

**THE FIJI SECONDARY SCHOOL SPORT AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION STATUS QUO AND  
ITS IMPORTANCE TO TERTIARY CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT**

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*This study examined status quo of physical education and sport in secondary schools in Fiji and the level of confidence in the delivery of the Ministry of Education prescription, as well as issues that affect tertiary curriculum development in this area. Physical educators in 21 secondary schools filled in a questionnaire and three of the respondents were interviewed. The researchers visited schools and made field notes. Responses and field notes were coded for curriculum delivery, external connectivity and influence on curriculum development. Data analysis showed that all sampled secondary schools profess to have physical education, intramural, and inter-school sports; physical education teachers yearn for connectivity, particularly external connectivity; and they strongly support the development of the degree major in the University of the South Pacific.*

**Background**

Since Methodist missionaries, as part of evangelising, started formal education in Fiji in 1835 (Tavola 1991: 8), Fiji education has developed to a well-developed network of secondary schools, despite socio-economic, locality, systems inequality, and political turbulence. In 1970 the number of secondary students was only 13% of the number of primary children, but by 1999 it had risen to 47%. This shows increasing access to secondary education. In 2000 there were 142,621 primary and 68,129 secondary students (Tavola 2000). By developing nations' standards, Fiji has a high percentage of trained teachers. For example, in 1986, 95.3% of secondary teachers and 99% of primary teachers were trained teachers (Tavola 1991: 138).

Bacchus (2000) states that a logical step for Fiji is to improve the quality of education offered in educational institutions throughout the country. Physical education (PE) and school sport must be part of this goal. Bacchus (2000: 54) stressed that teachers need to recognise the importance of subjects such as physical education, which are often marginalised as they are not examined. In some Fiji schools, when exams are near, physical education classes are cancelled for study time. In others, they are not taught at all, despite the fact that all schools are allocated between 40 and 80 minutes per week for physical education.

## **Training PE teachers**

Secondary schools have PEMAC (Physical education, music, art and craft) teachers. In 1999, the Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE) started a one-year course on Physical Education/Music or Physical Education/Art for certified teachers. Nineteen students graduated in the first year. (Williams and Taylor 2000:337). FCAE now has a two-year Diploma in PEMAC for secondary teachers. The Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) has a two year diploma and a one year Certificate in Sport and Physical Education (Mitchell, Miller and Elder 2005).

The University of the South Pacific (USP) began a Bachelor of Science in Sports Science program in 2008. This program was coordinated by someone without sports science qualifications and is an example of a decision made at the top and imposed on those at the bottom, hoping it will work. For such a degree major, 'informed knowledge' of the status quo of school sports education in USP member countries is absolutely vital. We need to know our served environment in order to serve it well. Developing a curriculum without locating the needs of the population it serves and not having heard the voice of teachers who will implement it could result in an inappropriate curriculum for the learners. Ellis (1999: 23-24), who researched in the West Indies, stressed that curriculum development "without the information obtained through research could lead to deficiencies in the system that could be detrimental to learners, as well as to the nation". Developing a university curriculum without initial research runs a high risk of putting bandage on the right arm when the left is the injured limb.

## **The study**

This study was designed to hear 'teachers' voices' on the Fiji physical education prescription and its implementation, and to use the findings to influence sport and physical education curriculum review at USP.

## **Data collection**

Twenty-two PE teachers from 21 secondary schools filled in a questionnaire, which had first been given to two lecturers in the School of Education, USP, for their comments. The questionnaire asked about the length of time the teachers had taught PE; their qualifications; professional development; PE teaching in their schools, its strengths and obstacles; their own PE program; their level of confidence in teaching the different sections of the PE prescription; the intra-school and inter-school competitions their school took part in; and the contribution of parents to sport and PE in their schools.

Eleven of the PE teachers were from Suva, the capital city of the Fiji Islands on the island of Viti Levu, and 11 were from Labasa, the main town on the island of Vanua Levu. Interviews were conducted with three PE teachers during the visits and field notes were kept, not only of the sampled schools of Suva and Labasa, but also of six secondary schools in Lautoka, a major town in western Viti Levu, as well. These field notes, which cover people, places, events, activities, conversations, observations and reflections, supplemented information from the questionnaires, interviews, and official documents.

Official permission and access was received from all the principals of the participating secondary schools. Consent was obtained from the PE teachers in these schools, prior to giving them the questionnaire and conducting the interviews. The University of the South Pacific (USP) provided funding for the project.

### **Data processing**

Miles and Huberman's (1987) *Qualitative Data Analysis* was used to process data. This involved:

- (a) *data reduction*—the focusing, sorting, discarding, and organising of 'raw' data to enable one to draw conclusions. Emanating from research questions, priori codes were used. Written and transcribed data were read thoroughly and then coded against related meaningful segments. Coded text chunks were then cut manually and put together in files where further sorting, organisation, and interpretations occurred.
- (b) *data display*—which is 'an organised assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action taking' (ibid: 21).
- (c) *Conclusion drawing/verification*—this was done throughout the process by 'clustering' issues, settings and actors in order to understand the phenomenon studied.

