

Primary school physical education in Aotearoa /New Zealand: The voices of teachers

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Introduction

The teaching of physical education in Aotearoa/New Zealand primary schools has been the subject of increased interest in recent times. Much of this interest has been generated by the growing perception that there are problems with the quality of teaching and learning in this area. These concerns include the preparation of primary school teachers to teach physical education; the reduction of advisory support; the increased emphasis on numeracy and literacy squeezing other learning areas; the availability of teaching and physical resources in schools; the enduring issue of whether generalist teachers or physical education specialists should be teaching physical education in the primary schools and the availability of relevant, and effective professional development (Dyson, Gordon, & Cowan, 2011; Gordon, 2011; Penny, Pope, Lisahunter, Phillips, & Dewar, 2013; Petrie, 2010, 2011; Smith & Philpot, 2011). These concerns are not exclusive to New Zealand with Morgan and Hansen (2008) having reported similar findings from Australia.

This article reports on the interviews of eleven primary school teachers conducted as phase one of a larger Aotearoa/New Zealand wide study which intends to offer a detailed examination of contemporary physical education in primary schools and to

build on the empirical base established by previous research (see for example Penny, et al., 2013; Petrie, 2011).

Methodology

All participants were recruited via a questionnaire completed as part of the larger study on which they had indicated that they were willing to be interviewed. Of the eleven interviewees ten were female and one was male. The participants were from Auckland, Wanganui and Wellington and their teaching experience ranged from one to forty plus years.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format based on twenty five questions with follow-up prompts when required. The questions sought to establish the reality of the teaching and learning of physical education as it occurred in their classrooms. The interviews took place in a quiet room selected by the teacher and took between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. The transcriptions were then imported into a software package (NVIVO, 2008) as a way of organising the data.

Data were analysed inductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) leading to the emerging of a number of major themes (see findings).

Ethics approval was secured from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Findings

The findings are reported under the following themes; the aims of the physical education programmes; what is overtly taught and the pedagogical approaches used in physical education; teachers assessment of, planning for and confidence in teaching physical education; external providers, availability of resources and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Professional Development (PD).

Aims of physical education programmes

The major aims for physical education were identified as involvement/enjoyment and the teaching of physical and social skills. For many teachers, having students involved was of crucial importance and they wanted their students to "immerse themselves in physical activities, to want to do more" and to develop a "passion and willingness to get involved". While full involvement was identified, for some this was not always seen as realistic "cause you've always got that slightly overweight kid who hates PE no matter what you do".

For over half of the teachers the development of physical skills was seen as central to their physical education programme. The development of fundamental skills was mentioned by some, while others identified specific sports skills. The ability to perform

these skills was considered a measure of the quality of the programme. "Well, one of the examples of quality is ... the number of children that actually made great gains, out of season, with their swimming, was really significant."

What is overtly taught in programmes

When asked to identify the major content areas taught in their programmes, fitness, outdoor education, physical skills, sport/games and dance were most often identified. Fitness was mentioned by a number of teachers, with most considering it to be separate from physical education. The majority of schools allocated separate times for fitness and physical education although a small number combined the two; "lots of our PE teaching doubles up with our fitness times". The activity most often mentioned was Jump Jam, which was both widely implemented and popular with teachers.

Six of the teachers specifically discussed school camps as being part of their physical education programmes, with a number of other 'close to school' outdoor education activities also being mentioned. The use of the close environment for outdoor education activities seemed to be well supported: "they have done a lot of walking... We've been across the river, the bridges ... and visited all the tunnels, towers or bridges there".

The majority of teachers identified the teaching of physical skills as a content area. This ranged from perceptual motor programmes at one school to run-jump-throw, small and large ball skills and a series of skills aligned with specific sports. Sport received some comment, with teachers believing that it gave some focus for the skills they were developing. "If we are doing touch I will make the focus around running, catching of the rugby balls". Those teaching at a younger age level were more likely to talk about games than sport, however, "At this age [junior team] in a PE lesson I don't do any kind of sport, but I would use

a variation of a game to practice what we have been doing".

