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RESEARCHING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPORT EDUCATION IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL SETTING: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the approach, selected findings and a related discussion connecting to the implementation of a unit of Sport Education to a class of Year 6 and 7 students in a primary school setting. Neither the teacher nor the students had previously experienced Sport Education in a primary school setting. This paper will focus upon the insights of the teacher, gained through the design, delivery and deliberation of a new curriculum. **The research** incorporated teacher self reflected inquiry through the use of a journal maintained throughout the implementation of the Sport Education curriculum, and a post curriculum implementation interview with the teacher.

The findings from this study suggest that, from the teacher's perspective, Sport Education is more motivating and inclusive of students normally less inclined toward participation. The team affiliation feature of the SE approach was perceived as the key design element for enhanced motivation. This study indicates that SE provides the capacity for the teaching and collection of evidence of a broader range of outcomes and associated student achievement than previously used teaching approaches. It was also observed that students were taking aspects of personal and social development learning from the Sport Education physical education unit and applying them in the co curricular context. However, in contrast to findings from other studies, the engagement of skilled and athletic students was problematic. Additionally, there was an observed disconnection by students who appeared to resent having to engage in activities that reduced time for game play.

Introduction

Sport Education is a physical education curriculum model that presents an approach for the development of programs extending the experiences of students beyond that offered from traditional physical education teaching approaches. This is an important consideration as the manner of delivery of physical activity in physical education has been questioned for its capacity to realise educational outcomes for all students (Alexander & Luckman, 2001). It has been suggested that the only thing many students learn through the traditional approach to teaching physical education is that they cannot perform the skills necessary to be successful (Booth, 1983). A superficial exposure to skill and strategic knowledge development and, a lack of time to develop skill proficiency have also been highlighted as problems for physical education (Mohr, Townsend, & Pritchard, 2006). For the purposes of this paper traditional approaches to the teaching of physical education are conceptualised as multi activity, teacher centred didactic approaches focussed on sport skill acquisition in largely decontextualised settings (Pill, 2007).

Sport Education (SE) was originally proposed as a model capable of addressing the concerns regarding traditional approaches to physical education teaching and learning. “Designed to provide authentic, educationally rich sport experiences in the context of school physical education” (Siedentop, 1994), SE provides the possibility for the contextualised teaching of sporting skills in an environment that has been suggested as more motivating for students than the decontextualised approach of traditional physical education pedagogy (Siedentop, 1994; Kirk, 1996).

The Sport Education Approach

The SE model was originally hypothesised to provide a positive and inclusive physical education sport experience for all students through the contextualised teaching of sport (Siedentop, 1994). The component features of the SE approach are illustrated in Figure 1.

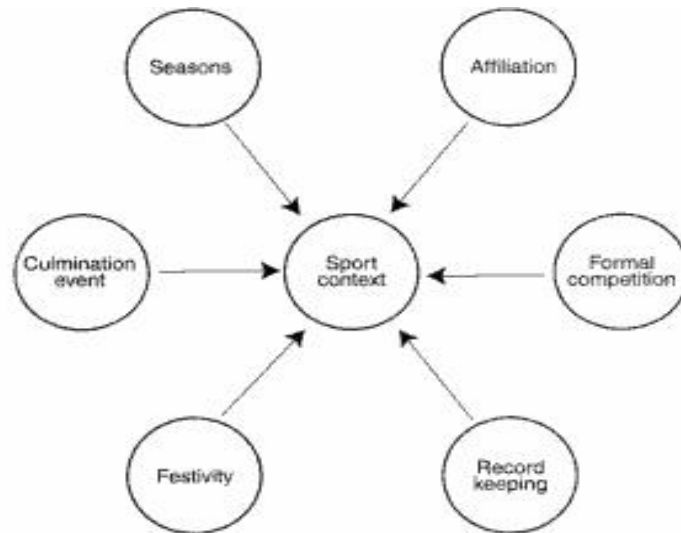


Figure 1: Primary features of Sport Education, from Siedentop et al 2004, p4)

Beginning from the premise that sport differs from other physical activity experiences, the SE curriculum is defined by 6 primary features that create the sport context in physical education (Siedentop, 1994).

