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Who's teaching PE/Sport in NSW primary schools? The 'specialist teacher': a case study

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Abstract

The delivery of primary education has undergone considerable change. Since the introduction of school based management a practice that anecdotally appears to be gaining ground is the employment of 'specialist teachers' to teach individual Strands or Key Learning Areas. This paper defines a specialist teacher as a person who is employed to teach in a specific Key Learning Area or a Strand or activity of a Key Learning Area. The term specialist does not include 'career specialists' (eg. librarians, special education teachers) employed by DET. How this specialisation has come about is difficult to locate. We know very little about these teachers: how they contribute to teaching, learning, assessment and reporting; and how their performance is managed. This paper describes some of the preliminary results of a study that is the first to explore some of the current practices of specialists in general, and specifically PE/Sport teachers in NSW primary schools. It reports the results of a questionnaire distributed to all principals in public primary schools. There were 401 responses (response rate of 25%). It offers some first thoughts on why PE/Sport is being given to 'specialists'.

Introduction

Two traditional features of primary schools invariably continue today: a commitment to basic skills (literacy and numeracy) and the one general classroom teacher. What appears to be different today however is that society has higher expectations of teacher subject knowledge (Alexander, Rose & Woodhead, 1992; Bassett, Jacka & Logan, 1982; Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994; Hall, 2000; NSW Institute of Teachers, 2006; Thornton, 1998). This expectation is compounded by a concern that the curriculum is frequently overcrowded (Eltis, 2003). These changes in primary education are seemingly so significant that Hall claims 'no one teacher can reasonably be expected to know all that is required' (2000, section 1). In responding to the above claims it seems pertinent to explore whether such changes require new ways of delivering the primary curriculum. One path of inquiry is the possible alternatives to the generalist class teacher, that is, a subject specialist (Alexander, Rose & Woodhead, 1992; Thornton, 1998; Hall, 2000; Office For Standards in Education [OFSTED], 1997).

Despite such a possibility there has yet to be a comprehensive debate regarding the role of subject specialists in primary schools. Instead, it appears that the notion of specialised teacher knowledge has drifted into public primary schooling, with schools employing 'specialists' to teach a variety of subjects including physical education, dance, music and science. However there has been little organised or empirical investigation of the wider anecdotal evidence that the specialist primary school teacher does indeed operate in NSW. Indeed, NSW DET currently has no documentation or data which reflects the extent of such practices. Understanding of this practice is further complicated by some schools buying in 'Outside Providers' (OPs) with subject or strand expertise (Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, 1992). In addition, the more orthodox practice of employing Relief from Face to Face teachers also adds to the range of teachers potentially employed to teach different subject areas in NSW schools. A comprehensive examination of the role and practice of these teachers appears to have been neglected at both the macro level of education policy and in current research. In a time when the professionalism of teaching is receiving public scrutiny (Donnelly, 2005; Humphries & Pryor, 2006; Smyth, 2006) and quality underpins numerous pedagogical frameworks (Ramsey, 2000) the issue of who is delivering the curriculum and why needs to be addressed.

One of the Key Learning Areas (KLAs) in NSW government primary schools given recent prominence is Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE). What is remarkable, is that although traditionally the subject hierarchy finds English and Mathematics at the apex and 'non-academic' subjects such as PE and Sport at the bottom, the contemporary focus on the body brings into question whether in fact the hierarchy is being changed. In this regard we may well be at a cross-roads regarding the importance given to the subject. Increasingly the popular media has devoted attention to issues surrounding physical activity and opinion pieces all promulgating the idea of an 'obesity crisis' (Kirk, 2006). In addition to this, given that one small report suggested that up to 30% of Australian government primary school children had access to PE and Sport specialists (Turnball, 1992) it seems prudent and timely to assess the apparently increasing specialisation of the PE and Sport curriculum in the primary context.

It is helpful in understanding any shift in the practice from the one generalist to multiple subject specialists to take a brief look at the historical evidence of the Australian primary school teacher, which at best is fragmentary. Although the

following extract does not explicitly detail that primary schooling should be delivered by the one generalist, it does include a clear theoretical assumption that the content taught to primary school children required only a little knowledge.

‘The art of teaching should be most highly developed in the teacher of the youngest, while the extent of knowledge needs to be greatest in those that are called upon to teach adults. ... In the higher classes of schools, where the children are more established in their bodily and mental habits, and where the content of the instruction has to be increased, the knowledge of the teacher becomes of increasing importance, and his (sic) skill in teaching is of less importance, since the formative influences become less and less effective as time goes on. (Commission on primary, secondary, technical, and other branches of education, 1903, p. 42.

