

## RETURN OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION TO THE CURRICULUM: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACING SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

The changing place and status of Physical Education in the South African school curriculum has followed much the same route as that of Physical Education in developed and developing countries, namely that of decline and demise. In 1994, Physical Education was officially dropped from the South African National Curriculum. Now, in concordance with worldwide reform trends and due to concerns with regard to health risks associated with physically inactive children, Physical Education has been reinstated in the National Curriculum, as one part of the learning area Life Orientation. As with any reform effort, this positive step on the road of child health brings with it certain problems and challenges for the developed as well as developing communities of South Africa, especially after such a long absence of a subject in the curriculum. The purpose of this study was to investigate the problems and challenges facing schools in advantaged and disadvantaged communities in South Africa, and proffer appropriate recommendations. A total of eighteen Life Orientation teachers from the nine provinces of South Africa participated in the study. Data were collected through interviews, and qualitatively analyzed. Results revealed that the major challenges for schools in the two types of communities included teachers who were not sufficiently qualified, low status of the subject, shortages of facilities and financial resources, unique curriculum requirements, limited time allocation and practical problems involving large and cultural diverse classes. In light of the results, recommendations are made with regard to further training of current teachers as well as the training of student teachers, within the unique educational environment of South Africa.

**Key words:** Physical Education, Life Orientation, implementation problems, disadvantaged and advantaged communities, teacher training.

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### INTRODUCTION

During the last 20 years, the implementation and status of Physical Education (PE) in school curricula have shown similar trends in countries across the globe that of decline and demise (Hardman, 2001; Kloppers, 2001; Morgan & Bourke, 2005).

In their study on PE in 35 countries worldwide, Pühse and Gerber (2005) found that the common factors contributing to this decline included a crowded curriculum, loss of time allocation, lower perceived status of PE in general, and insufficient financial and material resources. Hardman (2006) reported similar contributors to the status of PE in several European countries, while Tinning (2004) and Morgan and Bourke (2005) also emphasized the detrimental influence of insufficient teacher training and unqualified personnel on the quality of PE.

The United States of America, England and Australia are some of the few developed countries where PE currently enjoys relatively high status, following a historic pattern of decline and reform. In the United States, deterioration of PE programmes became especially evident during the 80's and early 90's, showing decreased state requirements for PE as well as a decline in societal support for school-based PE (Pate & Hohn, 1994; Langford & Carter, 2003). According to Siedentop (1987) and Pate and Hohn (1994), PE was seen as an "endangered" subject area with an uncertain future. Health concerns led to a national reform effort in PE programmes in the US, which was most notable in the publication of the *National Standards for Physical Education* in 1995 (NASPE, 2004). This document identified content standards, clarification of the content in PE and assessment guidelines, and has since been used by teachers, schools districts and states to guide development of curricula, instruction and assessment (NASPE, 2004). However, several national reports emphasize that there is still a critical need for increased physical activity and physical education in American schools (Gallahue &

Cleland, 2003; NASPE, 2004; Johnson, 2006). According to the *Shape of the Nation* Report of 2006, 70% of the states' PE requirements are inefficient to combat the obesity epidemic (Johnson, 2006).

In England, the future of PE looked bleak some ten to fifteen years ago (Whelan, 1999). Due to the pressure on curriculum time and that of raising academic standards, the statutory orders for PE in primary schools were even temporarily suspended, effectively lifting the requirement to teach the National Curriculum for the subject (Fischer, 2005). Physical Education was reintroduced in the National Curriculum in 1992, and according to Fischer (2005), the current high profile of PE in England reflects major recent governmental initiatives to develop participation levels in sport in general, as well as the promotion of higher standards in sport at international level.

The serious decline in PE in Australia since the end of the 80's led to the 1992 Senate Inquiry into the nature, extent and resourcing of PE and Sport in Australian schools (Penney & Kirk, 1996).

Although the Senate inquiry reported widespread support for PE within the Australian community, it also indicated that problems such as an insufficient education budget, a crowded curriculum and insufficient time allocation contributed to the deteriorating fitness and skills of Australian school children (Penney & Kirk, 1996; Tinning, 2005). Reform efforts in PE in Australia came apace the establishment of a new national curriculum in 1992, which was organised around eight Key Learning Areas (KLA), forming the template for the knowledge, skills and processes to be taught (Curriculum Corporation, 1994; Penney & Kirk, 1996). The place of PE is now in the KLA of *Health and Physical Education*, implying that PE now shares its curriculum time with Health Education (Curriculum Corporation, 1994). The definition of Physical Education in its contribution to school health promotion, its connection to sport development as well as the fact that PE is an examinable subject in the senior school level, contribute to its relatively high status in Australia (Olds, Tomkinson & Baker, 2003; Tinning, 2005).

