

Survey research of Queensland schools' reasons for using or not using externally provided health and physical education instruction and the forms of instruction they use.

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Background

The use of providers belonging to entities external to schools (hereafter referred to as external providers) to deliver health and physical education (HPE) in Australian schools has been noted in a number of government reviews at the state and national level over the past two decades (e.g., Senate Standing Committee on the Environment, Recreation and the Arts, 1992; Directorate of Education, 1993; Education Department of Western Australia, 1994). In the reports that emerged from these reviews, it is a practice that has been discussed in some instances as a worrying sign of the poor state of HPE in Australia, and in others as something that should be fostered and encouraged (albeit in a qualified and cautious manner). Despite the attention drawn to the use of externally provided HPE at the political level via these reports, and by articles in professional journals (see for example, Tinning, 1992; Macdonald, Hay & Williams, 2009), it remains a phenomenon upon which very little systematic research has been conducted. As a result, academic, political and professional discussions about the practice have had to rely largely on anecdotal evidence or personal experiences. To the best of our knowledge, only two attempts have been made to systematically collect any data on the use of externally provided HPE. These were undertaken in the doctoral theses of Webster (2000) and Ardzejewska (2009), both of whom collected data on their use in New South Wales primary schools. Thus, it would appear that no research has been conducted on external providers in Queensland schools or in Australian secondary schools.

Research Questions

In light of this void, we undertook research with a sample of Queensland primary, secondary and combined primary-secondary schools. In this presentation we present and discuss data related to three research questions: (1) What externally provided services are Queensland schools using in relation to the planning, delivery and/or assessment of HPE learning experiences? (2) For what reasons are Queensland schools using externally provided HPE services? (3) For what reasons are Queensland schools not using externally provided HPE services?

Methods

The data pertaining to these three questions were collected via a multi-mode (Internet and mail) questionnaire consisting of a mixture of 21 closed and open response items. The questionnaire was sent to a sample of 843 Queensland schools for completion by the person deemed by the schools' principals to be best informed to respond to the questionnaire's focus.

Frame

In this presentation we predominately report on evidence gleaned from three open response items. These data were analysed by manually sorting, organising and coding the responses according to commonalities and differences between them.

Research findings

The most commonly reported services being used by respondents related to camping and other outdoor education activities, gymnastics, dance, swimming and beach activities. Analysis of the responses provided to items about schools' reasons for using or not using externally provided

services, appears to demonstrate, almost unanimously, that schools' decisions are heavily influenced by school-level evaluations of their access to necessary resources, most notably, specialist skills and knowledge, equipment and facilities. This is an interesting finding for at least two reasons: (1) Queensland schools are not formally obligated to provide their students with any specific physical activities (e.g. there are no compulsory physical activities specified in the P-Y9 HPE Syllabus); (2) Following this, there would appear to be a discrepancy between the resources Queensland schools have for providing HPE programs and the resources that our respondents had for the kinds of HPE learning experiences that they wanted or believed they needed to provide to their students. In all, this points, inter alia, to the need for further research into the deliberations undertaken in schools about the use or non-use of external providers generally, and more specifically, the decision-making processes undertaken to choose between different external providers offering similar services by those for whom the use of external providers is considered agreeable.