More explicitly the remainder of the extract clearly demonstrates the perception that specialised knowledge increases with levels of schooling.

Hence, as the school life progresses, the purely educative content of the instruction decreases in importance, while the informative content increases in importance.’

(Commission on primary, secondary, technical, and other branches of education, 1903, p. 42).

Alexander, Rose and Woodhead (1992) note some ninety years later the perception of specialised knowledge and levels of schooling continues to maintain a hold on the view of those involved in primary teaching. Nonetheless in England since 1992 pre-service teachers have been required to undertake a subject specialisation and there are now four types of primary teachers (Alexander, Rose & Woodhead, 1992; OFSTED, 1997).

Despite the articulation of this practice there remains a lack of policy detail describing how these teachers should work in schools, or the decisions school leaders must make in distributing generalist and subject specialist staff. Nonetheless the OFSTED survey provides some interesting comparable baseline data for NSW by describing how schools use their specialists. The survey notes that the best examples of specialist teaching were found in either very small schools or large schools due to greater flexibility in staffing. The final recommendation of the OFSTED (1997) survey advocated that ‘schools need more teachers than classes if they are to manage their teaching effectively’ (p. 9). The survey also notes that the approach must be ‘carefully managed’ and not ad hoc’ (p. 6) where the subject specialist teaches at least several if not all classes and ‘influences the teaching of the subject throughout the school’ (p. 6). It asserts that the problem with the ad hoc arrangements is not that the students receive poor quality teaching, but that there is inequity amongst students depending on who teaches them.

Although there appears to have been no formal discussion of subject specialist allocation in Australian literature, there are infrequent and often anecdotal accounts (Barcan, 1980; Duncun, n.d; Ginger 1980; Russel-Bowie, 1996). These reports would seem to indicate that specialists have always been used in ‘non-core’ subject areas. However definitions and assumptions regarding specialisation are unproblematised. Similarly when reviewing studies which proposed differences in the quality of teaching or student outcomes when specialists were used, Hall found that the studies lacked empirical data either way, but were instead, ‘opinion pieces’ (2000, section 6).

From the discussion so far there is clearly support for subject specialist teachers in primary school although it is unclear why such support exists in the absence of comprehensive empirical data. Also clear as the title of specialist teacher explicitly details, there is a connection to these teachers and subject content within the primary school curriculum. In NSW public primary schools, where principals have some discretion over whether a subject or strand should be taught by the generalist class teacher or subject specialist it is useful explore what types of teachers are being allocated to what subjects and what is guiding such decisions. The following outlines the development of a theoretical framework that provides a link between school subjects and the allocation of subject specialist staff.

There is now an extensive body of literature with an overarching view that subject epistemology is a very useful framework when exploring curriculum delivery both within the classroom and at the level of school leadership (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Siskin 1991, 94; Stodolsky, 1988, 1993; Stodolsky & Grossman, 1995). To date this well regarded body of work has been only applied within a limited number of research goals. That is, it has exclusively focused on ‘academic’ subjects mostly limited to mathematics and literacy. It is yet to be seen how such assumptions play out in other ‘non core’ subjects. It has also less considered the role of school leaders in making curriculum decisions. Rowan and Miskel (1999) have made a tentative suggestion as to how these implicit views of subject epistemology intersect with multiple ‘rules’ and institutional processes. They explicitly link subject epistemology with their institutional analysis theory explaining that ‘social actors of all sorts - individuals, managers, interest groups’ make an impact on one another because they are ‘...embedded in socially-organized environments that generate rules, regulations, norms and definitions’ (p. 359). In this case, the most useful contribution from this institutional theory is to highlight the notion of how rules apply. ‘Rules’ are defined as the policies, curriculum and instructional guidelines that shape teachers’ work and implicit subject epistemology in a school curriculum can both shape and influence ‘rules’. It remains to be seen in a climate such as NSW public education, where subject specialist allocation ‘rules’ are not clearly articulated at the macro level, how decisions are being made at the micro level. At this level, the rule makers are the principals themselves as it is they who must make the decision to supply and allocate generalist or specialist teachers across the curriculum.

A first step in exploring potential new patterns of curriculum delivery and the rules guiding such patterns in NSW public primary schools, is to establish a clearer definition and purpose of the subject specialist teacher. It is similarly important to ascertain the extent that subject specialists are used, in particular in PE/Sport. The second concern is the focus of this paper.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed method sequential QUAN-QUAL design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), consisting of an exploratory questionnaire followed by interviews with individuals who were targeted on the basis of their quantitative questionnaire responses. This methodology allowed features of groups or individuals that are identified through one form of measurement to be then used to shape and interpret further data collection (Tashakkori & Teddlie).