1. Seasons: Sport is played in seasons that contain both practice and competition; SE is therefore organised by seasons rather than units of work.
2. Affiliation: Sport is played in teams and players connect with and usually belong to the one team for the season.
3. Formal Competition: Sport seasons include a schedule of competition between teams.
4. Record Keeping: Records of individual and team participation are kept to provide feedback and enable goal setting by participants and the teacher.
5. Festivity: Individual and team performances are recognised and celebrated throughout the season and, during a culminating end of season event.
6. Culminating Event: Sport seasons typically come to a conclusion with a defining event. SE seasons therefore conclude with a 'festival' type of event that celebrates the success of all students who participated.

Although defined by the above 6 features, SE is not meant to be what Shehu describes as a 'sealed' model (Shehu, 1998) to be implemented as

prescribed. It should be adaptable “to meet particular teacher or curriculum goals” (Siedentop, Hastie, & Mars, 2004 p33) and is intended to be organised in such a way that it is “developmentally matched to the experiences and abilities of the students” (Siedentop et al, 2004, p13) as well as the capacity of the teacher to design the curriculum. With this in mind, the SE model in this project was not defined by the necessity to rigorously pursue the 6 primary features of SE, but rather by the goals of SE. “To educate students to be players in the fullest sense and to help them develop as competent, literate, and enthusiastic” students (Siedentop, Hastie & van der Mars 2004, p7). A competent student has the skills, knowledge and understanding to participate in games and activities satisfactorily. A literate student understands the rules, rituals, traditions and distinction between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in the designated activity. An enthusiastic student wants to participate in the activity because they value the experience and enjoyment derived from participation in the activity.

The legitimacy of SE as a valid curriculum approach for physical education is supported by studies considering the approach from teachers’ and students’ perspective. A synopsis of relevant research considering SE indicates that teachers implementing the approach are generally positive about its contribution to the empowerment of student learning and the achievement of student learning outcomes. Alexander & Luckman (2001) report teachers’ endorsement of SE’s potential to cater inclusively for girls as well as students described as highly skilled. Similarly, Hastie & Sinelnikov, (2006) described increased interest by girls in SE and suggest that this may be due to feelings of investment in the process of learning because the girls were engaged and motivated by the team affiliation. Increased affiliation and feelings of belonging offered in SE have been positively commented upon (Browne, Carlson, & Hastie, 2004). In addition to potentially being a more inclusive approach for girls, there is some evidence that SE can lead to greater inclusion of less skilled students (Clarke & Quill, 2003) and that lesser skilled players may particularly benefit from SE’s expanded curriculum goals (Carlson, 1995). Additional to the enhanced motivational climate and more inclusive nature of SE suggested, increased game competency and motor skill level is also

reported as an outcome of SE participation (Alexander, Taggart, & Thorpe, 1996; Carlson, 1995; Peter Hastie, 1998; Taggart & Brooks, 2000; Siedentop, 2002). Observational assessment of students during a SE season are indicative of an improvement in students game understanding and game play (Hastie & Buchanan, 2000; Pope & Grant, 1996). Studies have also reported teacher's preference for SE as a physical education teaching approach as it provides the potential for a greater focus by the teacher on student learning and the achievement of learning outcomes (Alexander et al., 1996, 1997; Grant et al., 1992).

The grouping of students in teams is highlighted as an important element in the success of SE. Participation in SE as a team and the requirement by individuals to take on a role within the team are put forward as presenting the potential for the promotion of personal and social development outcomes in physical education (Carlson, 1995; Alexander et al., 1997; Black, 2000; Wallhead, O'Sullivan, & 2005). Alexander & Luckman's study of teachers who had implemented SE reported that teachers perception of what is learnt by students "shifted markedly toward personal and social skill development" (Alexander & Luckman, 2001 p255). In a Primary Years context, MacPhail, Kinchin, & Kirk (2003) inform that SE may provide students with opportunities to be reflective about the meaning of sport as the construction of SE is more in keeping with students experience and understanding of sport.

