

The challenges of teaching physical education: Juxtaposing the experiences of physical education teachers in Kenya and Victoria (Australia)

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Abstract

This qualitative study compares the experiences of Kenyan and Victorian secondary school Physical Education teachers with the aim of discovering what they can learn from each other. Through in-depth interviews with four experienced PE teachers; two each from Kenya and Victoria, and using phenomenological research methods, the study sought to gain an understanding of the teachers' experiences in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and administration of PE programmes in their secondary schools. From these experiences the study identified the challenges faced by teachers in both Kenya and Victoria. There is a lot that PE teachers can learn from each other in matters concerning curriculum time allocation, class sizes, teachers' professional affiliation, examination and assessment, school sport, and use of technology, among others. Knowledge and understanding of these experiences may be of great help not only to teachers but also to education officials, curriculum planners and school boards.

Keywords: Physical Education, challenges, teaching, Kenya, Australia.

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Introduction

The teaching of Physical Education (PE) faces challenges in most countries (Hardman, 2009). These challenges range from reduced curriculum time and a lack of adequately prepared teachers, to the poor state of facilities and a negative perception from teachers, students and parents (Nyakwebwa, 2005). According to Van Deventer (2005), the crisis PE faces globally has both a scientific and a political dimension, meaning that it is not only to do with curriculum content but also with the politics surrounding the curriculum as this is developed and implemented in schools. The following seven themes were developed by Hardman (2009) in his efforts to better understand the nature of these challenges across the education systems in different countries:

- a) Situation of physical education in schools: this theme refers to the way in which the government and other policy frameworks support the existence and conduct of PE.
- b) Physical education curriculum time allocation: this is a critical measure of the relative importance of PE in relation to other subjects.
- c) Physical Education in schools: this theme highlights the status of PE as perceived by teachers, students and parents, especially in relation to other subjects.
- d) Physical Education curriculum: this is, of course, central to understanding and defining PE, specifically in relation to the aims, activity areas and the perceived relevance of PE.
- e) Physical Education resources: the quality of teachers, access to facilities and equipment, and overall financial support play a key role in the success of any PE programme.
- f) Equity (inclusion) issues: inclusion of all students in PE lessons is often challenged by gender and disability.
- g) Partnership pathways: PE teachers and students connecting with others is important to forwarding the aims of PE.

The study undertook to apply these themes in an investigation of the perceptions of PE teachers concerning these challenges in two jurisdictions: Kenya and Victoria (Australia). Both Kenya and Victoria have three-tier education systems, although they are not identical. In Kenya, this includes eight years primary, four years secondary, and four years post-secondary education (Buchmann, 1999). At the end of primary school students sit for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination while at the end of form 4, they sit for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). However, PE is not included in these certificates as an examined subject. Victoria also has a three-tier system of education but the only external examinations exist at year 12, called the Victoria Certificate of Education (VCE). PE is an examinable subject in the VCE and it is assessed and reported on across all other year levels.

Methodology

Design

Qualitative research methods were employed in this study in order to generate detail-rich data that was embedded in its context (Maxwell, 2005), with a strong emphasis being placed on the lived experience of teachers (Patton, 2002).

Sample and Sampling

Purposive sampling enabled the selection of four teachers, two from Victoria and two from Kenya, all well positioned to communicate information-rich insights

and in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). Although seemingly small from a quantitative perspective, the sample size reflects the use of participant observation and in-depth interviewing (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

The first Victorian teacher, Yvette (pseudonym) is from a co-educational school in metropolitan Melbourne with approximately 1,400 students and six PE teachers. The second, Marvin (pseudonym), is from a suburban co-educational school in Melbourne with six PE teachers. The two schools were chosen for their willingness to be involved in the study and for ease of accessibility. As for the Kenyan teachers, Jamal and Aisha (pseudonyms) are both from schools within the capital city Nairobi. Both Kenyan schools are single sex with Jamal's being a boys' school and Aisha's a girls' school. It is noteworthy that though both schools have student populations of over 1,000, they have only one PE teacher each.

Data collection

Participant observation was undertaken in both Victorian and Kenyan schools. However, the main mode of data collection was face-to-face interviews with the two Victorian teachers and telephone interviews with the two Kenyan teachers. According to Best and Kahn (1993), interviews are far superior to other data gathering methods if well conducted. The interviews were carefully transcribed and then the content was thematically analyzed. Schemes of work, class timetables, students' class reports and school strategic development plans were also accessed, providing a rich source of data and also important in triangulation (Punch, 2005).

Data analysis

Moustakas's phenomenological modification of the Stevick-Collaizzi-Keen method (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) was used to analyze the data. After listening to and rereading each interview, a list of significant statements was developed that were valuable to the aims of the study. These statements were clustered into the themes described by Hardman (2009) as a way of understanding the experiences of the teachers in the study.