As no data had been previously gathered in this area, the questionnaire largely served a more general, descriptive purpose. This paper focuses on two of five sections of the questionnaire:

- 1) respondent demographics; and
- 2) subject specialist teacher use in the school in general and for PE/Sport specifically.

Preliminary Results

Respondent school characteristics

The questionnaire was mailed to all NSW primary school principals (N= 1608)

There were 401 respondents (25% response rate). These responses were reflective of a broad cross section of NSW schools in terms of demographics with respondents reasonably distributed across 'urban', 'rural' and 'regional' zones and DET school sizes.

Use of specialists in responding schools

Of the respondents 54% reported they were female and 46% reported they were male.

The survey specifically sought evidence concerning the employment of subject specialists in NSW primary schools. The term 'specialist' was specifically described on the questionnaire in the following statement 'an RFF teacher or other DET teacher who teaches in one specific KLA or a Strand or activity of a KLA AND/OR an outside provider used by your school to teach in a specific KLA or a Strand or activity of a KLA. In response to this definition, 317 (79%) of principals reported that they had considered employing specialists, while 295 (93%) of these principals had actually employed a specialist. The small number of principals who had NOT employed specialists were asked to state why they had not, leading to the following thematic categories of responses: prohibitive costs were cited by 11 principals, inflexibility of current staffing arrangements were cited by seven principals, while the remaining five cited lack of availability of suitable persons. A Pearson chi square test detected no significant difference in employment decision according to regional locations or school size.

Of those that reported to employ a specialist 71% used an RFF teacher, 28% used a DET teacher specifically to teach the one content area and 58% used an Outside Provider (see Table 1.)

Table 1. Breakdown of type of specialists reportedly used in NSW public primary schools

Type of specialist	N	%
RFF teacher	224	71%
DET teacher	87	28%
Outside provider	182	58%

Respondents were asked to complete an open response question regarding what subject/strand the RFF specialist teacher taught. A category was formed when at least three respondents gave the same response. Respondents listed a total of 18 different categories. The ten top categories are listed in order in Table 2. Other one off responses included tennis, band, boys' education and chess. Categorisation however is a little rubbery because dance could fit into two different KLAs (Personal Development Health and Physical Education [PDHPE] or Creative And Performing Arts [CAPA]) and some principals defined Visual Arts as separate to CAPA. Band could also theoretically fit into music or CAPA, but it may be also viewed as extracurricular.

Table 2. Subject/strands that are reported to use RFF subject specialists

Strand	N	%
Technology	95	42%
Music	68	30%
PE	31	14%
Visual Arts	30	13%
Science	26	12%
Sport	24	11%

CAPA	18	8%
Literacy	17	8%
Dance	17	8%
LOTE	16	7%

From those who reported to use a DET trained teacher to provide specialist teaching in a particular content area only, analysis of qualitative responses revealed 14 subject/strands plus one category of other including learning support. The five top categories are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Subject/strands that are reported to use DET trained subject specialists

Strand	N	%
Technology	24	28%
Music	18	21%
Literacy	14	16%
LOTE	10	11%
Dance	8	9%

It is interesting to note that the top two subject/strands reportedly taught by RFF and DET teachers – technology and music - are the same. For this study in particular it is also noteworthy that PE, sport and dance appear in the top ten and dance in the top five respectively.

Respondents were also asked to list the subject/strands an OP was used for. Analysis of qualitative responses listed a total of 19 different categories plus one category of other including: yoga, skiing, hockey and health. The ten top categories are outlined in Table 4. Interestingly strands that relate to PE/Sport have a much higher profile when it comes to using OPs.

Table 4. Subject/strands that are reported to use Outside Provider as the subject specialist

Strand	N	%
Gymnastics	68	37%
Music	40	22%
Dance	38	21%
Physical Education	30	16%
Sport	23	13%
Band	17	9%
Tennis	12	7%
Visual Arts	9	5%
Technology	8	4%
Drama	7	4%

PE/Sport specialists

Because PDHPE has eight strands there is difficulty in defining the subject. Indeed it is unclear exactly how the strands are divided into the components of Health, Personal Development and Physical Education. Because of this fluidity in the degree of definition, this study set out to explore physical education and sport under the one umbrella but DET approval required them to split into two separate categories. A total of 171 schools reported that they used at least one type of specialist for either PE or Sport as outlined in Table 5. The use of OPs far outweighs any other type of reported specialist use for this subject content.

