools. Increasingly there is a need for schools to rely on outside assistance (parent and community) in an attempt to minimise

the effects of reduced funding and to continue to provide quality programmes. This can be problematic for some schools, however, as the increase in numbers of families with both parents/caregivers working has meant a decrease in the availability of these people as participants in their children's leisure time. The increasing number of single partner families, and families in the lower socioeconomic bracket in many schools and districts, has also meant that schools are unable to rely as heavily as previously on parents and community members.

The influx of new curriculum documents has also had an impact on schools and the provision of resources. As each new document has been introduced, schools have been seriously involved in professional development programmes and implementation processes, both of which are costly in terms of money and teacher time. The combined effects of these events has been a funding shortage in schools. This tends to be particularly felt in physical education programmes because of the relatively limited value given physical education and extensive cost of providing and maintaining equipment and facilities. For many schools physical education is not a priority, and time and money saved here can be used elsewhere. This makes it difficult for the enthusiastic physical education teachers to implement quality programmes. While some schools are already well equipped and provide quality programmes, the lack of appropriate time, equipment and facilities available to many teachers in other schools, makes planning and implementation of effective physical education programmes very difficult. An example of this is the problem faced by schools which lack suitable indoor space, especially when the weather is cold and/or wet. In circumstances like this, where changes to the physical education lesson, teaching approaches and style are required, teachers with little confidence or knowledge of physical education find it easier and less hassle to just 'skip' the physical education lesson. Lack of a swimming pool is a further example of this. No pool in a school usually means no aquatics programme, or children being transported to a suitable pool at a cost to parents or caregivers. For many schools, however, this is not an option as the costs are too high to be justified to parents. Costs of providing quality programmes within the school have their parallel in the community. While society at large may consider that sport and active involvement are vital to the growth and development of children, many families find that the cost of involvement in out-of-school activities is prohibitive. For many parents, the expectation is that the school will have to be the provider of such a programme of activities.

### ***Curriculum Squeeze***

Since the introduction of *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* in 1993, curriculum documents for 5 of the 7 Essential Learning Areas have been introduced leaving only "Health and Physical Education" and "The Arts". Early in 1996 the Minister of Education delayed the release of the consultation draft of the "Health and

Physical Education” document because of the pressures facing teachers from the major changes already occurring throughout education. This gave recognition to the reality of burnout from workload, paperwork and diminishing autonomy facing primary classroom teachers. The imposition of another external project was potentially disastrous. Change requires time and patience and teachers are having to prioritise change to best suit their circumstances. Meantime, the debate over the justification for physical education continues: Is Physical Education justified by its contribution to health and wellbeing or justified by its contribution to sport and physical activity? The naming of the Essential Learning Area as “Health and Wellbeing” signalled a shift in popular discourse from the previously dominant ‘activity orientation’ to one of ‘health orientation’. As Taggart, Alexander and Taggart (1993) show in their research, this debate is similar to that undertaken by Australian educators. Nevertheless, introduction of a document, whatever the title, will not transform the learning of children. This creates only surface change. Learning is affected by the curriculum, teacher commitment to goals and teacher expertise.

This link between teacher expertise and perceived value of a learning area is captured by Fejgin, Ephraty and Ben-Sira (1995, p.66) in their observation that the status of a subject is ‘determined by the degree to which the profession holds monopoly over an esoteric body of knowledge needed to perform the service’. In our society, where sport is a central focus and significant social issues are health related, there is a danger that if physical education is left undefended by its profession, health promotion will inevitably subjugate the physical activity aspects of the curriculum. On the other hand, if communities regard teachers as being paid to ‘coach and referee’ their children, and the academic community perceives that those in the field of physical education are restricted to physical dimensions, then the future for physical education is not favourable either.

Hutchinson (1993) shows that many prospective teachers wanting to specialise or take responsibility for physical education have heavy involvement in sport. These teachers develop a confidence to teach based on previous successes performing in sports but lack ability to plan, develop units of study or focus on learning specific skills. Keeping students ‘busy, happy and good’ is often the limit of their teaching. Experience in sport alone is not enough to guarantee outstanding programmes; this must be supplemented by professional development.

Students and classroom teachers view practicum experiences as necessary for building confidence and providing hands-on experiences with children (Graber, 1995), but to teach what? Methodology courses dominate programmes in teacher education refining students’ skill in planning and evaluating and knowing about children. Associate teachers working with students express concern at the lack of subject knowledge in many areas. Given that many of our prospective teachers are selected



partly for their ability to perform at sport, then the expertise they take into the classroom is one of sport performance. Unfortunately, the condensed curriculum courses in today's teacher education will do little to help broaden the views of such teachers to include personal and socio-critical orientations. Rink's (1993) idea of an eclectic approach doesn't seem feasible. No, the emphasis tends to be on games, sport, dance and fitness, that is what has gone before and that which is readily available in resource texts. The upshot is that teachers are denied the skills and knowledge necessary for making informed choices on how best to teach physical education.

The most effective method of teaching physical education is a practical approach, providing opportunities for students to '... learn to move as they move to learn'. For New Zealand teachers this implies taking children into the outdoors. Fejgin et al. (1995) found that teachers felt vulnerable to critique by principal, peers and passersby 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 non-participants and seemingly undisciplined behaviour. Further, as physical injury occurring in outdoor activities is more obvious than the mental injury caused within the classroom, the consequences are subsequently more open to complaint. Avoiding taking children out of the classroom regularly for physical education may be the result.

Another curriculum requirement that adds pressure to teachers is that of evaluation. Within the classroom there is greater scope to measure the progress of children's learning via written material [hard copy]. Obsession with measurement has created 'technocratic physical education' that encourages classroom teachers to emphasise those activities where measurement is feasible (e.g. fitness, running, jumping, throwing). While we cannot live without this scientific rationality in our lives we should minimise its impact and be holistic and human-centred in our approach to teaching physical education. Generally, assessment of students in physical education focuses on effort, attitude, dress, attendance, discipline and enjoyment. Social aspects such as cooperation, leadership, tolerance and membership are sometimes included. Evaluation of skill performance, however, is based on ease and grace of performance, that is, those attributes that stand out above others. Teachers' ability to assess motor skill performance, social skills, personal growth and critical awareness is likely to remain superficial until teachers receive appropriate professional development.

## Conclusion

You may well ask "So what?" or "Where to from here?" . If things are really as bad for physical education as has been outlined, how can it survive? The answer is, we don't know. What is clear is that written documents alone do not hold the answers to the problems confronting physical education. Rather it is people who, through their attitudes and actions, will influence the future direction of the subject. We are only too

well aware that since the disbandment of the Curriculum Development Unit in 1989, guidance in the field has been left to the voluntary efforts of a few dedicated professionals. There seems to us to be an urgent need for a range of professionals in the physical education field (sport educators, movement educators, physical educators, and health-promoting educators, and researches) to develop a coordinated effort to promote quality physical education in consultation with teachers and Boards of Trustees.

Finally, we would like to emphasise that the effort required to run an effective physical education programme incorporating the physical, cognitive and socio-critical is no less than that required for a quality reading, mathematics or music programme. A disconcerting school community should expect nothing less.

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