

## The status of primary physical education in Solomon Islands

Jeremy Dorovolomo

*Through an analysis of 81 primary teachers' questionnaire responses, 16 interviews and three weeks observation of a school's physical activities, this paper attempts to depict the status of primary physical education in the Solomon Islands and to ascertain the extent to which teachers are confident in following the PE syllabus. School intramural and inter-school sport programmes were also surveyed. The results show that 35% of primary teachers in the Solomon Islands do not teach PE in their classes, and teachers are not confident to teach 60% of what the syllabus prescribes. However, 97% of the primary schools have intramural sport and 77% of the schools participate in inter-school sport. Related issues of teacher training, curriculum development, in-service training, resourcing, cultural inputs, teacher attitude and stakeholder connectivity are discussed.*

### Purpose and sample

The purpose of this small piece of action research was to create awareness of the situation with regard to physical education and sports in Solomon Island primary schools, to motivate desired behaviour from stakeholders and to gain public support. The evaluation objects were the delivery of the primary physical education syllabus, intramural and inter-school sports. Thus, these questions were relevant: Are teachers confident in implementing the primary physical education syllabus? Do primary teachers actually teach

physical education? Do schools have active intramural sports? Do schools have active inter-school sport?

'Judgement sampling' was used where the sample was drawn on expert judgement or 'best guesses' about which units may best reflect the characteristics of the population (Worthen and Sanders, 1987). Primary schools of the Northwest constituency of Choiseul were all covered to provide a typical rural sample, and various schools of Honiara, the national capital, provided urban data. Ninety-seven primary school teachers were involved in the research.

Permission was taken from chief education officers and head teachers of the sampled schools prior to data collection. Village chiefs were also contacted for the schools located in a village.

### Instruments

Four profiling activities were implemented to gather information:

- Questionnaire.

A paper and pencil questionnaire was given to 81 primary school teachers, and 81 responses were received.

- Interviews.

The views of 16 of the 81 respondents, all from Honiara schools, were recorded.

- Observation.

To explore and become more familiar

with the day-to-day reality of the setting, the writer observed one of the schools, indirectly observing physical education activities of the school.

- Documentary information.

The syllabus and related materials were used to structure and focus the interviews and questionnaires.

## Discussion of results

### Confidence

Results showed that primary teachers lacked the confidence to teach about 60% of the syllabus. Teachers were confident to teach only minor games (such as 'cat and mice', 'over and under', 'catch and sit', various relays) and major games such as soccer and netball, the two most popular games of Solomon Islanders. However, most teachers lacked the confidence to teach swimming, dance and simple gymnastics, which are the other components of the primary PE syllabus. My observation of one school confirms this; it was evident that children taken out for PE mostly played minor games and soccer and netball. Teaching of other areas of the physical education syllabus was not observed.

A significant reason for not teaching gymnastics is cultural. In Choiseul, where part of the research was undertaken, it is not acceptable for girls to stand on their head or do a forward roll. And if a sister or cousin sister is present, it would be disrespectful for a boy to be in such positions. Throughout Choiseul, respect for the sister and brother is very strong. Therefore, the cultural aspect of the society must be considered when

And if a sister or cousin sister is present, it would be disrespectful for a boy to be in such positions.

developing the curriculum. Students need to relate personally to the curriculum and feel that their backgrounds make a contribution to what they are learning. Primary teachers in many parts of Solomon Islands may not see the cultural relevance of teaching gymnastics. This is not unique to Solomon Islands: Tremayne (2000), conducted a survey of Year 9 Muslim and Catholic students of four high schools in New South Wales. The study indicated that more of the Muslim group than the Catholic group were concerned that cultural values made it difficult for them to engage in PE-related activities. There are problems with issues such as dress, public display, independence and cultural values.

When it comes to swimming, there is no pool at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) to teach it and the beachsides of Honiara cannot be classified as safe to teach swimming. In the rural areas, however, swimming can be taught if the school is near a clean, safe seashore. I myself have taught swimming in remote secondary schools. The Solomon Islands, as is the case with other Pacific island countries, has lots of water and our children spend considerable time in it, making swimming, relevant and necessary.

If teachers are not confident to teach 60% of the syllabus there are certainly gaps between curriculum development, teacher education and actual implementation. The SICHE should be bolstered to meet the training needs of primary teachers in the field of physical education.

## Participation

Another feature clear from the three weeks of unobtrusive observation was that the lower classes were the only ones given PE. A dominant reason that emerged from interviews was that Class 6 students were shortly to sit a public exam and a seemingly logical approach to improving exam scores is to reduce the time spent on non-examinable subjects, most notably art, music, and PE, thereby increasing time spent on the examinable subjects.