Dance was mentioned by all eleven teachers as being taught within physical education or in two cases the arts curriculum. "We've done dancing, we've done folk dancing displays, we've done dancing for the pleasure of it; aerobics - we've done jump-jam, which is fitness and then we made up our own aerobics programmes". In one case jump jam was used as a basis to link to other curriculum areas "Last term we were doing communities and we painted lions because we decided to make an African pride of lions. I did the African lion jump jam".

Pedagogical approaches used in teaching

When asked to describe a 'typical physical education lesson' the descriptions identified that the traditional physical education approach (Tinning, 1995) was still strongly enshrined in their practice. "Generally a warm-up followed by a stretch, and then ... we will do some skills, followed by a game and then a cool down". When asked if they used other models of teaching three identified that they used cooperative learning within their physical education programmes. Five others made comment about the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) approach, although only one actually used it in their teaching and was unsure if it was being implemented correctly.

Assessment in physical education programmes

Most teachers reported little or no official expectation of assessment for physical education and were unsure how to do so competently if required. The main means of assessment appeared to be 'teacher observations' although six teachers also mentioned that student self-assessment and peer assessment was used. "I sometimes get the kids to watch their buddy's doing, and I'll say to them, what you're

looking for is, have they got their hand flat, is their thumb here, do they look like this?".

The difficulties involved with assessing movement, which once completed was no longer available for review, was mentioned by a number of teachers. Nonetheless, there appeared to be little thought of using video or other means to secure the movement for future analysis. "PE assessment happens there and now, whereas with a writing assessment I can take that home with me on the weekend ... and refer back to it anytime". Other identified problems included lack of teacher knowledge, time pressures and concerns that assessment took time away from physical activity.

Planning and preparation for teaching physical education

The vast majority of the teachers reported spending little time planning for physical education lessons. There was some acknowledgement of longer term planning in the yearly and/or term plans but in general the individual lessons received little attention. "Not much at all. But once I know what I am doing for the term it pretty much just runs its course". One teacher, however, reported planning diligently for physical education especially in areas where she felt less confident "gymnastics and swimming, I'll do the six weeks planning, and that does take quite a long time to do, it takes a good, yeah, an hour and a half [per lesson]".

The teachers were also asked if they critically reflected on their physical education lessons. Three said no while the other eight considered that critical reflection was a part of their teaching. A teacher explained his/her criteria for judging a successful lesson:

One is by the children's response. Are they enjoying it? If they are not enjoying it there is no point doing it. And have we actually achieved anything? So have we made progress? So I think what game we can focus on next time?

Confidence to teach physical education

In general the teachers reported good levels of confidence in their ability to teach physical education. Eight considered themselves to be either very confident or confident while three described themselves as gaining confidence with increased experience. It was interesting to note that a number of them felt that their colleagues were less confident than themselves. "A lot [of the other teachers] would be less confident, but you get thrown into it sometimes and with teaching you do have to be a bit of a jack of all trades".

External providers for physical education

All teachers reported that their schools used external providers to teach children aspects of their physical education programme. Swimming was particularly popular, with the vast majority of schools organising for students to participate in swimming lessons with outside providers. Other providers covered a variety of activities such as basketball, turbo touch, cricket, dance and gymnastics. The teachers were generally positive about these providers, feeling that they provided the specialist knowledge they did not possess. Swimming was the only activity that was reported to have any formative or summative assessment of students. There was also little overall evaluation of these programmes, apart from general observation, although two teachers reported instances where dissatisfaction with the quality of the programmes led to the providers receiving negative feedback from members of staff. The overall quality of the programmes was variable, with some teachers being extremely happy with the quality while others observed serious weaknesses in the teaching:

they did lots of exploring but it was just exploring, I'd like them to come in with an actual programme where they explore, they learn and they build on it...so they can actually see some skill

progression... cause with what we did they just go faster and faster, they didn't actually get better and better.

