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# Health and Physical Education (HPE) teachers in primary schools: supplementing the debate

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The purpose of this article is to join in the debate around who is best prepared to provide quality Health and Physical Education lessons (HPE) in primary schools. Christina Curry's article 'Why public primary schools need specialist PE teachers' (in July 2012) advocated specialist PE teachers and Natalie McMaster's article 'Generalist Teachers; Ideal candidates for providing developmentally appropriate, best practice instruction in physical education in early childhood and primary settings' advocated generalist classroom teachers. Both articles published in the Active and Healthy Magazine raise pertinent issues surrounding Health and Physical Education and lifelong wellness.

## Says who?

What I will be sharing is where I see theory meeting the practice. I have spent a considerable amount of time in primary schools (15 years) as a generalist classroom teacher, Health and Physical Education specialist and as a school leader for Foundation Stage and Key Stage One (3-7 years) in an English curriculum school (450 children). For a number of years these roles were combined and juggled. Furthermore, I completed a Master of Education (Physical and Health Education) from Deakin University where I was fortunate to have learnt from the expertise of academics such as Professor Richard Tinning (University of Queensland) and Professor Chris Hickey. Studying my Masters in HPE as I taught full time enabled me to attempt the social critical pedagogy with success. In 2006 I completed a Doctorate of Education titled "An evaluation of school responses to the introduction of the Queensland 1999 Health and Physical Education (HPE) syllabus and policy documents in three Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) primary schools." This study was very relevant to present national curriculum reform in HPE and the implementation process.

My experience in research and practice has provided me with a special opportunity to reflect on the best way to approach the issues raised by Curry and McMaster. My thoughts on these issues are supported by data collected at the end of the 2012 school year. The data was gathered using surveys completed by 138 government primary school principal participants in the state of Victoria. This is a large number considering the demanding and time limiting role of school principal. There were two ethical clearances that were granted before this research was conducted. They were the ethical clearance from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD).

Government school principals' surveyed represented schools from seven Victorian regions and schools of various enrolment sizes (Table 1).

Table 1 Victorian regions represented by school principals surveyed

| Victorian Region | Size of school enrolment |                  |                   |                       | Total |
|------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------|
|                  | Small schools (less 100) | Medium (100-300) | Large (300 - 600) | Very large (more 600) |       |
| West             | 7                        | 4                | 0                 | 0                     | 11    |
| Inner West       | 0                        | 8                | 3                 | 1                     | 12    |
| North Central    | 6                        | 3                | 0                 | 1                     | 10    |
| Inner North      | 3                        | 3                | 2                 | 0                     | 8     |
| Melbourne        | 1                        | 25               | 33                | 6                     | 65    |
| Inner East       | 4                        | 7                | 2                 | 0                     | 13    |
| East             | 6                        | 11               | 2                 | 0                     | 19    |
| <b>Total</b>     | 27                       | 61               | 42                | 8                     | 138   |

## Advocates for Health and Physical Education

The first point I would like to comment on is that as evidenced by the Curry and McMaster articles and the number of Victorian government principals who participated in this research, there are many advocates for HPE. That is, there are many people who have experienced the benefits of learning in, through and about movement, who believe in the key learning area and care that primary children across Australian schools receive a quality education.

The second point I would like to clarify is that the learning area within the Australian Education system and that I specialised in, is 'Health and Physical Education'. As McMaster argues, generalist primary and early childhood teachers have the developmentally appropriate pedagogical knowledge and understanding of the child's holistic learning. This holistic approach is the very reason why the ultimate outcome of a child being physically educated is to be a healthy and a well person throughout life. There are seven dimensions of wellness: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, environmental and occupational which are all strongly connected (Robbins, Powers & Burgess, 2011). As evidenced by the following excerpt from the recent draft of the Australian curriculum, HPE auspices more than the physical:

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).

While Physical Education is the learning area referred to within the United States and the United Kingdom, Health and Physical Education has been the nomenclature in Australia since 1994 (Australian Education Council). It is only due to very gradual curriculum change in one or two Australian states' educational policies that the term Physical Education may be at times referred to in the P-10 curriculum.

### Structure for preparing primary school Health and Physical Education teachers

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) draft shape paper for HPE, similar to predecessor curriculum documents, 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).

As earlier mentioned McMaster debates the importance of developmentally appropriate HPE and raised the issue that having a HPE specialist within the primary school does not guarantee a quality developmentally appropriate program. For a long time I thought that primary schools in Australia simply required specialist HPE teachers as Curry argues (2012). However, as Dinan-Thompson (2009, p.48) expresses; questions are often raised about "who is teaching HPE, and who is deemed competent to teach HPE in schools". Hence, I no longer think HPE specialist roles is a viable solution for two reasons. One, the obvious reason that this is yet to evolve in all schools is the cost involved. And two, we lack 'suitably qualified', that is 'developmentally appropriate' knowledgeable primary HPE teachers due to the absence of specific courses in Australia. Hence, specialist HPE teachers working within primary schools are often not qualified generalist classroom primary teachers (often secondary HPE 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.