Compared to the research on PE in developed countries, studies on the status of Physical Education in developing countries, particularly in Africa, are relatively few. The reports of Ammah and Kwaw (2005) and Salokun (2005) on the profile of PE in Ghana and Nigeria, respectively, showed that financial constraints, lack of governmental commitment to the subject, and insufficient teacher training were the most dominant problems in both countries. According to Chappell (2001) and Kloppers (2001), financial and material shortages, and an accompanying absence of facilities, are the major factors contributing to the poor status of Physical Education in developing countries. Many developing countries do have policy requirements for Physical Education in their national curricula, but actual implementation does not meet legal obligations. In a study comparing 167 nations, Hardman (2001) found that approximately 60% of the cases of inadequate or non-implementation of statutory policies, were economically under-developed countries.

In the same study, 75% of the African countries did not implement PE policy, and 86% did not perceive the status of PE to be equal to other school subjects (Hardman, 2001). Chappell (2001) points out that participation in sport and physical activity is not valued as important in developing countries when poverty constitutes a fight for survival. Supporting this view, Kloppers (2001) states that the main reasons for the demise in PE in Sub-Saharan Africa differ fundamentally from those in developed countries, referring to decolonisation and on-going wars, abject poverty and the centrality of politics.

The historical and developmental tendencies of PE in South Africa are very similar to global tendencies over the last 20 years. In 1994, PE was officially dropped from the curriculum (Lion-Cachet, 1997). According to Lion-Cachet (1997) and Rossouw (1999), reasons were primarily attributed to the perceived lower educational status of the subject in relation to other academic subjects, leading to other factors similar to the global influences mentioned previously. Along with the political changes in

South Africa came the *Revised National Curriculum Statement* in 1994, steering education in a new, outcomes-based direction. Increased pressure by the health sector as well as the new educational government system led to the partial reinstatement of Physical Education in the national curriculum. However, similar to the Key Learning Area *Health and Physical Education* in Australia and in support of the emphasis on PE as part of the development of *Life Skills* in some countries, PE is now only one part of a multidimensional learning area known as *Life Orientation*. The learning area Life Orientation was fully instated for all grades in 2006 and consists of five sections namely personal, community and environmental health; social development and citizenship; personal development; PE, and career guidance (SADoE, 2003b). The nature of this reinstatement as well as the long absence of the subject from the curriculum can be expected to lead to many of the same implementation problems as experienced by the developed countries already discussed. However, as South Africa consists of both advantaged and disadvantaged school communities, deriving from mainly two different social backgrounds

from the old political system (SADoE, 2003a), similar problems to those of both developed and developing countries can be expected. The purpose of this study was to investigate the current PE implementation problems and challenges for schools in advantaged communities, and schools in disadvantaged communities in South Africa, and to proffer appropriate recommendations.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research design and method*

Qualitative methodology was mainly used in this study, although the biographical information of the participants were analysed quantitatively. Analysis, interpretation and description of individual perceptions, attitudes and convictions were completed (Henning, 2004). The investigation focussed on the interpretation of the subjective experiences and meaning attribution of Life Orientation (LO) teachers and was therefore approached from an interpretive paradigm.

### *Subjects*

The participants in the study consisted of 18 secondary school Life Orientation

teachers from the nine provinces of South Africa. Of the two teachers from each province, one taught at a school in a disadvantaged community (township schools) and one at a school in a disadvantaged community (former "Model C schools"). As the participants participated in regular meetings with other Life Orientation teachers from their provinces and were considered knowledgeable on the status and problems of Life Orientation and Physical Education at schools in their provinces, they were considered a representative sample purposefully selected for this study.

### *Data collection*

Data were gathered over a period of three weeks by means of individual telephonic and personal interviews. Interviews were conducted with a schedule, which lasted 30-40 minutes and sought to identify teachers' perceptions, concerns and interests in regard to the problems and challenges associated with the implementation and representation of PE within Life Orientation. The first section of the schedule included questions pertaining to background information such as the time allocated to Life Orientation,

facilities available and qualifications of the teacher. Sample questions in the second (main) section included: What is the general attitude of colleagues with regard to Physical Education and Life Orientation? How do the learners respond to Physical Education? What problems do you experience in the implementation of Physical Education?

#### *Data analysis*

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participant responses to questions in the second section of the schedule were categorized into themes and analysed according to the guidelines of Henning (2004). Themes and sub-themes were refined as identified independently by each participant. Although no generalisation can be claimed for these qualitative research results, the selection of teachers from different types of communities from all the provinces of South Africa, enhances validity and allows for analogies to be drawn and used as a basis for further study. According to Henning (2004), the validity of the findings of qualitative research is not so much dependant upon the number of respondents than on the knowledge and the level of reliability in

which the respondents react to the questions during the interviews.

