
Status of Physical Education in Fiji: A Study of the Western Primary Schools

KATARINA TOGA RURU

Department of Sports and Physical Education
School of Humanities and Education
Fiji National University
FIJI

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the prominence of physical education in primary schools. To conduct this study one hundred primary school teachers were randomly selected from the western schools in Fiji. The study employed mixed method. The qualitative study employed the ‘purposive sampling’ method. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the one hundred subjects while semi-structured interview questions were used for the selected interviewees. The findings revealed that generally PE has been marginalized in Fiji primary schools. More often teachers were obliged to use the time for other subject coverage because PE is non-examinable. Weather conditions, lack of resources and poor facilities also impinge in its implementation. This has weakened the reputation of PE in Fiji primary schools. Moreover, this excludes students from valuable experiences as a result of being physically active. Consequently there is a need for collaboration amongst all education stakeholders in promoting PE programs in schools.

Key words: Physical Education status in schools, teacher subject preferences, Key Learning Areas.

Introduction

The value of Physical Education (PE) in many countries has been undermined due to the differences in perceptions of PE.

These differences are no doubt the result of the wide variety of experiences offered under the PE umbrella. Although many professionals consider true PE to be nothing less than a quality instructional program conducted by specialist PE teachers, for many this is not the actual experience. Many countries like the United States, require PE in their schools however, a significant decline was notable in the analysis of the PE requirements (Burgeson et al., 2001). Similar assumption may be made about the situation of PE in Fiji primary schools). They claimed that although PE is one of the core subjects in the Fiji primary school curriculum, it is not emphasized in schools. Burgeson et al., (2001) and Hardman & Marshall (2001) claimed that if such trend continues to occur, the subject may face elimination from the formal curriculum. Hardman & Marshall (2001) contends that presently, the status of the PE is much lower than the more academic subjects.

The implications that follow from its relative position had raised great concern among physical educators all over the country. Such concern stems from the reality that there is an increase in the number of obese children in schools resulting from inactivity. Considering that schools are the primary societal institution with the responsibility for promoting physical activity in young people (Sallis & McKenzie, 1999), it may be argued that school PE might seem to be an ideal remedy to such sedentary lifestyle since children spend approximately 90 percent of their time in school. It is important therefore to investigate the status of PE in Fiji schools to establish better understanding of the existence of such issue in Fiji. Moreover, to identify the contributing factors that may have undermined the implementation of PE in schools.

Background

Physical Education is one of the components of the Healthy Living and Physical Education Key Learning Area documented

in the Fiji National Curriculum Framework. The former Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Education (MOE), Alumita Taganesia stated that Physical Education is one of the core requirements of the formal curriculum and must be taught regularly (“Taganesia”, 2003). According to the Ministry of Education (2013) Healthy Living and Physical Education, Science, Enterprise Education and Social Science are allocated 4 x 30mins classes per week. It recommends that all primary school children should receive PE lessons regularly.

Despite the documentation of such policy by the MOE, numerous researchers have found that many schools have not fulfilled the core requirements. They claimed that what actually takes place during PE lessons does not resemble what is purported to be happening. Bennet, *et al* (1983) & Whippy (2005) suggests various reasons for the non-occurrence of PE lessons. These include: lack of teachers, facilities, and equipment, supervision of timetable, academic minded head teachers, budget constraints and attitude towards PE. Other contributing factors include religious constraints, climatic limitations, and parents and teachers lack of acceptance of PE as a core subject.

Similarly, Seruiratu (1995) revealed several misconceptions that affect PE programs in Fiji whilst examining the non-occurrence of PE lessons in school. Several factors that form the basis of her examination include the belief that sports session is a total physical education program; that PE periods are free play sessions and this is reflected in the mode of teaching; that PE's only value is providing a break between academic classes; that PE only benefit the physically gifted; that physical education should not be treated like an academic subject; and that an extra-mural curriculum is not integral to the education program. Such misconceptions have yet to be proven through research.

This study was designed to investigate the problem concerning the status and issues undermining the

implementation of PE in primary schools in Fiji. This was necessary in view of the fact that very little had been documented on the status of PE in Fiji schools apart from the Report of the Fiji Island Education Commission Report (2000) and the research by Koroi, (1979).

A common theme of concern is the low status accorded to PE in all schools, particularly in the primary level. The findings from the current study open up avenues for further research on issues surrounding ideologies shaping health, science and physicality. Furthermore, this present study provides stakeholders with the much-needed feedback on the current status of PE in the Fiji primary school system and the underlying issues that underpin its effective implementation. Such information is crucial in the monitoring, evaluation and revision of the current PE program in schools. Moreover, the findings provide valuable information on the issues undermining the implementation of the current primary school PE program. It highlights reasons for the low status of the subject in schools.

