

# Generalist Teachers;

## Ideal candidates for providing developmentally appropriate, best-practice instruction in physical education in early childhood and primary settings



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The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is conducting a consultation on the draft Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education Foundation to Year 10 with possible implementation in schools in 2014. One of the aims in the Health and Physical Education curriculum is to develop student expertise in movement skills, physical activities, and movement concepts as a foundation for lifelong physical activity participation and enhanced performance. What impact will this have on school staffing, specialist Physical Education (PE) teachers and generalist teachers?

### Specialist PE Teachers

The number of full-time specialist physical education teachers in the early childhood and primary settings is small, and the presence of a specialist does not always guarantee a quality developmentally based program (Morgan & Hansen, 2007). There has been considerable debate regarding the need to increase the number of specialist PE teachers in Australian public primary schools. "Specialist PE teachers have the knowledge and skills to ensure all children are exposed to a quality PE program and have positive and worthwhile experiences" (Curry, 2012, p. 17). Whilst it would be optimal to have a specialist PE teacher in all Australian public primary schools, the reality is that many schools do not have the staffing capabilities. In addition, schools who do have specialist PE teachers often utilise the PE classes as release time for their generalist teachers and as such students are accessing PE classes in general only once a week.

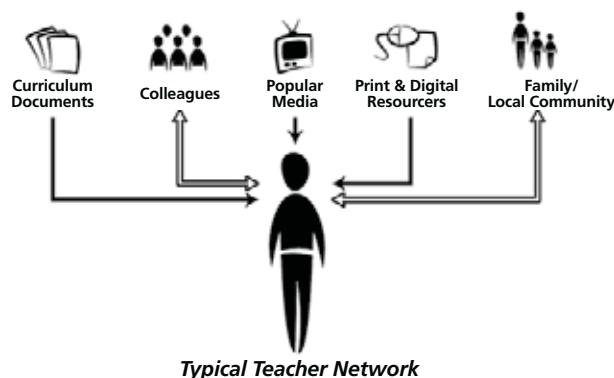
The development of movement skills, physical activities and movement concepts cannot be the sole responsibility of the specialist PE teacher. One PE class presented by a specialist PE teacher once a week does not provide adequate time for some children to develop the movement skill foundations required for more complex or specialised skills. They need many other opportunities throughout their day to practice and master the physical skills required to participate in physical activity. Research suggests that by 8 years, children have established their belief in physical activity and sport and that without competence in a range of skills such as running, skipping and balancing, children are less likely to access the range of options available to establish an active lifestyle (DECCD, 1997). The limited opportunity to practice and availability of equipment for students outside of schools prohibits participation for some children and their families. So when can these children access further opportunities to develop their physical competence?

Herein lies the inherent benefit of generalist teachers instructing physical education, movement skills, physical activity and movement concepts. The generalist teacher has their class for the majority of the day and can construct curriculum experiences

which deliver the knowledge and skills of other curriculum areas, in, about and through movement (Arnold, 1988).

Learning in movement involves acquiring the movement skills, concepts and strategies required to move with competence and confidence and build upon the important early foundations of play and fundamental movement skills. These skills, concepts and strategies can be incorporated into learning experiences in other curriculum areas. The aim of Education Queensland's *Smart Moves – Physical Activity Programs in Queensland State Schools* is to increase student participation in and improve the quality of physical activity. Schools are encouraged to integrate physical activity with the concepts of other curriculum areas such as teaching fractions and decimals by having students play five games of ten pin bowling, recording their scores and describing their score as a total out of ten and then as a decimal. This learning experience can also include teaching students the skills, concepts and strategies for the movement required to participate effectively in ten pin bowling.

Learning about movement involves developing knowledge related to movement and physical activity such as movement concepts, rules of games and sports, fitness knowledge, safe participation and principles of fair play and ethical behaviour. This includes understanding the place and meaning of physical activity, outdoor recreation and sport in their own lives as well as locally, nationally and globally, and the varied roles that exist within organised sport and recreational activities. Using the example outlined above, the integrated mathematics learning experience can also include learning about the game of ten pin bowling incorporating safe participation and principles of fair play. The learning experience could then explore where ten pin bowling is available in their community and a visit from a guest speaker who is in a professional ten pin bowling team to talk to the students about the sport, the rules, how to get involved and the types of training involved with being in a professional team.



