

TEACHING PE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Margaret Gordon writes on the importance of quality PE programs in primary schools and offers practical suggestions for classroom teachers...

“Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) develops the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes important for students to take positive action to protect and enhance their own and others’ health, safety and wellbeing in varied and changing contexts. Physical education is fundamental to the acquisition of movement skills and concepts to enable students to participate in a range of physical activities – confidently, competently and creatively.” PDHPE K-10 NSW Syllabus Rationale 2018

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

If we learned nothing else from the COVID years of lockdown/pandemic let it be the importance of health, safety and wellbeing, for ourselves and for the students we teach.

Ask yourself- *“How effectively can we teach children who are unhealthy, unsafe or unwell?”*

We simply cannot! Arguably, this makes PDHPE the most important subject of all! If the aim is that “PDHPE K-6 equips students with knowledge, understanding and skills to support their health, safety and wellbeing.” (Draft new syllabus. NESA, 2023) then the importance of quality teaching and learning in this Key Learning Area (KLA) cannot be underestimated.

Primary school teachers tend to cover Personal Development and Health (PDH) concepts well. The Department of Education requires that Drug Education, Road Safety and Child Protection concepts are taught in every stage of learning across Years K-10 and ample support materials are made available online. Extensive instruction regarding respectful relationships and anti-bullying is provided through the plethora of positive friendship and social skills programs employed in public schools across NSW. These have even been commercialised, with great financial reward for savvy businesspeople worldwide. Furthermore, individual teachers address social conflicts daily making it feel like we are constantly going back over positive friendship behaviours, respectful relationships

etc.

But what about PE? Far too often, Physical Education (PE) is relegated to an afternoon treat or reward. Classes play another game of Bin-Ball or Capture the Flag because the students love them, and the games just run themselves.

This is not because teachers don’t understand the importance of PE, and it certainly is not because they don’t care. Instead, PE simply is often not prioritised because we are all so overworked, trying to meet the minimum requirements for each KLA. Ask yourself; what’s the first thing to be scratched from your day plan when school-life gets busy, or your maths lesson didn’t quite go to plan? How often do you resort to the same game outside because the kids have been begging you?

We must mandate and prioritise quality PE and provide our students with a wide variety of physical activity experiences. Students thrive when challenged by the physical activities in which they participate. Unless it truly is meeting the students at their point of need, Bin-Ball is not a PE lesson in and of itself. By all means, go outside and play a game for fun. But it is not a PE lesson. Quality and authentic PE lessons need to be planned just as carefully and strategically as any other KLA. The development of both fine- and gross- motor skills should be a priority. So should be the all-important skills of resilience, cooperation and sportsmanship, which are inherent within a quality PE lesson.

PDHPE deserves same time and attention as the other 5 KLAs. Use strategies such as the teaching/learning cycle and backwards mapping. Consider the outcomes towards which you are moving your students.

Ask yourself- what do these students need to learn? How can I plan a program to help them learn it? How will I know when they have learned it successfully? Differentiate, by considering the four key classroom elements; content/process/product/learning environment. These apply to PE just as much as they do in any other subjects! Not every student will be the next superstar, but they still

should be given ample opportunity to enjoy being active.

WHAT DOES A QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

The program will be unique to your educational setting, but here is my advice:

-Plan for PE just as carefully and strategically as you would for any other KLA. Meet students at their point of need.

Incorporate the Game Sense pedagogy; have most kids moving, most of the time.

“In the Game Sense approach, individuals learn within the context of the game and teachers employ questioning instead of direct instruction.” (Georgakis, Wilson & Evans, 2015, p. 73) I highly recommend this article as a starting point if Game Sense pedagogy is new to you. The School Sport Unit offers some valuable professional learning online via MyPL.

Search MyPL for the following short courses;

- School Sport Unit: Thinking while Moving.
- School Sport Unit: Game-based learning in sport and physical activity
- School Sport Unit: Delivering engaging sport and physical activity programs in K-2

-Warm up with a quick start, run around game which gets everyone moving. Two of my favourites are ‘Infinity Tag’ or ‘Who’s Got Game’¹.