Nonetheless, such initiatives may actually deny students important experiences. A study done by Wilkins *et al.* (2003) of 547 Virginia elementary schools showed that there is no reason to believe that allocating less time or no time to PE leads to greater school success on standardised curriculum tests. Their findings do not support the notion that reduced time for PE and other non-examinable subjects is related to higher exam scores. Furthermore, Wilkins *et al.* (2003:731) stressed that a 'statistical trend was generally found to be positive, suggesting that students in schools who have art, music, and physical education taught by specialists may actually do better on standardised tests'. Taking away time for PE has no basis of justification as a strategy to improve standardised exam scores. The overall education of the whole child is the important issue.

## Implementation of the PE curriculum

The issue is that curriculum developers should not create a syllabus for the sake of developing one; they have to be sure that teacher education is able to provide

sufficient training for prospective teachers, before distribution. The disjointed nature of curriculum development, teacher training, resourcing, and curriculum delivery is the shortfall. Released in 1988, the PE syllabus has received no revision or evaluation of its success. In small island nations, where human and material resources are

scarce, stakeholders must ensure that policy proposals are not considered in the abstract but are judged immediately in relation to the resources (Rodhouse, 1993). Eventually, it is the primary teachers who deliver the curriculum. Whatever the curriculum, an integral component

of the process is the teachers. Mills (1992:38) stressed that 'teachers are the most significant factors in implementing a school reform ...'. A syllabus may look good on paper but if teachers do not have the training and confidence or do not share the vision to deliver it to the students, programmes will flounder.

## In-service programmes

In-service training can provide opportunity for teachers' professional development in this area, instilling confidence and zeal for the subject. Lack of in-service education means that teachers are not accessing professional development opportunities commensurate with the demands of the syllabus content and requirement. A comparative study undertaken by Rowling *et al.* (1998) in 150 New South Wales secondary schools is relevant here. The study looked at health education and PE in-service programmes and showed that teachers were more effective in teaching PE because there were regular in-service

Taking away time for PE has no basis of justification as a strategy to improve standardised exam scores.

programmes, than health education where fewer in-service programmes were offered. In-service programmes will assist primary teachers of PE to renew and expand their horizons. It is understandable that they concentrate on areas where they have knowledge, skills and feelings of efficacy. Effective teachers must be academically prepared. If teachers are not receiving the preparation, they either do not cover these topics or are doing so with limited knowledge and skills. Moreover, given that 'students learn more from teachers who have recently been enrolled in professional development programs' (McGraw, Banks & Piper, 1991:9), the lack of attention to professional development in PE is a cause of concern. Teachers need to be furnished with school and system level support for this cause.

### **Developing one's own syllabus**

The syllabus is highly prescriptive, stating what teachers should do each lesson, each week, each term, for the year. The author's advice would be that teachers plan their own programme, as long as it is structured, sequential and developmentally appropriate, because teachers operate in a variety of contexts, and a plan that is suitable to that context is essential. Throne (1994) stressed that the role of the classroom teacher thus expands from one who implements theory to one who also creates, tests, questions, and informs theory within the context of his or her classroom. The challenge for teachers is to develop situated rather than prescribed certainties in their schools. Kincheloe (1993) emphasised the notion of postmodern

PE teachers, within the context of their schools ... should provide a structured programme of educational experiences suitable to their situations.

teachers learning to produce their own knowledge and encompassing the contextual contingency and uniqueness of particular teaching situations. Instead of becoming pawns in a cult of expertise, taking orders from experts, conversant with the language of efficiency and scientific management, teachers should be involved in the analysis of the context in which their teaching takes place. PE teachers, within the context of their schools, according to Williams (1985), should provide a structured programme of educational experiences suitable to their situations.

### **Intramural and inter-school sports**

A positive finding of the survey was that 97% of primary schools in Solomon Islands have an intramural sports programme, i.e. competitions between classes or other equal competitive groups within the school. Almost all schools have an internal sports day each week, usually after class. This is marvelous because schools are making the effort to organise physical activity and sport for pupils on a regular basis. In contrast, only 23% of the schools have inter-school competitions and then only occasionally. It is the strengthening of all three facets that should be the aim; pupils to be taught structured PE in their classes, and to have a chance of active participation within and outside the school.

Certain sporting federations are doing a good job of organising competitions among schools, notably the soccer, basketball, athletic, and netball federations. All stakeholders at provincial and national level can play a

part. Importantly, the government should consciously offer to raise the status of PE in the country through appropriate policy directions. For in schools, it is forces external to the school that exert a significantly greater influence than forces within the school. Many times, these external forces have an expectation that teachers should be capable of innovation, without realising just how much help may be required in this enterprise (Williams, 1985).

