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# Experiences of sport coordinators in a physical education professional development programme

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## Abstract

Physical education (PE) is an essential component of the school curriculum. However, studies show that many facilitators responsible for the delivery of PE in South African schools possibly lack the requisite specialist skills for effective PE delivery. Such facilitators can therefore be assisted with in-service training and professional development (PD) interventions to equip them with the relevant PE teaching skills. The purpose of this study was to analyse sport coordinators' views about the attributes of effective development of non-specialist PE teachers or programme facilitators in South African schools. A qualitative interpretive paradigm was used to conduct a case study among 32 sport coordinators who taught Foundation Phase PE in 32 schools in the North-West Province of South Africa. The training model of PD was used to design the intervention, which included four different workshops held over one year. Data were obtained by using three semi-structured questionnaires, which were completed at different stages during the intervention and consequently analysed using the conventional content analysis approach. The most significant finding was that continuous training and support should not be considered as optional, but rather a necessity. Both the selection of content and pedagogy used to present the programme need careful consideration. Developing pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) experientially is critical. Modelling of practice and engaging the participants in carefully designed practical activities to demonstrate theoretical principles is preferable compared to the traditional lecture method. Thus, teachers should be assisted, not only to grasp concepts associated with PE as a learning area, but also to develop the pedagogic insight needed to adapt their teaching strategies to the instructional settings in which they find themselves.
**Keywords*:*** Physical education, sport coordinators, non-specialist physical education teachers, physical education programme facilitators, professional development.

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## Introduction

Quality physical education (QPE) provides opportunities for the "acquisition of skills which define self-confident and socially responsible citizens" (UNESCO, 2015:4). Research shows that children gain invaluable benefits from engagement

in developmentally appropriate physical education (DAPE)[a] programmes (UNESCO, 2015; Stroebel, Bloemhoff & Hay, 2016; Freak & Miller, 2017). Teachers play a significant role in the planning and presentation of DAPE programmes. Therefore, a teacher's quality plays a key role in the success of a PE programme. Viewed from this perspective, it is preferable to employ subjectspecialists to implement PE programmes in schools (Faulkner, Dwyer, Irving, Allison, Adlaf & Goodman, 2008; Rink & Hall, 2008; Freak & Miller, 2017). In South Africa, many teachers responsible for teaching PE are not qualified (Rooth, 2005; Van Deventer, 2009; Visagie, 2009; UNESCO, 2014). PE delivery is usually under the custodianship of non-specialist teachers in the form of generalists (qualified teachers without specialised training in PE), and external PE programme facilitators[b] who are not qualified teachers.

Despite the dearth of PE specialists in South African schools, PE is not included in the teaching specialisation options recommendedfor Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). In South Africa, PE is no longer a standalone subject, but is included as Life Skills programmes in one of the four study areas of the Foundation Phase (grades R–3), and one of three study areas of the Intermediate Phase (grades 4–6). Similarly, PE is included as Life Orientation programmes in one of five topics taught in the Senior Phase (grades 7–9), and one of six themes offered in the Further Education and Training phase (grades 10–12) (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Consequently, designated PE teaching posts in most of the government schools do not exist (Burnett, 2018). Rather, teachers are employed as Life Skills or Life Orientation teachers and are expected to teach all components of these subjects, even if they are not suitably qualified. These individuals are referred to as non-specialist PE teachers or generalists (Hardman & Green, 2011; Freak & Miller, 2017; Lynch & Soukop, 2017).

The expertise, skills and knowledge of non-specialist teachers in the implementation of school PE programmes is questionable. Most of them have had little, if any, previous PE involvement or training (Visagie, 2016). Studies have indicated that non-specialist teachers believe that their lack of PE qualifications directly influences their ability to teach PE (Faucette, Nugent, Sallis & Mckenzie, 2002; Faulkner *et al*., 2008; Kirk, 2012). Due to their poor subject knowledge and lack of pedagogical understanding, non-specialist teachers feel ill-equipped to design and deliver a DAPE programme. Braga, Jones, Bulger and Elliott (2017) recognise that professional development (PD) for teachers is a key intervention in enhancing the PE skills of non-specialist teachers and promoting the development of quality PE programmes.