The principles applied have been recognised in many other learning areas within education. Pre-service teachers do not study English Literature in preparation for teaching and learning of phonics (letters and sounds), in the early years. Nor do they study physics and chemistry in the Faculty of Science in preparation for teaching and learning science in the primary school. Physical Education (PE) courses specifically tailored 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 primary 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 primary children 'developmentally appropriate' nature that the draft paper emphasises.

Both Curry and McMaster channel us to a problem within primary schools. As Curry states generalist teachers have "very little specific training in HPE" (p. 17). In the past there was no required accreditation or formal training in physical or sport education as a condition of employment for graduating primary school teachers (Moore, 1994). In my experience having worked in schools and university education faculties across four Australian states and territories, this is a problem that still exists today. Some primary graduates have studied units that relate to movement broadly (often not primary HPE) or not at all. Furthermore, Curry asserts that it is difficult for the generalist classroom teacher to focus on HPE when they are responsible for all learning areas. Hence, having a specialist HPE teacher within the primary school ensures consistent and regular HPE lessons.

In arguing that generalist teachers are the best candidates, McMaster rationalises learning through movement in a connected curriculum to benefit all learning areas. This involves the generalist teacher designing learning experiences optimising physicality through multi-sensory learning. It can be argued that this is different to quality HPE specialist lessons and that not all teachers may be as passionate or confident to do this. I agree to some extent with McMaster when she argues that generalist teachers are ideal candidates to teach HPE in primary schools as they have a better pedagogical and developmentally appropriate understanding of the children. Hence, I propose that for the first time in Australia's history primary education (P-6) pre-service teachers (generalist classroom) be given the opportunity within their university courses to specialise in developmentally appropriate Health and Physical Education. My experiences at Monash University (Gippsland campus) Bachelor of Primary

Education evidence that there is strong demand for such a course. We have on average 55 of the 80 (69.0%) first year intake choosing to study the HPE major stream. These numbers have continued throughout second and third year where numbers have increased by 92.0% in biennial units, from 39 (2011) to 75 (2013). Graduating generalist teachers with a HPE specialism can teach either in the classroom or if the school has the opportunity for a specialist they can step into such a role. This is supported by the Victorian government primary principals surveyed.

## Principals' survey results

From the 138 principals surveyed 120 (88.2%) preferred to have HPE specialist teachers in their school. Within small schools (less than 100 children) many Principals stated that it was not possible or financially viable to have HPE specialists due to their rural, regional or remote location. Therefore there was a much higher percentage of Principals in small schools who answered 'no' to this question, stating that they did not prefer to have HPE specialist teachers.

The comments supporting HPE specialists in primary schools were many and suggested that quality was provided through expertise, knowledge of the subject, priority of the learning area, skill development, motivation, community relations, sport coordination and to enable a developmentally appropriate and consistent program. Also, it was mentioned that some classroom teachers are not able (physically) to take HPE classes and that it provided release time for classroom teachers.

From the 138 principals, 82.6% believed a course that qualifies teachers to be generalist classroom teachers and HPE specialists would be or would probably be valuable.

|          |            |
|----------|------------|
| No       | 2 (1.4%)   |
| Maybe    | 22 (15.9%) |
| Probably | 30 (21.7%) |
| Yes      | 84 (60.9%) |

The number of principals who stated that their HPE specialist teacher was a qualified specialist was 62 (59.0%), 43 principals (41.0%) stated that their HPE specialist did not have specific qualifications and 33 did not answer the question.

Principals' commented on key attributes of a good HPE teacher. The top six responses were:

|  |               |
|--|---------------|
| 1. HPE curriculum knowledge & dev appropriate pedagogy | 54 (mentions) |
| 2. Planning/ assessment and flexibility (organised)    | 49            |
| 3. Passion/ interest/ enthusiasm (children)            | 35            |
| 4. Rapport /communication and management skills        | 32            |
| 5. Cater for all learning needs (empathy & support)    | 20            |
| 6. Engage students & fun                               | 12            |

## Concluding remarks

A university course where generalist teachers have the opportunity to specialise in developmentally appropriate primary HPE will enable, in time, all schools in Australia to have classroom teachers who are prepared to teach the whole child with particular strengths and focus in physical learning as specialist primary HPE teachers. There is a demand from principals and from the student interest at Monash University (Gippsland campus). Such a course directly relates to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) and the recommendations of the Gonski Report, where all children are to have the same opportunities regardless of where they live or what school they attend. Finally, teacher advocacy for HPE, the standard of resources and time deemed appropriate to ultimately enhance children's lifelong health and wellbeing needs to be supported by the profession to improve the quality of HPE in Australian schools.

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## About the Author

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