Results and Discussion

Juxtaposed in this section are details concerning the challenges facing PE both in Kenya and Victoria, gleaned from the various data sources including participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis. The section is structured around Hardman's (2009) seven themes as earlier discussed.

a) Situation of Physical Education in schools (is it supported by government?)

In Victoria, Health and Physical Education is a Key Learning Area (KLA) in the curriculum (Tinning, 2005). Teaching and assessment of PE is guided by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) from Years F-10, and then examined in the Victoria Certificate of Education (VCE) which covers Years 11-12. Regarding assessment of PE in Victorian schools, Yvette notes that "PE is [externally] examined at VCE but [there are also] in Year 12 ... a series of school assessed tasks. In Year 11 it is school assessed." Speaking about the junior secondary school levels, Marvin acknowledges that "we don't have formal examinations in years 7-9, [but] we are starting this year [at our school] for the first time." From these comments it can be surmised that PE is examined in Victoria although with variations in approach around the middle years, culminating in an external examination at Year 12.

Whilst there is a curriculum for PE in Kenya, it is often infrequently implemented, to the extent that some Head teachers timetable it only to satisfy school inspectors (Chappell, 2001). Neither is it assessed nor examined. According to Aisha, "there are no PE exams so to the students' PE classes are like outings." In addition, many if not most schools do not have any PE teachers and where they are present, they may lack any relevant qualifications (Nyakweba, 2005).

b) Physical Education Curriculum Time Allocation

In Victoria, the Moneghetti Report (Directorate of School Education [DSE], 1993) recommended allocations of minimum times for PE and Sport combined: 20-30 minutes at Foundation-2, 3 hours per week at Years 3-6: 100 minutes of PE plus 100 minutes of Sport at Years 7-10. These time allocations were taken up by the Victorian government and mandated. Yvette's school has "a double period of 100 minutes of PE practical activities and two 50 minute periods of health per week" for Years 7-10. Marvin's school also has four periods of PE per week at the junior secondary levels, though each period is 47 minutes.

In contrast, Kenyan schools timetable only forty minutes of PE per week and in all classes. Therefore, Kenyan students receive only forty minutes of PE instruction per week, where possible. According to Jamal, "forty minutes is hardly enough because about half of that time is used by students to change into PE kit and to walk to the field." Aisha agrees, stating that "it is hard to do any meaningful work in such a short time."

c) Physical Education in Schools (perceptions amongst students, teachers, parents)

Victorian teachers, parents and students generally see value in the learning achieved through PE, although there is still a higher perceived importance placed

on academic subjects. This means that PE has a comparatively low status. Yvette believes that "PE teachers are seen [by other teachers] as jokers who run around and play all day." Marvin concurs, noting that "our challenge [as PE teachers] is to find our place in the school curriculum. Often you have to battle and advocate for your subject."

Low status is also an issue in Kenya, but the situation is more serious than in Victoria. Because of low status, PE classes in Kenya are frequently cancelled and PE time is used to teach other subjects. According to Jamal, if given a choice, "most schools would not programme PE at all." It emerged that the negative attitudes to PE in Kenya are not just evidenced by students but encouraged by teachers and parents who often feel that PE adds no educational value, especially in relation to future employment. Aisha and Jamal confessed that during parent-teacher education consultation days, PE is hardly considered as worthy of mention. "On such days we are totally ignored," says Jamal.

d) Physical Education Curriculum

In Victoria PE and Health Education are joined as Health and Physical Education (HPE) which is one of the eight Key Learning Areas (KLA) for education from Foundation to Year 10 (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA], 2009). According to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), HPE aims to enable students to achieve a degree of autonomy in developing and maintaining their physical, mental, social and emotional health (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], 2005). Yvette revealed that at her school, "we structure it so that we call it Physical Education, Sport and Health from Year 7 to Year 9." The new HPE Australian Curriculum has been under development for a number of years now, and is set to be introduced nationally in 2014 and 2015 (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [ACARA], 2013).

In contrast, the Kenyan PE syllabus is often ignored by many schools, thus presenting significant challenges (Kadoodooba, 2009; Nyakweba, 2005). Aisha comments that "if the teacher feels he [or she] doesn't want to teach [PE] nobody will follow him up." PE teachers are largely ignored and left to devise their own ways to manage their subject and classes.

e) Physical Education Resources

(i) Teaching personnel

Physical Education teachers in Victoria undergo a minimum of four years of training at University. Beyond pre-service training, teachers continue their professional learning through school based strategies. Yvette's school has a

teacher appraisal system and a buddy system that enables her to “explore ways in which one can improve and expand one’s career. It helps to build one’s capacity.”

In a Kenyan context, four year’s training is also the norm. And there is debate around the need for new approaches to the teaching of PE, prompting Amusa and Toriola (2010) to advocate for a uniquely African PE and Sport that is more relevant to indigenous Africans than the Western PE model. Kenyan teachers are required to teach between 22-28 classes a week but the quality is questionable because as Jamal says, “nobody follows up to check what I do. No supervision of PE teachers takes place.”