## RESULTS

The results are presented according to the two sections of the interview questions. According to Table 1, which shows a summary of the background information of the participants and their schools, ten of the eighteen respondents reported that PE at their schools comprised less than 25% of LO, which does not comply with curriculum requirements. It is also evident that in general, these teachers were insufficiently qualified to present PE, and that there were a shortage of PE facilities and apparatus, especially among schools from developing communities.

With regard to the second section of the interviews, three themes emerged in each of the interviews with the teachers. Data were combined to describe the approaches to PE within LO, major implementation problems and challenges, and needs and recommendations with regard to teachers' training.

Table 1: Background information of LO teachers and their schools ( $N=18$ ).

Question	Total ( $N=18$ )	Advantaged communities ( $n=9$ )	Disadvantaged communities ( $n=9$ )
<b>Time allocated to LO in the school</b>			
Average hours/week	4.2	4.5	3.8
<b>Is PE fully implemented according to the National Curriculum requirements?</b>			
Number answered "yes"	16	9	7
<b>Percentage of LO spent on PE</b>			
Less than 25%	10	3	7
<b>Age of LO teacher</b>			
Average years	38.7	35.8	40.3
<b>Qualifications</b>			
Physical Education	11	4	7
Psychology	13	3	10
Career Guidance	11	5	6
School counseling	7	3	4
Religious Education	7	4	3
Recreation Science	2	0	2
First Aid (valid)	9	4	5
Coaching	13	6	7
<b>Apparatus and facilities available for PE</b>			
PE hall / gymnasium	4	4	0
Netball balls	14	9	5
Soccer balls	6	0	5
Rugby balls	8	7	1
Cricket apparatus	10	9	1
Tennis apparatus	8	8	0
Hockey apparatus	6	8	0
Volleyball apparatus	5	2	3
Hoops, ropes, beanbags	8	8	0
Gymnastics apparatus	5	5	0
Swimming pool	6	6	0

LO = Life Orientation; PE = Physical Education.

### Approaches to Physical Education within Life Orientation

The approaches of colleagues, which constituted principals and other teachers, were consistently positive according to respondents from both types of communities. Colleagues were very conscious of the health benefits of

physical activities and understood the importance of PE in this context. According to two teachers from developing communities, the primary motivation of their principals to implement PE, was to "keep the learners out of trouble", a statement which has to be understood in the

context of the high crime rate among youth in South Africa. These teachers believed that by motivating learners to be physically active in and after school, they were kept "off the streets". With reference to the attitudes of learners towards PE, the majority of teachers from both types of communities replied that their learners were very excited about the PE section of LO, and looked forward to every PE lesson. Learners appeared to be relaxed and more focussed on their work after a PE lesson. A recurrent comment, however, was that culturally diverse classes were divided in their attitudes. According to most teachers from developed communities, one group especially, namely Black girls, weren't keen to participate. This tendency was attributed to their cultural practice where girls do not generally participate in sport.

### **Implementation problems and challenges**

#### *Qualifications of LO teachers*

The insufficient qualifications of LO teachers were a concern commonly held in schools from developed communities; less so in schools from developing communities. Problems mentioned in this regard were the risks

and legal implications of injuries to learners in the PE class of an unqualified LO teacher, and difficulties concerning the practical assessment of movement and sport skills. The challenges for teachers to present quality lessons in each of the five sections of LO, were a further concern. According to two teachers, it is "impossible to be a specialist in five subject areas".

#### *The academic status of PE*

One problem that was mentioned in numerous interviews is the non examination-status of PE. Due to its low status in relation to other academic subjects, PE classes often fall victim to organisational "odd jobs". Contradictory to the positive attitude of colleagues reported by many of the respondents, the lower status of PE was also attributed to the ignorance of colleagues and parents with regard to the importance thereof for academic achievement in other subjects.

#### *Facilities, apparatus and financial resources*

A shortage of facilities, apparatus and financial resources was mentioned as a major problem by respondents, more so those from disadvantaged communities.

The National Curriculum requires that a Grade 12 learner should have acquired 3 certificates by the end of his school career to obtain a Senior certificate. As these certificates (of which one should be a sport coaching qualification) should, according to the requirements, be acquired at an external organisation, all respondents were concerned as to the financial means to this end.