Resources

The teachers' responses in relation to the availability of teaching resources were generally very positive. All felt that they had sufficient equipment and/or physical education gear with a number considering that they were very well resourced. "We can get the equipment we need, that's the big thing, you know, we make sure that the right equipment is there for the lessons." They were less enthusiastic about the availability of space for teaching with limited indoor space available and in some cases little open space outside. Where there was a school hall the multiple uses limited access for physical education lessons, a problem often made more difficult by the weather. "If it rains, there goes PE. We have a huge school, and we only have hall space inside if it's raining, which is [usually] already booked".

Initial Teacher Education and Professional development

The teachers came from a variety of ITE programmes. Two were involved in specialist physical education while the remainder went through either one year graduate diploma programmes or the specialist three or four year primary degrees. All remembered having studied physical education in their programmes, for example "two [PE] papers, one compulsory and one optional," which they generally felt did not fully prepare them for teaching.

All teachers felt that they would benefit from professional development (PD) in physical education. Generally they felt that there were limited opportunities to be involved with PD in PE and there was a strong feeling that other areas, particularly literacy and numeracy, were seen as more important. While all felt that PD would be useful and positive, there was also awareness that some teachers would be reluctant to take advantage of it if it

was available:

We had somebody to give us a workshop for run, jump, and throw, and everybody moaned profusely about having to do it ... but we all learned heaps, and it changed our approach... So there is a bit of an attitude, yeah.

Discussion

This investigation provides insight into primary school teachers' views on the design, implementation and support of physical education in their schools. The teachers were keen to encourage students to participate and having them involved in activity was identified as being an important outcome for physical education. The teachers' pedagogical approaches appeared strongly influenced by traditional physical education pedagogies based around command and practice (Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Penny, Pope, Hunter, Phillips, & Dewar, 2013; Petrie, 2010, 2011). There was little evidence of student-centred pedagogies being used, despite the social constructivist nature of the NZC (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the push towards pedagogy that encourages student centred teaching and learning (p. 34). The reasons for the lack of transfer of pedagogical practices that are used in other learning areas to the teaching of physical education was unclear and is an area worthy of further examination (Dyson, Gordon, & Cowan, 2011; Gordon, 2011).

In general the teachers did little detailed planning for physical education and appeared confident of their ability to teach competently without doing so. They indicated that they used a process of critical reflection as part of their teaching; however, the level of reflection appeared to be of a reasonably rudimentary nature and mostly centred on what was occurring directly in the classroom. There seemed to be little evidence of teachers using the 'Teaching as Inquiry Model' proposed as an integral part of the teaching and learning process as

outlined in the NZC (2007, p. 35). There was also no obvious indication that the teachers were exploring the teaching and learning of physical education from a more critical lens. The extent to which external providers were used to teach aspects of physical education was perhaps an indication that teachers were not overly confident in the teaching of some areas in physical education (Dyson, Gordon, & Cowan, 2011; Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Penny, et al., 2013).

In general the teachers, we interviewed, valued physical education and believed that it was important for their students. They described a number of examples of teaching and learning that was occurring in their programmes that suggests there were many positive outcomes for students. They also demonstrated limitations in their pedagogical and content knowledge of physical education. There was an acknowledgement that there was potential for further growth

and a desire by the teachers to develop their knowledge of the teaching of physical education if offered suitable support and encouragement.

Many of the findings from this study are aligned with those of others on primary school physical education in New Zealand (Penny, et al. 2013, Petrie, 2013). They are, for example, with the exception of equipment availability, consistent with all ten implications and recommendations presented by Penny et.al. (2013). The inconsistencies between schools and limitations in the learning and teaching of physical education have become more apparent as the true picture emerges. With this knowledge comes the responsibility to ensure that there is improvement in how physical education is taught in primary schools. It is only when this occurs that physical education will be able to reach its potential to contribute in a meaningful way to the education of our children.

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