-Cool down with questions, but, whilst doing so, incorporate movement. Walk and talk with students as you guide them to consider:

- What worked during our main event today?
- What was the key concept of the game?
- How could we challenge ourselves more if we played this again?
- How did we solve this movement challenge collaboratively?

-Avoid teaching formal sports in PE as this instantly will put off some students. Those who already play that sport will dominate; those who don’t will not even try.

Rather than teaching Touch Football or Netball select the key skills and concepts of these sports and simplify them. These are both invasion games which focus on moving the ball from one side of the play space to the other, without losing possession to the opposing team. Repeat the same simple games but vary the experience by changing:

- the ball you use,
- the size of the goal zone,
- the number of passes required between teammates,
- or the allocated time for play.

Simple tweaks can make the world of difference.

Introduce sport-specific rules, such as no-contact for netball or backwards passing in touch football, as the students’ skills progress.

-As much as possible, avoid teaching skills through drills. “*Game-ify*” the learning! Keep all students occupied rather than waiting in line for their turn.

For example, when teaching dribbling in soccer or basketball, pair students up then give each pair a ball. One player is the dribbler, the other is the chaser. If the chaser can steal the ball, they swap roles.

-Emphasise personal challenges- kids love to achieve a high score, though this doesn’t mean they need to compete against anyone but themselves:

How many safe passes can you make before a dropped ball?

- How many safe passes can you make in one minute / two minutes / before your classmate runs all the way around the court?
- Can you beat your previous high score?
- Increase / decrease the play zone or game space.

-GET THEM THINKING:

- Ask questions to prompt students’ own critical thinking throughout the lesson.
- Allow time and space for the learners to solve problems on their own = cooperation, collaboration, relationship building
- Ask the students- how could we make this harder/easier for you?
- How would you teach this skill to younger students?
- When or where might this skill be useful?

COMMON EXCUSES NOT TO TEACH PE

The kids’ behaviour is out of control. We can’t trust them to play games and sports.

As is the case for all teaching and learning, if you hold high expectations in PE the students will rise to them. Just as you would for any other lesson, give explicit instructions, provide clear boundaries and always have a back-up plan. Follow your usual behaviour management procedures just as you would in the classroom and consider carefully how you will group students throughout

the lesson.

Two Key Tips for PE

- Make sure you have a good quality whistle and establish clear, consistent whistle signals for outdoor PE lessons: one whistle means freeze; two whistles means stop & drop, three whistles means game over etc.

- Incorporate movement and games into the allocation of groups or teams and by all means, PLEASE avoid the practice of selecting two team captains who then take it in turns to select individual players, which can be seen as a humiliating experience for some students.

For example, play 'Would you rather?' where students move to one side to indicate their preferences such as chocolate vs. ice-cream, Summer vs. Winter, Socceros vs. Wallabies etc. These groups then become teams for the next game.

OR Play tips where students hold hands to form a human caterpillar when tipped. These groups can then be used as teams for the next game. Remember, sport isn't always fair, so groups don't necessarily have to be 'equal' – use this as another element of challenge!

We don't have time

It is essential to make time. PE is mandatory! The NSW Department of Education [Sport and Physical Activity Policy](#) states that "NSW Public Schools are required to provide a minimum of 150 minutes of planned physical activity for students in K-10 each week" (NSW Department of Education, 2018)

This, however, doesn't have to all happen in one hit. Make it work best for you and the learners in your specific context. Short bursts of daily fitness activities can be a positive way to start the day. Some schools use RFF teachers to deliver quality, consistent PE lessons across the school. Others incorporate deliberate movement opportunities in mathematics lessons, which is just one way to embed PE concepts in a meaningful, relevant context. As the old saying goes, "work smarter, not harder," by combining KLAS.

We don't have space

Not all PE lessons need to happen outdoors on a football field or basketball court. You will not always have access to the school hall.