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[a] DAPE – A PE programme that includes activities that are appropriate for the age and level of development of learners.

[b] "PE programme facilitators" refer to all coaches, volunteers or individuals from external organisations who do not have any teaching or PE qualifications, yet still teach PE.

In some South African schools, it is not just the non-specialist PE teachers who are responsible for PE implementation. "Outsiders" are being employed to implement PE programmes due to the incapacity of generalist teachers to do the job effectively (Visagie, 2016). This practice is not unique to South Africa, as Petrie (2011:14) indicates that in New Zealand there is an "increase in providers knocking on the door of primary schools with programmes, initiatives, and resources to sell". Although it may appear beneficial that there are diverse PE service providers with greater purported expertise than non-specialist teachers, there are still some notable concerns. Petrie (2011:15) observes that some of the programmes offered by "outsiders" are often "developed by people with limited curriculum knowledge and poor pedagogical awareness." Such external agents may not be able to offer a curriculum-driven programme or demonstrate the ability to adjust their programmes to meet the specific needs of learners in schools. The sport coordinators[c] involved in this study fall under the category of external agents who facilitate PE programmes in schools.

Based on the fact that the sport coordinators are not certified as PE teachers, it is vital that they are professionally developed for to ensure that the learners experience curriculum-driven PE programmes (Blair & Capel, 2011). Research scholarship generally embraces the vital role of professional development in improving teaching effectiveness (Armour & Duncombe, 2004; Davis, Burgeson, Brener, Mcmanus & Wechler, 2005; Morgan & Hansen, 2007). Effective professional development programmes have been implemented, especially in rich countries with a relative abundance of PE resources and qualified PE specialists (Stidder & Hayes, 2017). South African teachers are, in terms of policy, obliged to register with the South African Council of Educators (SACE) to undergo professional development (Tsotetsi & Mahlomaholo, 2013). However, there are no policies in place which require external PE programme facilitators to develop their skills and knowledge to meet specific PE teaching requirements. Furthermore, studies on the professional development of non-specialist PE teachers are limited (Petrie, 2011). Burnett (2018) recommends that external PE programme facilitators need to engage in PD programmes in order to be certified as facilitators. This study therefore set out to explore the experiences of external sport coordinators who were part of a PD programme in physical education.

## Conceptual Framework

The study was grounded on the conceptual framework of a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programme (CSPAP), which was analysed based on the experiences of sport coordinators in a PD programme for the effective implementation of PE in schools. The CSPAP framework places PE and the PE

[c] "Sport coordinators" were not qualified teachers, but were initially sports coaches who were then contracted to implement PE programmes in their schools.

teacher or facilitator at the centre of school-wide physical activity promotion (Chen & Gu, 2017). To achieve the recommended physical activity levels among learners, PE teachers and facilitators should be equipped with competencies and skills through professional support. The CSPAP framework is viewed as an ecological approach to physical activity promotion in schools, as it acknowledges the nuanced contributions and roles of various stakeholder PE facilitators in terms of the experience and perceptions they bring to school PE programmes (Kohl & Cook, 2013). Thus, in this study, the CSPAP framework was used to explore the experiences of sport coordinators as PE facilitators for a school-based PD programme in PE. The aim of the study was to determine the participants' experiences in the PE PD intervention programme.

## Methodology

*Study design and setting*

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore sport coordinators' experiences in a PD programme in PE. The study was based on the interpretivist paradigm, which aims to derive a deeper understanding of human and social phenomena within the participants' unique contexts and lived experiences (Lynch & Soukop, 2017). The design elicited rich descriptions and details of sport coordinators' experiences of their participation in the PD programme.

