



# Health and physical education (HPE): Implementation in primary schools



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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates Australian Government Primary School Principal perceptions of how health and physical education (HPE) is implemented. Principals of primary schools in the state of Victoria (Australia) were deliberately chosen as participants as they are key school leaders who have a high degree of autonomy and power to improve the quality of teaching. The Victorian state Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) first listed outcome for children 0–8 years is: ‘children have the best start to life to achieve optimal health, development and wellbeing’. Hence, this research offers pertinent results and recommendations in achieving this outcome. The data were gathered using ex-post facto surveys completed by 138 principal participants from a cross section of schools. The key findings were that principals: (1) strongly desire to have specialist HPE teachers in their schools; and (2) want HPE specialist teachers who are interested in and want to be working with primary aged children. Furthermore, there was strong interest in HPE specialists who are able, willing and qualified to teach as generalist classroom teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

This research project investigates Primary School Principal perceptions of health and physical education (HPE) within Government schools in the state of Victoria, Australia. HPE is an essential key learning area that is compulsory within Australian school curriculum. In 1989 The Hobart Declaration on Schooling stated Goal Nine; “to provide for the physical development and personal health and fitness of students, and for the creative use of leisure time” (Australian Education Council (AEC), 1989). Again in 1999, HPE was identified as one of the eight key learning areas in The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century, and more recently in The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, held in December 2008.

Research suggests that the optimum time for children to learn and refine their motor skills and to be introduced to positive HPE experiences is during preschool and early primary school years (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012; Branta, Haubenstricker, & Seefeldt, 1984; Commonwealth of Australia, 1992; Espenschade & Eckert, 1980; Kirk, 2005). However, as a key learning area HPE has had to overcome a number of barriers throughout history that have impeded implementation and curriculum developments (Brooker & Penney, 2009; Lynch,

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2014a, 2014b; Stolz, 2009). The most prominent time was the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the PE curriculum within Australian schools was considered to be in crisis (Tinning, Kirk, Evans, & Glover, 1994). The crisis was at first identified among physical educators [now health and physical education] at conferences and in journals: National Workshop on Australian Physical Education [now HPE] in Crisis (Deakin University, 1991) and the National Conference on Junior Sport (Australian Sports Commission, 1991). 'In-house' discussions of crisis led to a Senate Inquiry into the state of PE [HPE] and sport within Australian Education systems. This review was considered as the most significant in the history of physical education [now HPE] (Kirk, 1998). The findings of the Senate Inquiry (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) supported the in-house discussions of crisis among physical education [now HPE] professionals.

Fifteen years later research was conducted with the purpose of determining whether the problems identified by the 1992 Senate Inquiry into Physical [now HPE] and Sport Education were of concern within three Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) primary schools, as well as to investigate how 'health' was implemented (Lynch, 2007a). The interpretivist study adopted an 'evaluative' and 'multiple' case study (Merriam, 1998) and is the only identified follow up study to the 1992 Senate Inquiry, specifically of HPE implemented in practice. Findings suggested that the three case study schools "appeared to be vulnerable to many of the factors that led to the decline in HPE as revealed in the report by the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts" (Lynch, 2007a, p. 22). Also, that "not enough had changed since the 1992 Senate Inquiry into Physical [now HPE] and Sport Education" (2007, p. 22). However, it was acknowledged that this study was only a small scale sample and that the data was limited by nature. It was "recommended that a large scale research project be conducted to ascertain verisimilitude of findings" (2007, p. 22). A large scale research project has been a gap in research and is the purpose of this study.

## 2. Literature review

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) draft shape paper for HPE, 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).

Quality HPE "should be a developmentally appropriate educational experience designed to provide immediate and lifelong benefits" (Graham, Holt-Hale, & Parker, 1998, p. 4). Australia's first 'Active Healthy Kids' Report Card on physical activity for children and young people released in May this year (2014) urged that the quality (intensity of activity) and quantity of activity is 'age appropriate'. To enable a deeper understanding surrounding implementation of 'developmentally appropriate' HPE in primary schools, the literature reviewed has been organised around three elements:

- *History of crisis:* 1992 Senate Inquiry;
- Indicators of concern in schools today; and
- Significance of the state of Victoria (Australia)

## 3. History of crisis: 1992 Senate Inquiry

Developmentally appropriate curriculum opportunities relate directly to quality HPE. This was a major problem in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the HPE school curriculum within Australian schools was considered to have been in crisis (Tinning et al., 1994; Dinan-Thompson, 2009). This concern led to a Senate Inquiry (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) into the state of PE [now HPE] and sport within Australian Education systems. The Inquiry began on the May 7th, 1992 through an established committee whose job it was to assess, investigate and report on the state of PE [now HPE] (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). The committee heard evidence from fifty-one individuals and groups, and received 219 submissions from a variety of interested parties. One inspection tour was conducted and the Report was published in December 1992 (Swabey, Carlson, & Kirk, 1998). The findings of the Senate Inquiry (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) supported the in-house discussions of crisis among health and physical education professionals.

The Senate Inquiry found that there was in fact a decline in the opportunities for quality HPE in Australian schools although paradoxically there was unanimous support for the learning area. The problems were mainly with resources and the time allocation to the key learning area which resulted in a drastic decline in children's skill levels and physical fitness (Tinning et al., 1994). Another major problem was that "suitably qualified physical education [health and physical education] teachers are [were] not being employed to teach physical education [health and physical education] and school sport to all children" (, p.xiv). There was also no required accreditation or formal training in physical or sport education [health and physical education] as a condition of employment for graduating primary school teachers (Moore, 1994).

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