Learning through movement involves developing communication, decision making and self-management skills, and learning to manage risk and persist with challenges while participating in a range of physical activities. Again using the example above, the learning experience could be extended to include students exploring the social and personal management skills required to be an effective member of a ten pin bowling team and exploring the similarities and differences between being in a ten pin bowling team and being on a football team.

The opportunities for the integration of PE into other curriculum areas are endless but they do require the generalist teacher to have knowledge and skills of developmental motor sequences, physical activities and movement concepts if they are to ensure that what they are teaching is best-practice and results in a quality program. "The basic principles of high quality PE and sport always enables young people, whatever their circumstances or ability, to take part in and enjoy PE and Sport; promotes young people's health, safety and wellbeing; and enables all young people to improve and achieve in line with their age and potential" (DfES & DCMS, 2004, p.1).

### External Service Providers

Schools have attempted to 'fill the gap' when a specialist PE teacher is not on staff and contract external providers to provide a range of teaching services from whole programs to specialist areas such as dance and gymnastics programs for their students. Research in Queensland indicates that the main reason for outsourcing PE in schools, sport and/or outdoor education activities was found to be a lack of expertise within the school teaching staff (Williams, Hay & Macdonald, 2011).

Whilst external service providers can provide additional and specialist support to schools this is not the solution to the provision of a PE teacher. Some external service programs are designed outside of the school curriculum by individuals (some non-accredited) and organisations working in the area of promoting a particular sport or product. Health and PE curriculum and policy areas in government nationally have identified the increase in external service providers in Health and PE and are working with the Principals of their schools to ensure that the services of external providers are appropriate. The programs, projects and initiatives of external service providers who deliver educational sessions should always be assessed on their capacity to contribute to the learning outcomes set by the teacher/school, and a thorough assessment of how these programs support student learning outcomes. Programs need to be developmentally appropriate and utilise content and teaching strategies that are evidence-based and reflect the philosophy and principles of the school and relevant policies.

Relying on the services of external service providers does not increase the expertise of the school teaching staff nor enable the school to run their own programs without requiring outside assistance. The reliance on external service providers can result in programs being offered one year and not the next and if the funding for programs is sourced from students, there will always be issues with inequity as some families will not be able to afford for their children to participate. Unless schools have ongoing budgeted funding for external service providers there is limited continuity for programs and this can have an effect on student learning and outcomes.



Some external programs have now implemented teacher professional learning in planning, delivery, skill development and mentoring as a vital element of the program. They have identified the need to ensure that generalist teachers have the knowledge, skills and confidence to continue with the program after its conclusion. The benefits being that the children can continue to practice and develop their skills within an existing school program.

### Generalist Teachers

"Generalist teachers, with their knowledge of the individual needs of their students and the security and psychological support that they provide in the early childhood and primary classroom, are ideal candidates for providing developmentally appropriate, best-practice instruction in physical education" (Callcott, Miller & Wilson-Gahan, 2012, p.16). It is the generalist teacher who works daily with the children, has a solid relationship built with their students, knows the diversity of their student cohort and can construct curriculum experiences which deliver the knowledge and skills of other curriculum areas, in, about and through movement.