### **Results and discussion**

#### *Curriculum delivery*

Data from the interviews, the questionnaire and field notes indicated that, despite the time-tabled allocation of one or two PE periods per week, actual delivery varied from no PE to full allocation. There must, therefore, be barriers militating against the implementation of PE in schools. Data from the study showed lack of equipment, lack of facilities, improper attire, poor attitude towards PE by the school and as a

result less support, and big class size, as the top five barriers. Furthermore, the study found that in Term 3 PE and sport are normally cancelled because that is when high stakes national exams are sat. One teacher said:

... for the third term physical education and sport were not allowed at all. Students were not even given the opportunity for free play in the afternoons, because they need to study for nationwide exams (FL11).

Hardman (2004) stressed that school PE worldwide appears to be under threat, due to decreasing time allocation, inadequate financing, a lowering subject status, and being ever more undervalued and marginalised by authorities. Physical Education is often seen as less important than academic subjects, and particularly if it is not examinable. When PE is not an examination subject it carries a stigma of inferiority, as it does not match the perceived academic significance of other examination subjects (Wright, McNeil and Schempp 2005). Bradshaw (2006) argued that the profession should vigorously lobby to establish PE as a core subject to gain positive field recognition and public perception. In Fiji, a realistic pathway can be made for high school students to have PE as a formally assessed subject and this will contribute to elevating its ranking in the school curricula and serve a decisive role in benefiting Fiji children.

The many benefits of PE and sports are well-known, but the risks of being inactive may not be so well known. Inactivity plays a role in life-style diseases, and some of the statistics in Fiji and the Pacific Islands on such diseases are staggering. In Fiji, 80% of deaths are attributable to lifestyle diseases, 70% of which are due to heart disease, the number one killer (Naivalu 2004). Rates of diabetes in many Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) are nine to ten times higher than in western countries. Stroke and hypertensive disease are among the five leading causes of death in nine out of fourteen PICTs (Coyne 2000).

In answer to the questions relating to their confidence teaching the various sections of the PE secondary prescription, PE teachers were found to be most confident teaching volleyball, athletics, body systems, fitness education, sport injuries and drugs in sport, and least confident teaching cricket, outdoor, education, sports sociology, basketball and hockey. The confidence rate for three popular Fiji sports (soccer, netball and rugby) varied according to the ethnicity and gender of the teacher. Indo-Fijian and female teachers' confidence rating for teaching rugby was low. Similarly, Fijian and female teachers' confidence rating in teaching soccer was low, and netball had a low

male confidence rating. Thus, even though rugby, soccer, and netball are very popular Fiji sports, and played in secondary school intramural and inter-school meets, the confidence rating in teaching them was, overall, average. It is very unrealistic to expect PE teachers to be very confident in teaching everything in the curriculum, but it is important to see the strengths and weaknesses of teachers, because that also signifies the strengths and weaknesses in curriculum delivery. This is so because it is the teachers who deliver curriculum contents to students, the eventual destination of all curriculum materials.

An issue emerging from the study is that 'minor' sports should be encouraged as much as the 'major' ones (rugby, soccer, netball and volleyball). Treanor and Housner (1999) stated that there is nothing inherently wrong with team sports, but when they are the only alternative and offered in the same way year after year, with little progression or relationship between courses, the curriculum becomes stale and students lose interest. The Fiji PE prescription does not include 'minor' sports such as badminton, tennis, or table tennis. These should be deliberately encouraged, as well as lifestyle physical activities such as walking, cycling and canoeing. Otherwise, however, the coverage of the PE prescription is good. It has a health and physical activity component, sport education, sport science, outdoor education, and sport humanities orientation. It is the responsibility of USP PETE to respond to these curriculum models.

Every sampled secondary school has the Fiji Secondary PE prescription. PE teachers are using it with a combination of their own programs. This is good; the prescription should only be a guide and PE teachers have to adapt it to their various situations. Their PE program needs to be well planned because when PE teachers do not plan and prepare a thoughtful, sequential, and developmentally appropriate program that reflects the needs of students, they simply reinforce the fallacy that PE is less important than other curriculum areas (Stirling and Belk 2002). Through thoughtful planning about what works in the various Fiji contexts, PE teachers can help elevate the status of PE.

All but one of the sampled secondary schools have intramural sport but only three schools have it weekly; most have it once a term. Rugby, soccer, netball, and volleyball are popular both in Suva and Labasa, but basketball and athletics are common intramural sports only in Suva. Suva also has more sport options for intramural sport which includes badminton, softball, hockey, and swimming. An intramural program should be aimed at encouraging all students to participate in active lifestyle (Ross 1997).

All but one of the schools participate in inter-school competitions, mostly once a term. In Labasa, rugby, soccer and athletics are popularly whereas in Suva there is also hockey, volleyball, badminton, and basketball. Schools usually arrange their own competition, attend organised carnivals, or compete in sport-federation-run competitions. There is certainly a place for inter-school competition, but it is only the gifted who participate. This is not necessarily wrong, but it eliminates the general student population. Therefore, schools should not hesitate to organise inter-school sport with the general school population, in addition to the elite competitions. .