While inter- and intra- school competitions are important, it must be noted that they should not replace the teaching of PE in class. The idea behind intramural and inter-school sports is to supplement the regular PE classes, with the purpose of providing opportunity for students beyond the PE classes (Rice, 2002).

## Conclusion

The aim of the exercise was to find out if teachers are confident to teach the primary PE syllabus. Most of them are not confident to teach a big portion of the syllabus. The perception that it is not an examinable subject, so it should be given lesser attention, has weakened the reputation of PE in Solomon Islands primary schools. This excludes students from valuable experiences. Furthermore, the gap between curriculum development, teacher education, and curriculum delivery is a telling revelation. Curriculum development was done without collaboration with teacher education and vice versa — hence, poor delivery. Cultural issues and sensitivity, periodic evaluation of the syllabus, continuous in-servicing, changing negative perceptions of PE, activating

societal stakeholders, and consideration of contextual issues need to be considered to ensure better curriculum delivery. In addition, a balanced regular physical education class, and intramural and inter-school programmes are crucial to enhancing students' exposure to developing important skills and competencies at an early age.

## Bibliography

- CDC. 1988. *Solomon Islands primary schools physical education syllabus*. MET, Honiara.
- Kincheloe, J.L. 1993. *Towards a critical politics of teacher thinking – mapping the postmodern*, ed. H.A.Giroux & P.Freire, Bergin & Garvey, London.
- McGraw, B., D.Banks and K. Piper. 1991. *Effective schools: Schools that make a difference*. Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn, Vic.
- MEHRD. 2001. *Situational analysis, teacher education and training report*. Honiara.
- Mills, G.. 1992. Coping with change at the school district level, *Curriculum Perspectives* 12 (1): 37 – 44.
- Rice, M. 2002. Middle school: Intramurals or interscholastic sports? *Journal of the Maine Association for Middle Level Education* 12 (1):1-3.
- Rodhouse, J. 1993. Problems of Policy and Development. In K. Bacchus and C. Brock (eds) *The Challenge of Scale*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Commonwealth Secretariat Publications, London.
- Rowling, L., M. Booth and D. Nutbeam. April 1998. Health education curriculum and teaching: Progress and problems. *Curriculum Perspectives* 12 (1): 1-3.



- riculum Perspectives* 18 (1): 46 – 52.
- Throne, J. 1994. *Living with the pendulum: The complex world of teaching*. Harvard Educational Review 64 (2): 195 – 208.
- Wilkins, L.M.J., G.. Graham, S. Parker, S. Westfall, G.R. Fraser and M. Tembo. 2003. Time in the arts and physical education and school achievement. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35 (6): 721 – 734.
- Williams, E.A. 1985. Understanding Constraints on Innovation in Physical Education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 17 (4): 407 – 413.
- Worthen, B.R. and J.R. Sanders. 1987. *Educational evaluation – alternative approaches and practical guidelines*. Longman, London.

---

## APPENDIX

The extract from the prescription on on the next page is from the term three programme for Class 3. The prescription has similar structures for Classes 1 - 6. At the bottom of this extract it can be noted that there is hockey. It is hard to understand why a curriculum developer would include hockey when hockey is not palyed at all in Solomon Islands. It cannot be seen even in Honiara, the capital. Implementing it by teachers would almost be impossible, unless there was a programme under way to introduce the sport. It is an example of importing a curriculum and hoping that it will work on the ground. Curriculum should be based on informed judgements

**Extract from the Solomon Islands Primary Physical Education Syllabus, p. 14**

*Weekly programme: Standard 3 Term 3*

<b>Week No.</b>	<b>Skills and Minor Games</b>	<b>Agility, Tumbling and Vaulting</b>	<b>Balancing Activities</b>	<b>Partner Activities</b>	<b>Dance and Rhythmic Activities</b>	<b>Sports</b>
1	Warm ups Circle Soccer Towerball Wandering ball Circle Catch					Soccer Netball
2					Warm-ups Traditional dancing	Soccer Netball
3					Warm-ups Traditional dancing	Soccer Netball
4				Warm-ups. Dagger fight, knee boxing, circle slap, bullfight, elbows, tug of war, alternate pull up. Game: Hoppo Bumpo		Soccer Netball
5		Warm-ups A series of rolls, Leap frog, Dive over a back, Game: Up and down dodge ball.				Fun Day Sports
6			Revision			
7		Warm-ups. Skipping with hoops. Two in a hoop race shuttle. 3-man shuttle. Game: Up and down dodge ball.				Soccer Netball
8	Warm-ups Hockey skills: push dribble, trapping, the hit, scooping. Dribble zig zag.					Hockey
9	Warm-ups. Revise last weeks activities. Teach goal shooting, passing and receiving. Game: In and out relay.					Hockey
10			Revision			