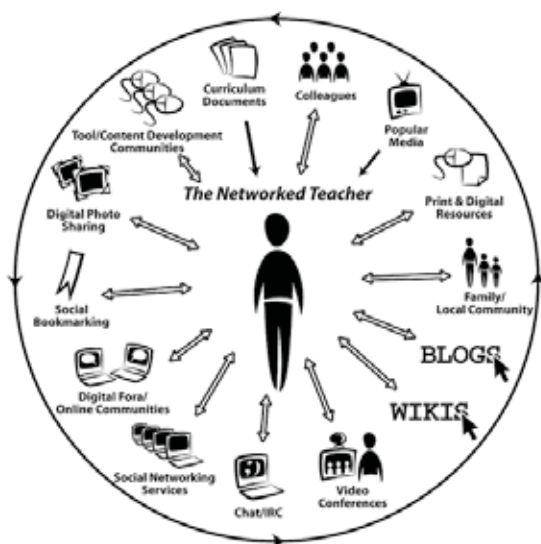
What the generalist teacher lacks is the attitudinal disposition to and confidence in teaching PE (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). Morgan and Hansen's research indicates that generalist teachers value PE and believe in its benefits but many do not feel confident, competent enough or physically fit to take PE classes. Generalist teachers also lack physical domain knowledge and skills which are important in the delivery of a quality PE program but strategies can be developed to ensure that generalist teachers have access to professional learning in delivering PE and the integration of movement into other curriculum areas. In Australia, a key recommendation from a Senate Inquiry into Physical and Sport Education (SSCERA, 1992) was that urgent professional learning strategies and/ or specialist PE teachers were needed to overcome the significant barriers teachers faced.

These significant barriers in PE can be overcome through professional learning programs for teachers and the recognition that the Health and PE curriculum area is vital in a child's development. Improvements in self-esteem and confidence that are associated with a sound development in motor skills has

a flow on effect to other areas of a child's education (DECCD, 1997). Research also suggests that physical competence (especially for boys) has a substantial influence on peer relations. Physically competent children enjoy greater social success than do physically inept children and the suggestion is that physical education can be used as an intervention strategy to enhance the peer status of physically incompetent children by improving their motor skills (Evansa & Roberts, 1987).

Education authorities, schools, and teacher educators must advocate to ensure that the barriers to teaching PE are seriously addressed and teachers are appropriately supported in terms of resources, skills, and environments for teaching PE (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). Whilst this is important, generalist teachers need to realise that they are in a position which makes them ideal candidates for providing developmentally appropriate, best-practice instruction in PE for the students in their care. They are best placed to identify their own strengths and weaknesses in teaching and programming in the physical domain and can seek professional learning and support, to increase their confidence and competence to teach PE.

Generalist teachers wishing to develop their knowledge and skills in the physical domain can become networked teachers in professional learning communities. Being part of a professional learning community where there are collegial groups of educators who learn collaboratively is not a new concept for teachers; they do it all the time, sharing ideas and supporting each other. What is new is the variety of avenues that teachers can follow to obtain that information. A networked teacher accesses professional learning from a variety of traditional sources such as conferences, workshops, print resources, curriculum documents, university courses, coaching courses, sports specific coaching courses and mentoring programs. The networked teacher can also access professional learning via non-traditional sources such as online courses, Moodle courses, Blogs, Twitter, Podcasts, Wikis, Social Networking sites, social bookmarking and video conferencing. This enables the generalist teacher the flexibility to access information and support from a wide variety of credible and reliable sources at a time that suits them and at a developmental level that meets their current personal learning needs.



## Conclusion

With appropriate support, generalist teachers can increase their knowledge and skills in the physical domain and become confident and competent teachers of PE in their classrooms. Although it is wonderful in reports to recommend that teachers are appropriately supported in their professional learning by education authorities and schools, why wait? I urge generalist teachers to recognise the importance of Health and PE in education and take action to develop their knowledge, confidence and skills in the physical domain. You are not alone, there are many other generalist teachers in education beginning their personal learning journey today and many other specialist teachers in education who are more than happy to share their expertise in a variety of formal and non-formal forums. A simple way to begin is to join a PE hash tag on twitter and browse the Blogs and websites to which specialist PE teachers and academics contribute. More importantly, join a professional teaching association for HPE and keep informed about new research, new courses and upcoming professional learning opportunities in your state or territory. The Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education can be the conduit for quality PE in schools but not without your help.

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**Natalie McMaster is currently Associate Lecturer Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast. In 2011, Natalie was on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), Health and Physical Education National Panel and began working for ACARA as an advisor on Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia priority and its inclusion in Health and Physical Education. She is currently a writer for the Australian Curriculum for Health and Physical Education. She can be contacted via email [nmcmaste@usc.edu.au](mailto:nmcmaste@usc.edu.au).**