Many Victorian secondary schools have more than one PE teacher, enabling them to have a PE Department internal to the school. However, in Kenya this is rarely the case. According to Jamal, “most schools have only one PE teacher because of the one lesson per week policy.”

(ii) Facilities and Equipment

Victorian secondary schools have an average class size of around 21 students and a student/teacher ratio of approximately 12:1 (DEECD, 2010). Classes around the middle school levels may be larger than the secondary average (many schools work to a maximum around 25 students), however this class size still enables the provision of adequate equipment and facilities for most of PE and Sport.

Conversely, an average Kenyan class has 40-50 students, posing a major challenge for teachers. Most Kenyan schools have problems in providing sufficient facilities and equipment to present PE, Sport and Recreation. Whilst some schools have adequate facilities, many have next to nothing, a case that is also evident in South Africa (Toriola, Amusa, Patriksson & Kougioumtzis, 2010)

(iii) Finance

The Victorian government funds and regulates education in State schools and this education is basically free up to Year 12, when students are expected to complete their formal schooling (DEECD, 2010). Therefore schools obtain funding from the government and decisions are made at the school level regarding the distribution of these funds to individual departments, including the PE department. Marvin happily revealed that at his school, “support from school administration is pretty good because we have a good history of PE and sport.”

Although the Kenyan government pays teachers’ salaries and other basic requirements, parents and communities meet the other costs of education.

Limited finance leads to cost-cutting and PE programmes are often the first casualties. According to Aisha, "we do get a little support but priority is given to academic subjects first."

f) Equity (Inclusive) Issues

In Victoria, girls and boys may have separate PE classes, depending on the policy of the individual school. Sport is also organized according to year levels with all students encouraged to participate.

Many schools in Kenya are single-sex but both boys and girls are exposed to the same PE curriculum. However, sport in Kenya is elitist and only the best students generally get to play in school teams.

In Victoria school sport generally has a participative focus with emphasis placed on giving every student an opportunity to be involved, if they elect to, at some level. Majority of Kenyan schools are single-sex and school sport is elitist with star players having a big advantage over average players. In both Kenya and Victoria, attempts are always made to modify PE programmes to accommodate those with a disability.

g) Partnership Pathways

The Australian Council of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) is the main professional association that provides professional development programmes, consultancy support and curriculum materials for Health and Physical Education teachers in Victoria and across Australia. ACHPER (2010) strongly advocates for quality HPE.

Kenyan PE teachers have no subject or professional association. The Kenya Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance (KAPHER-SD) was formed in 1996 (Amusa & Toriola, 2012), but is now moribund. Jamal remembers that there were active associations a number of years ago, though they were basically oriented towards presentation of papers at seminars. "However they sort of fizzled out and I have not heard of any association or body that advocates for PE. It is not clear what went wrong but it may be due to logistical challenges." The absence of a strong association has had a profound weakening of PE teaching in Kenya. Van Deventer (2004) stresses that only through partnerships can Physical and Health Education be strengthened. Amusa and Toriola (2012) note optimistically that there are visible signs of professional growth and development in PE and School Sport in Africa.

Limitations

This study accessed four teachers in a significant level of depth- and certainly, the inclusion of more teachers would have greatly contributed to the study's breadth, however this was not possible within the logistical limitations of this particular investigation. According to Best and Kahn (1993) the quality of participants is more important than the sample size in qualitative research. It is worth noting that the outcomes of this qualitative study could be used to develop a future quantitative investigation involving a larger number of participants.

Conclusion

While Kenya and Victoria share some similarities in their school systems, there are also significant differences that have ramifications for how PE is positioned in these countries. From the perspective of Kenyan PE teachers, Victorian PE teachers operate in a context that is more supportive. Perhaps the main policy difference is that PE is an examinable subject at Year 12 in Victoria (while in Kenya it is never examined). This seems to suggest that if only Kenya could introduce an examination for PE, then all would be well.

However, this is more easily said than done. Perceptions of PE amongst students, teachers and parents in Kenya are that it is merely an activity – in contrast to academic subjects where more important learning is believed to occur. Shifting these perceptions requires work that someone must undertake in order to raise the status of PE. The most obvious people to undertake such work are PE teachers themselves. It seems significant that Victorian PE teachers share a strong belief in the need for collaboration through various associations and events in order to improve PE, both in a curriculum content sense and also through the political machinations that surround curriculum.

As Amusa and Toriola (2012) acknowledge that Kenya has been serviced by the Kenya Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance (KAPHER-SD). However, they also highlight the main achievements of the association being very much in the area of elite athletes. For PE in Kenya to take the next steps forward the collaborative emphasis must be on curriculum development that embraces the physical education of all young people, rather than elite athletes only. Questioning the differences between PE and Sport must play a part in this development. This feeds into issues of equity and the provision of resources for all. Such development must occur not only in university departments of Exercise and Sport Science, but must be driven by departments of Education.

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