SE sits in contrast to traditional physical education approaches which are located in the transmission model of learning (Maxwell, 2003). In the transmission model students assimilate motor skill acquisition through practice that refines and progressively applies the movement patterns presented by the teacher. SE, however, is located within the constructivist model of learning where learners are directly involved in the construction of skill, knowledge and understanding in contextually meaningful environments (Kafai & Resnick, 1996). This project aimed to examine the implementation of SE as an example of an approach that promotes student achievement of learning outcomes in a context that is meaningful to the students.

The Research Context

Physical education at the school had in years prior to the study been taken by the class teacher. The students involved in this study had therefore not experienced the teaching of physical education by a specialist physical education teacher until the year this project was undertaken. Curriculum innovation in physical education could therefore be reasonably considered as new to both the school and the culture of the students. When questioned about the reason for the implementation of SE program with the students, the teacher commented that it was born from a desire to facilitate two objectives; to develop a curriculum more inclusive of those students normally socially isolated in physical education because of their lack of skill and game proficiency and, to facilitate more active participation from students who had presented as reluctant participants in previous units of work.

The research involved one combined Year 6 and 7 mixed ability coeducational class of 27 students and their teacher in a Primary School R-7 setting. The research was for the duration of a SE season which took place during Term 3 and consisted of one 45 minute lesson per week for ten weeks. Attention was focussed on basketball with 5 mixed ability and mixed gender teams developing towards self responsibility for a half court basketball competition. The modification of basketball play space used in the design of the learning context in this study is consistent with the “small group learning” pedagogical element of SE (Siedentop et al 2004, p25) aimed at maximising active participation. Prior to the SE season students were introduced to the project via a letter to them and their parents outlining and seeking permission for the project. At the commencement of the first lesson further explanation and an opportunity to ask questions was provided to students.

The SE unit was guided by student achievement of outcomes from the ‘Physical Activity and Participation’ and ‘Personal and Social Development’ strands of the Health and Physical Education South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability framework (DECS, 2005). During the planning and the teaching phases of the project there existed open dialogue between the teacher, as the developer and executor of the SE program, and the

researcher as both mentor and collaborator. Cooperation of this nature between a university based educator and researcher and, a school based educator positions curriculum development and research as unified rather than disconnect actions (Clarke & Quill, 2003). Cooperative ventures such as this have the potential to not only inform and benefit the teacher and students at the site, it contains the potential to illuminate the lessons learnt for the benefit of others considering physical education curriculum initiatives by adding to the literature base relevant to SE in physical education.

Methodology

The research methodology constituted a form of qualitative research in the pedagogue tradition (Bishop, 1992). Studies enclosed by the pedagogue tradition are exploratory in nature and concerned with classroom practicalities. It is suggested that qualitative methodology of this type is particularly relevant when researching collaboratively with teachers as teachers find it more relevant than other approaches as they “see themselves in it” (Nickson 2000, p.176). As teachers can readily locate themselves in this type of research it contains the potential for enhanced meaning and relevance to their work.

Consistent with the pedagogue tradition, the structure of this study followed that of a ‘teaching experiment’ (Hastie & Curtner – Smith, 2006). Rovegno (2001 in Hastie & Curtner – Smith, 2006) explains that “when employing this design, researchers develop or work with a teacher to develop a curriculum and study their teaching and the children’s responses to the curriculum” (p4). A teaching experiment therefore involves a sequence of teaching episodes, a method of recording what transpires in each episode and, a retrospective analysis of the data collected. This type of research structure is appropriate as the teaching experiment is more likely to permit an exploratory nature, a focus on classroom practicalities and, a summary of the complex, dynamic and fluid nature of classroom settings (Kelly & Lush, 2000).