Research Questions

In its effort to fulfill the aims of the current study, this paper had conducted a research using the mixed method to investigate the status and issues undermining the implementation of sport and PE in the Fiji primary school system. In particular, it addressed the following research questions:

- (1) How is PE ranked in comparison to other academic subjects?
- (2) What factors affect the implementation of PE in schools?
- (3) How can we improve the implementation of PE in schools?

Methodology

The quantitative study was conducted in the Western Division. A sample of one hundred teachers was selected from a population of primary teachers in the Western Educational District. The selected teachers were taken from schools between Rakiraki and Sigatoka. The qualitative study employed the 'Purposive sampling' method. In this sampling technique the researcher purposely chooses subjects who in her opinion were identified as relevant to the research topic. The process of sampling in this case involved the identification of the informants through representation such as ethnicity, type of school and gender of head teachers. All the selected head teachers were based in the Lautoka area due to accessibility. In this study, five head teachers were identified and interviewed.

The quantitative study employed questionnaires to collect data from the pre-determined sample while the qualitative study employed semi-structured interview questions to gather data qualitatively. The interview questions used open-ended items so interviewees' views may be expressed without restraint.

Findings

The results of this study exposed findings that PE is given low priority in the Western primary schools. It was evident that many primary school teachers fail to teach PE regularly. Lessons were often cancelled during unfavorable weather conditions or when more time was required for exam preparation and coverage of syllabus. Apart from such problems, the lack of equipment, resources and facilities and the introduction of OHS in schools were also contributing factors. Interestingly, the study found that insufficient teacher training preparation did not contribute to lack of program implementation as revealed by previous studies. In fact, the majority of teachers

investigated revealed adequate teacher preparation in teaching PE. The study also revealed that although the Ministry of Education has re-introduced the newly revised National Curriculum Framework (NCF), there are limited print resources provided for teaching PE. It may be assumed that reasons for this delay stems from the fact that there is only one officer responsible for the development of both primary and secondary curriculum.

This study also revealed there was general consensus amongst head teachers of the importance of PE in the promotion of active lifestyle amongst young people today. However, they did not enforce its implementation. This responsibility is given to the individual teachers. This may explain why some teachers fail to teach PE regularly. If PE is to be given equal recognition as other subjects, there is a need to closely monitor its implementation in schools.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that generally PE has been marginalized in Fiji primary schools. More often teachers were obliged to use the time for other subject coverage because PE is non-examinable. Weather conditions, lack of resources and poor facilities also impinge in its implementation. This has weakened the reputation of PE in Fiji primary schools. Moreover, this excludes students from valuable experiences as a result of being physically active. Consequently there is a need for collaboration amongst all education stakeholders in promoting PE programs in schools. It is recommended that provisions of adequate funds for upgrading of facilities and equipment, development of curriculum resources and educational policies and improvement of effective monitoring procedures are put in place so PE can be given the status it truly deserve in schools hence contribute to the vision of a healthy Fiji.

REFERENCES:

- Bennett, B. L., Howell, M. L., and Simri, U. 1983. *Comparative Physical Education and sport*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger.
- Burgeson, C. R., Wechsler, H., Brener, N. D., Young, J. C., & Spain, C. G. 2001. "Physical education and activity: Results from the school health policies and programs study (SHPP) 2000." *Journal of School Health* 71(7): 279-293.
- Fiji Islands Education Commission Report. 2000. "Learning together: Directions for education in the Fiji Islands." Report of the Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel. Government of Fiji, Suva.
- Hardman, K. and Marshall, J. 2001. "The state and status of physical education in schools in international context." *European Physical Education Review* 6(3): 203-229.
- Koroi, S. 1984. *A critical analysis of the centralized curriculum development policy in Fiji and an examination of the case for decentralization with particular reference to physical education*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji.
- Ministry of Education. 2013. *Healthy Living Syllabi Year 3 to 8*. Curriculum Development Unit. Suva Fiji.
- Sallis, J. F. and McKenzie, T. L. 1999. "Physical Education's role in public health." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 62: 124-137.
- Seruiratu, A. 1984. *Misconception about Physical Education*. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Taganesia, A. 2006, September 3. *Fiji Times*, p. 1.
- Williams, E.A. 1979. "Physical education in the junior school: A study of the teachers involved." *Bulletin of Physical Education* 15: 5-13.

Whippy, K. 2005. "How effective is the implementation of physical education at primary level." A paper presented for the ED455 course assessment. USP.