Table 5. Type of subject specialist reportedly used to teach PE/Sport

Type of subject specialist	PE	Sport
RFF teacher	53 18%	31 11%
DET teacher	18 6%	7 2%
Outside Provider	101 34 %	71 24%

Goals in using specialist for PE/Sport

From those who reported to use an RFF teacher, DET teacher or an OP to deliver PE and/or Sport, qualitative responses regarding the goal in using such specialists were analysed. The top ten were as follows: an expert who is properly trained; provision of extra skills for students; having teacher expertise; having equipment available; reducing OH&S concerns; increasing engagement of students; increasing the variety of choices for students; availing staff of professional development; providing systematic and standardised teaching; and having enthusiastic staff. Responses often included some comment in relation to gymnastics as evidenced in the following quote 'Safety in gymnastics was the major concern - the goal was to meet syllabus requirements with maximum student safety'.

Discussion

This study is the first to empirically document the current practice of using subject specialists to teach a wide range of content across the NSW public primary curriculum. Although the OFSTED (1997) survey highlighted different patterns of *how* subject specialists were used according to school location and size in England, it did not take the logical earlier step and provide data on the number of specialists employed throughout schools. Interestingly this study did not find any significant differences in school size or location and the reported numbers of specialists used. Conversely to the OFSTED survey the results of this study do not show patterns of specialist allocation. That is there is no ability to determine whether a specialist is employed on a permanent part time basis or whether they are used on a casual and limited basis. This in fact highlights the problem with the unproblematised definition of subject specialist even within the categories provided to principals on the questionnaire. These fluid interpretations may be one reason why no statistical difference between school zones and sizes and reported specialist use was evident.

It is interesting to ponder, even in the face of apparent minimal empirical evidence of improved student performance when subject specialists teach (Hall, 2000), why NSW public primary school principals are using specialists. It is likely that there are reasons beyond educational pedagogy (Burch & Spillane, 2005). To be sure there is the issue of perceived lack of teacher skills which corresponds to the concerns with the professional identity of specialist teachers (Abell, 1990; Duck, 1990; Fromyhr, 1995, citing Hing, 1993; Russel- Bowie, 1996). Of concern is that respondents appear to be resigned to the fact that some teachers are incapable of delivering some parts of the PE/Sport curriculum expressed in sentiments such as the need for 'enthusiasm' This corresponds to previous studies of primary teachers and physical education (Thompson, 1996). Surely however, one of the roles of an educational leader is to inspire classroom teachers to fulfill their role and this area of human resource management thus requires closer inspection. Perhaps using someone else to do the job is also a reflection of deeper pragmatic responses to a lack of available resources and higher priority macro level regulations and policies as is reportedly the case for gymnastics. It seems reasonable that if a school cannot afford the capital outlay for specialised equipment, a user pay type system in the form of OPs is put into operation. However affordability amongst families and across schools has equity implications (OFSTED, 1997). Furthermore is it reasonable for schools to be compelled to teach content that is beyond their means?

As initial anecdotal evidence suggested this study found that there was a distinct pattern in the types of subjects specialists taught. OPs were used to deliver KLAS that are perhaps considered the 'frill's or enrichment subjects (Stodolsky, 1988). RFF and DET teachers were also most likely to be used to teach these subjects, with the exception of some schools targeting literacy. The consistency in the reported patterns of use of subject specialists across schools would suggest that principals do indeed operate from a consistent set of 'rules'. More light however needs to be shed on what influences such rules. Is it possible that subject specialists are used to teach subjects because their importance and status is lower, or as some of the data suggests, because some subjects are considered too difficult in terms of subject knowledge and physical resources?

What should be of concern to those involved in primary education is the undocumented number of OPs being used in some way to deliver education. This is not to comment on the educational quality, indeed this study makes no claim about implementation as an investigation of curriculum delivery by OPs is beyond the scope of this study. However it is impossible to argue that such a practice has no ramifications for the nature of the primary school teachers' work and pre-service teacher training. Likewise it seems apparent that there are pedagogical ramifications when non-qualified teachers are involved in teaching a subject. Questions such as what are teachers doing when the OP is teaching demands explanation.

Conclusion

Although PE/Sport appears to have been socially and politically elevated to pseudo- important status through the 'obesity crisis', in this study it is sometimes relegated to OPs. The questionnaire data cannot yet provide a rich picture as to why PE/Sport is given to subject specialists although some inferences can be made. It is probable that the subject is considered to be outside of the purview of some primary teachers but delegating subject specialists to teach the PE/Sport may also reflect its importance. It may also reflect wider sociocultural beliefs about the value of certain subjects, or historical constructions of primary school teaching. Whatever the reason, the preliminary results of this study would seem to strongly suggest that changes in the delivery of the primary curriculum are well underway. Such a change may have critical ramifications for the nature of the primary school teacher's work. Future analysis of the larger qualitative data may answer some of these questions.

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