This paper concentrates on one sub set of the data recorded: the implementation of SE from the perspective of the teacher. A journal was

chosen for the reflections of each teaching episode. This was supplemented with an interview at the conclusion of the SE season. The data from the teacher's journal and interview were analysed using comparative systematic interpretation to reveal recurring themes. This interpretation permitted discernment, from the teacher's perspective, of the influence of SE on student learning and, the influence of SE upon the teacher as the designer of curriculum for the achievement of specific student learning outcomes.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to reveal insights from a teachers' implementation of SE for the first time in a primary school setting. The insights concerning SE come from the teachers' experience of designing and delivery of a new curriculum to students with no previous experience of Sport Education. This paper introduces the approach and initial findings from the retrospective analysis of the teacher's journal and post SE season interview. The development of a climate of inclusion, student motivation and the facilitation of a broader range of curriculum outcomes emerged as important themes along with data which details the elements which assist and hinder the first time implementation of SE unit. This paper presents the findings from the analysis of data collected from the teacher. Due to restrictions on the length of this paper, the student related data will not be considered in this paper but will be considered in a future manuscript.

SE develops a climate of inclusion and motivation

Enthusiastic SE students "want to continue to participate actively, because they have come to value the experiences and enjoyment derived from participation" (Siedentop et al 2004, p8). The teacher identified heightened attention and motivation levels for most students during the SE season compared to previous physical education units. In particular, the teacher noted that students who in the past would never join in were more engaged through the adoption of specialised roles as part of a team.

'One student that is not highly motivated and generally struggles to fit in socially is the first to design the team logo, which was a high quality. Furthermore, the student also designed a team song. This effort impressed the team mates who I am sure would have previously not wanted this student in their team'.

The team identification feature of SE has been connected with students' heightened engagement in physical education through an enhanced sense of purpose (Clarke & Quill, 2003). During this study it was noted that generally, students appeared more inclined to help each other. This was described by the teacher as a climate where *'helping others helped the team achieve'*. It was considered to be particularly influential in the improved, more positive peer relations observed. The teacher perceived *'a stronger sense of belonging, particularly for those less skilled and less confident'* during the SE unit. Team affiliation has been postulated as a SE feature promoting a sense of belonging and security (Alexander & Luckman, 2001). The teacher recorded the observation that the students normally socially isolated in physical education were more included and their contributions valued during the SE unit as a consequence of the team affiliation and role responsibility required within the team. SE potential for the promotion of an inclusive climate for those students normally observed as socially isolated during other forms of student grouping in physical education was valued by the teacher.

While the teacher noted an enhanced climate of inclusion and motivation for the majority of students, the reflection also indicated that a small group of students did not take to the SE experience as expected. These students appeared *'quite anxious to play games'* and only reluctantly participated in the team planning and role responsibilities allocated to them. The teacher analysis of this reflection attributed the reluctance to the cultural change of SE from that previously experienced. Somewhat surprisingly, the interview revealed that this reluctance to embrace SE was from the most 'athletic' students in the class. These students were depicted as the normally dominant figures in the class because of their athleticism. In explanation of the observed disconnection for this small group of athletic students, it was considered that

SE was not as distinctive or affirming for them because of the emphasis on teaching for outcomes additional to skilled performance in games. Teaching for expanded learning outcomes moderated the opportunities for game play. It required students to learn how to take on roles in addition to that of player, and these roles did not always provide the opportunity to be 'the best' in physical education if new skills had to be learnt and applied. *'These students didn't want to help others, probably because they were use to being the dominant figures in class and now they no longer were because other aspects of participation were equally important'*.

This observation is at odds with findings of previous studies suggesting highly skilled students are well catered for and enjoy the SE experience (Alexander & Luckman, 2001). It hints that the cultural shift to teaching for outcomes in addition to motor skill performance in drills and games may not sit well with students normally dominant because their skill and athleticism is paramount in traditional physical education activity settings. It was speculated that by Term 3, when this SE unit took place, students had become use to a structure and culture of physical education and, their 'place' within the experience. In essence, the teacher had established a way of doing things with the class which privileged a group of students, and SE disrupted this privilege. Upon reflection, the teacher discerned that *'next year when I do SEPEP I will do it at the start of the year so that I can create a more inclusive environment from the start, highlight personal and social skill development from the beginning and establish this is the way we do PE this year'*. Research investigating the effect that the timing of a SE unit within a physical education program has on class culture, students peer status and privilege, lesson engagement and achievement of learning outcomes is recommended.