### *External Connectivity Issues*

External connectivity is vital to the survival of physical education and school sport. Most of the sampled secondary schools see parental support as very positive. Parents allow their children to participate, pay sport fees, come to watch and encourage, and help fundraise for sport equipment and facilities. Only a few schools said parental support was low. One PE teacher noted that:

Parents have been very supportive in both areas [sport and PE]. We are constantly keeping in touch with parents. Parents are always there to assist whenever needed (QNS6).

Public opinion can make or break a program, so high-quality public relations are pertinent in maintaining public support. Schools need to establish a reputation for excellence, maintain a professional public image, keep parents informed and connected, collaborate with other disciplines, and engage the community (Baker 2001). The PE curriculum should not narrowly assume that the school is the only site of meaningful learning (MacDonald 2004).

Most schools also have good relationship with their local governments and communities and with several national sporting federations. However, it was evident that many national sporting federations are more active in Suva than in other urban areas such as Labasa. Fraser-Thomas (2002) stresses that, for smooth implementation of any PE curriculum to occur, teachers need support from within the school, the school board and provincial governments.

The surveyed schools requested on-going in-service, short courses on physical education and sport from the Fiji Ministry of Education and sporting federations. MacPhail and Halbert (2005) stressed that PETE institutions were the most obvious

institutions to provide leadership in the continuing professional development of PE teachers. The USP should be doing more to create that connectivity to PE practitioners. Wider collaboration, connectivity and integration is important to meet the needs of postmodern learners, whether they are in schools or our PETE institutions (MacDonald, Hunter, Carlson, and Penney 2002).

### *Influence on tertiary curriculum development*

There was strong support from participating Fiji PE teachers for a degree major in sport and physical education at USP. Currently, there is promotional stagnation for them because they do not have a degree. Most of them graduated with a diploma in physical education from the Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE) and the Fiji Institute of Education (FIT). As a result, PE teachers are not eligible to be a deputy or a school principal, so many PE teachers did degrees in other subjects to be able to make it into higher administrative positions and other forms of promotion. This is what an older PE teacher had to say. He had been ....

...in the system for thirty years but can not make any progress with promotions because there is no outlets to do a degree in physical education (FL8).

On 5 November 2004, the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, formally launched 2005 as the International Year of Sport and Physical Education. Four major aims were the: (i) democratisation and strengthening of the practice of physical education and sport for all in all member states and by all sections of the population; (ii) promotion of physical education and an integral part of lifelong learning; (iii) generalisation of physical education and sport as a major tool not only for health and physical development but also for acquiring values necessary for social cohesion and intercultural dialogue; and (iv) launching of an awareness-raising and information campaign focused on an issue arousing popular support (Allman 2004; Kluka 2004). The creation of a degree major in physical education at the USP is a timely complement to the United Nation's call for more recognition. For sport-loving islands, a degree in physical education is, as a number of the participants said, long overdue.

The PE teachers who participated in the study were very happy to discuss USP's role in teacher education. Their views should be heard by the course developers at USP because it is these teachers who will form the base of consumers. According to Yoo and Kim (2005), many PETE programs are organised around the desires of faculty members rather than the needs of teachers who implement school curricula. The

process of making the PETE program relevant and appropriate has to be ongoing. It must not be a one-off exercise but a continual shifting of current boundaries to better meet school curriculum needs. PETE institutions should willingly create new configurations and applications with shifting demands (MacDonald, Hunter, Carlson and Penney 2002). Any PETE curriculum should be a living entity; continually serviced, refurbished periodically, and relevant to schools (Siedentop and Locke 1997).

These are a few issues raised by the teachers that need to be reflected upon by the planners of the degree program in USP. USP's PETE needs to:

- be responsive to the current non-compulsory nature of PE in Fiji schools and can help lobby to build its status in the country
- be responsive to the alarming issues of lifestyle disease and physical inactivity
- be aware of PE practitioners' barriers to curriculum delivery and structure effective means to deal with them
- connect with schools that have strong and working PE programs as 'models'
- include curriculum models and contents of the school prescription
- include what schools do in inter- and inter school competitions and how to continually improve them
- recognise that intending PE teachers should be given the freedom to choose another subject to combine PE with (not just music, art and craft as is currently the case)
- attend to issues affecting schools far away from major cities
- be delivered in a collaborative and connective environment.

Future research should embark on in-depth investigation into the PE and sport situations in other member countries of the University of the South Pacific: Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

## **Conclusion**

Physical education is a statutory requirement in Fiji secondary schools but its implementation varies. There are examples of schools actively teaching PE and

organising intra- and inter-school sports, but there is also neglect of PE in a number of schools. PE is an integral part of our students' education, and it should command the attention of parents, administrators, students, school board members, the Fiji Ministry of Education, sporting federations and tertiary institutions. Creating effective PE programmes requires connectivity and collaboration. Many groups drive curriculum decisions and PETE institutions are key stakeholders. USP, as a regional University, should target precisely and ground itself on research-influenced PE curriculum development to better meet the needs of the Pacific Islands. This will send a strong message that PE and school sport are central and not peripheral.

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