*Time allocation and class composition*

Too little time and too many learners in a class to properly address the outcomes of the PE section of LO, was consistently reported as a challenge in schools from both types of communities. According to one teacher, the assessment standards of the Physical Education section "cover the total syllabus of the old dispensation. We now have to do in one period per week what we did in 3 periods per week in the old system". A common concern of teachers from schools in advantaged communities, were the cultural diverse composition of classes, leading to divergent expectations of and preferences for activities in the PE class. Respondents from schools of both types of communities further emphasised the difficulties associated

with large classes. According to one respondent with classes of up to 38 learners, this can contribute to "organisational and disciplinary chaos".

**Teachers' training: needs and recommendations**

The majority of respondents from both types of communities highlighted the need for existing teachers to undergo further training. Recommendations regarding the content of such training included guidance in practical didactical aspects and accommodation of cultural differences. Respondents also recognised the need for teachers with qualifications in only one or two of the sections of LO, to undergo further training in the other subject sections. Several teachers from schools in advantaged communities specifically identified the need for increased emphasis on PE training for teachers with no PE background and for student teachers, in light of the risks and legal implications of injuries in the PE class. In response to the problem of the certificate requirement of LO, a number of respondents from schools in advantaged communities suggested that the training of student teachers should include the attainment of a sport

coaching facilitator's qualification, to enable them to certify learners and to save on expenses. Furthermore, according to several respondents from schools in disadvantaged communities, undergraduate PE programmes should focus on apparatus improvisation and the presentation of creative PE when space and apparatus are insufficient.

## DISCUSSION

The general approach of colleagues to PE, as reported by respondents in this study, is very similar to the general opinions of teachers and principals with regard to PE in other studies. In both the USA and Australia, widespread awareness of and support for the health benefits of PE is reported among the school community (Langford & Carter, 2003; Tinning, 2005). However, as in these countries and in most developing countries (Hardman, 2001), the actual implementation of PE in schools in South Africa does not meet policy requirements.

Although the implementation problems of PE in South Africa in general seem very similar to those of both developed and developing countries worldwide, the results show that there are unique

challenges facing South African teachers. The unique five-fold composition of the learning area LO brings forth even more challenges for the training of teachers than in Australia, where Tinning (2005) points out that the two-fold *Health and Physical Education* KLA constitutes problems concerning the training of PE teachers. Student teachers now have to learn more courses in the time allotted to one subject and often tend to commit themselves more to one subject area than the other. The certificate requirements of LO are also unique to the South African curriculum, leading to pressure on already limited school budgets and PE time allocation. Furthermore, after the long absence of PE in the South African curriculum and in light of limited educational budgets, schools tend to avoid appointing new teachers for LO, allotting the subject to current, often insufficiently qualified, teachers. Like in other developing countries (Chappel, 2001), financial restraints are especially problematic in schools from developing communities, where poverty often limits school incomes because learners are unable to pay school fees.

For this reason, insufficient facilities and apparatus are among the most prominent challenges in schools from these communities.

The South African Department of Education recommends 35 learners per classroom in Grade 6-12, but acknowledges that class sizes are still unacceptably large, particularly in schools in disadvantaged communities (SADoE, 2003a). Large classes and insufficient time allocation are global problems (Pühse & Gerber, 2005), but the cultural diversity of South African learners could be considered unique. The 11 official languages of the country represent a wide variety of different cultures and communities, often resulting in classes of diverse backgrounds and customs, and requiring specific approaches from teachers.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the responses among LO teachers in the study, valuable and valid recommendations and strategies can be drawn to address the situation of PE in the South African curriculum. Although the awareness of the health implications of PE among co-teachers and principals were evident to respondents, further

education with regard to other benefits of the subject as well as legal implications associated with insufficient qualifications, seems eminent to improve its status in the school community. Furthermore, as in Australia (Tinning, 2005), a valid recommendation to policy-makers to improve the academic status of PE, is to make it an examinable subject.

To address the diversity in problems and characteristics of the different types of South African school communities as well as the diverse composition of classes, student teachers should be trained to individually determine and accommodate the needs of each type of community and class. This should include the skills to improvise strategies and apparatus to present creative PE when space and apparatus are insufficient, in support of the recommendation for teacher training with specific emphasis on practical didactic aspects for both current and student teachers. All respondents welcomed the suggestion of further training in the form of short courses (lasting 3-5 days), which would address other sections of LO as well.

Lastly, the recommendation of respondents to include a coaching facilitator qualification in the training of new teachers, provides a valid strategy to address the certificate requirement of LO in the South African curriculum.

In conclusion, it seems that well-planned, quality teacher training will play a cardinal role in addressing the problems and challenges accompanying the return of Physical Education to the South African National Curriculum. Further research is needed into the availability and composition of such training, which, together with governmental support and initiatives, can be the cornerstone of the South African PE reform effort.

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