An interesting reflection during the post SE season interview was the discernment that frequency and severity of behaviour management incidents were lower than during previous physical education units. It was thought that this may correlate to the generally heightened student motivation for physical education that the teacher perceived during the SE season. This is another potential area for SE investigation.

SE facilitates a broader range of curriculum outcomes

It was identified that there was an enhanced capacity to plan for student achievement and teacher collection of evidence of a broader range of physical education learning outcomes, particularly outcomes from the 'Personal and Social Development' strand of the relevant curriculum framework. It was noted by the teacher that the explicit pursuit of a broader range of curriculum outcomes presented the less physically competent students with an opportunity for a higher grade than when skill competency alone was used as the learning outcome. However, the unit grade of the most athletic students, normally the recipient of high grades in physical education but who in this instance were resistant to the team roles and requirements of SE outside of the player performance role, was lower at the conclusion of the SE unit. This result was linked by the teacher to the reluctance of the students to fulfil the requirements of their team roles and to contribute to the team in a manner that benefited all students learning. The observed reluctance of the athletically capable students towards the SE experience is in discordance with Hastie's (2003) postulate that, during SE skilful players embrace all team members, as to do so provides better opportunities for success. The failure of a group of 'athletically' capable students to embrace the expanded expectations of SE resulted in them achieving a lower grade than usual for the SE unit because they did not score as well relative to the Personal and Social Development outcomes.

The teacher's assessment of students indicated that the SE approach developed students understanding of game tactics and strategies more than other approaches previously employed. Interestingly, it was commented that *'strategic and tactical understanding was higher than when the game sense approach had been used in an earlier unit of physical education'*. It was considered that the emphasis on team meetings and team planning was the foundation for the enhanced development of student tactical understanding. Students with prior knowledge were judged to have had a positive medium for the sharing of this information with their team mates. In addition, students' requirement to fill the role of player and umpire when they were the duty team

was also considered influential. *'Having to umpire forced students to look at the game in a different way, helping their understanding as players'*.

Assuming the role of umpire was also identified as an interesting aspect of personal and social skill development. The teacher reported feeling that students were less likely to question decisions during games throughout the SE season. *'I noticed a lot less questioning of umpires' decision making compared with in the past when only the confident students had been placed in umpire roles. If a student did question a decision during the SE competition, their team mates would tell them to get on with the game. This is not something I had noticed in PE before, and I guess it comes from the students being better able to empathise with the umpire because they had experienced the role'*.

An unanticipated result of the SE experience was the teacher's observation of improved student independence in the co curricular sport setting. *'When we did athletics training at lunch and after school, the Year 6 and 7 students were taking responsibility for beginning stretching and warming up prior to my arrival. This hadn't happened before we did SE. They were getting equipment out, setting up and allocating each other roles like measurer and recorder without being asked by me, which is not behaviour I had noticed prior to the SE experience. Students were taking what they were learning in class into the co curricular setting'*. While transfer of learning from the physical education setting to sport settings is one of the 'ambitious' goals of SE (Siedentop et al, 2004) there is little in the literature related to this aspect of student learning in SE. Another interesting product of the Year 6/7 SE unit was the schools decision to trial SE with a selected group of Year 4 and 5 boys identified as requiring a medium for the explicit development and maturation of their personal and social skills. This suggests that in addition to there being teacher and student learning arising from this project, there existed the development of an awareness by school administration of the educative potential of SE as a deliberate instructional strategy for the teaching of personal and social skills. SE's potential for teaching designed for the development of social responsibility has been studied (Hastie & Buchanan, 2000), but there is limited

literature in this area. Research investigating SE's possibility for teaching personal and social responsibility skills which transfer and which lead to enhanced student behaviour in other social settings is recommend.

Conclusion

The results from this study suggest that from the teacher's perspective, Sport Education is potentially more motivating and inclusive of the students normally less inclined toward participation. The team affiliation feature of the SE approach was perceived as the key design element for enhanced motivation. Further, this study indicates that SE may provide the capacity for the teaching and collection of evidence of student achievement of a broader range of outcomes. Interestingly, it was observed that students were taking aspects of personal and social development learning from the physical education SE unit and applying it in the co curricular context. Future papers will further analyse the data and related findings from this investigation.

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