Think creatively and flexibly:

- How can you use your classroom space to get kids moving? Get the kids involved in finding a workable solution to this genuine 'movement challenge.'

- Come up with safe, simple routines to either move or incorporate classroom furniture into your PE lessons.
- Speak with your colleagues about how you can work together to share space for the benefit of all students. Could you swap classrooms for a session each week?
- Combining classes or even stage groups for a giant game provides ample opportunity for practising respectful relationships/getting on with others.
- Don't be afraid to combine Infants with Primary classes.; This can be a great opportunity for peer-support or buddy activities! The older kids will LOVE teaching and helping the younger ones to develop key movement skills.

It's too cold, too windy, too wet, too hot.

Honestly, fair call! No-one loves standing in the freezing wind or sleeting rain, and running around during the peak of Summer can be downright dangerous in the Australian climate.

My favourite back up plan, for when the weather won't play nice, is to combine and conquer...PDHPE combines beautifully with Creative Arts. Lots of drama games incorporate sophisticated physical movements.

See the wonderful JPL article, [Teaching Drama in Primary School](#) for some ideas.

Dance is both a creative art and a physical activity. Once again, don't be afraid to ask the students to help solve movement challenges. As I'm sure you can appreciate, they will come up with remarkably creative, flexible ideas about how to be physically active within the confines of a classroom!

FINAL THOUGHTS

PE deserves your professional attention, for the benefit of the students you teach and for their health, safety and wellbeing now and into the future. Mandate it; make it as fun for as many students as you can; keep them moving and keep them thinking. You never know, you might even have some fun too!

Helpful Resources

- **The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation.**

This is the national professional association representing people who work in the areas of health education, physical education, recreation, sport, dance, community fitness or movement sciences. <https://www.achpernsw>.

[com.au/](#) accessed 21/07/2023

- **Sport Australia Playing for Life game cards.**

These are a broad selection of ready to print, ready to use PE activities. There are examples of everything, from invasion games to ball-striking.

https://www.sportaus.gov.au/p4l/how_to_use_the_cards accessed 18/07/2023

- **Sport Australia Yulunga Games game cards**

These are a collection of Indigenous games, sports and activities from around Australia.

<https://www.sportaus.gov.au/yulunga> accessed 18/07/2023

END NOTE

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- **Infinity Tag**

Everyone is in.

Anyone can tag anyone.

When a player is tagged, they must stand still with their hands on their head, to indicate to other players that they have been tagged. They are back in the game as soon as the player who tagged them gets tagged.

If two players tag each other at the same time, they play a quick game of Scissors Paper Rock; winner keeps playing, loser stands still as though they have been tagged.

Play continues infinitely, or until the teacher calls time.

(I am yet to meet a class where we reach the point of one player left but, theoretically, it could be done!)

- **Who's Got Game**

Similar to the classic playground games of 'Bullrush' or 'Red Rover'.

Players stand at one side of the play zone. The aim is to cross to the other side without being tipped.

One person or a small group stand in the middle of the zone. These are the tippers.

Tippers call out 'Who's Got Game?'

Players call out 'We've Got Game!'

Tippers give a free pass; 'You've got game if...you're wearing white socks/have a brother/ate a banana with your breakfast'

Players cross safely to the other side if the free pass is true for them.

Other players wait for the tippers to call an action (run, skip, jump) then GO! Players and tippers have to move as per the action. If a player is tipped they swap teams and join the tippers.

Play continues until one player remains. They are then 'in' for the start of the next game.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret works as an Assistant Principal on the mid-north coast of NSW. She began teaching in 2015, leaving her hometown of Sydney to work in regional NSW.

Margaret has taught mainstream classes across all year groups, K-6. She worked for three years as a specialist PE teacher to cover RFF for all stages and loved every minute of it.

Despite making a return to classroom teaching in 2023, Margaret's passion for quality physical education and wellbeing drives her classroom practice. She maintains active involvement in the local PSSA and seeks professional learning opportunities through the DoE's School Support Unit. Margaret is also a member of the NSWTF's Sport Special Interest Group (SIG).

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