Prior to the study, the researchers' colleagues were approached by the director of the Royal Bafokeng School Sport Programme (RBSSP) in Rustenburg, South Africa to organise a PD programme for a specific group of participants in the Royal Bafokeng Kingdom at a time when they were grappling with what could be done to empower non-specialist and non-qualified PE teachers. The Royal Bafokeng community resides within the Rustenburg Valley of the North West Province. "Bafokeng" is used to refer to both the tribal grouping, as well as the land its members inhabit. The Royal Bafokeng Nation is a group of over 100 000 Setswana-speaking people living on ancestral land, in 29 villages and peri-urban areas. The nation consists of 72 clans, and as a collective, the leaders of each clan constitute the council (Royal Bafokeng Holdings, 2012). This research was conducted to determine whether such a PD programme had any positive impact on the coordinators' training and roles as PE teachers in the foundation schooling phase.

*Participants*

The study consisted of sport coordinators involved in RBSSP and responsible for implementing PE programmes in schools, who had some experience in coaching (average of eight years), organising and adjudicating at local athletics, netball and footballcompetitions. None of the participants had received any form of tertiary education, and many did not have a high school matriculation certificate. All sport coordinators (n=32; 18 males and 14 females) involved in the delivery of PE in

the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) voluntarily participated in this study. They included one from each of the 32 schools being piloted for PE teaching.

*Research instruments*

The study involved the use of open-ended questionnaires, which was developed by the researchers based on an extensive literature review (Guskey, 2002; Basit, 2010; Petrie, 2010). The main aspects covered in the questionnaire included PE activities, PE facilitation styles as well as the perceived benefits/improvements of engaging in a PE professional development programme. The open-ended questionnaire required participants to describe their personal experiences about the workshops. Specifically, the questionnaire items included topics which addressed their perception or otherwise of the workshops being beneficial, the observed changes in their curriculum knowledge as well as the difficulties and barriers experienced when teaching foundation phase PE. The instrument was content-validated after in-depth discussions with three academics and experts in the fields of PE and teacher training from two higher education institutions in Gauteng province of South Africa. The questionnaire was re-validated inbetween four PD workshops to confirm its suitability for data collection. The participants provided in-depth responses to the questionnaire items.

*Trustworthiness*

The trustworthiness of the findings was established through criteria propounded by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The criteria included credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the participants, as well as a persistent focus on the most pertinent and relevant aspects of the issues under study. Participants were asked to reflect on their responses to enhance the credibility of the findings and to confirm the correctness of the data gathered. Transferability was established through a thick description of the study context, the selection and characteristics of the participants, the collection of data, and the data analysis. Dependability and confirmability were established by describing the research steps taken from the start of the study through to the development and reporting of the findings throughout the workshops undertaken in the study. The findings of this study were also confirmed by other researchers. An audit trail of the research process was also kept throughout the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

*Data collection procedure*

The data were collected during a series of four PD workshops, which were conducted over a year. The workshops took place at a central venue for the participants during school holidays. The questionnaires were distributed among the participants after each workshop to determine their successive impressions and interpretations of the workshops. The successive use of the questionnaires was undertaken to evaluate the progress of the participants in the PD interventions. The

questionnaires were filled in the presence of the researchers so that they could address any queries that the participants had. The participants were all literate and independently completed the questionnaires after the PD workshops.

*Data analysis*

Data were analysed thematically using content analysis. Content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study, a conventional content analysis approach used in data analysis helped to identify the perceptions of participants with regard to their workshop experiences. Under content analysis, data from open-ended questionnaires were read word for word to derive codes by first highlighting the exact words from the text that captured key thoughts or concepts. Patterns which emerged from the data sets were coded and sorted into categories based on how they were linked. The emergent categories were then organised into meaningful thematic clusters. The conventional content method of analysis allowed direct information to be gained from the participants without imposing preconceived categories and ideas. This process was ensured through bracketing.

*Ethical considerations*

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Higher Degree and Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa (Ref.: SEM 12019-073). The purpose and procedure of the study were explained to the sport coordinators, after which they gave signed informed consent, thus voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study. After extensive discussion with the director of the RBSSP, permission was granted for the study to commence. The sport coordinators were acknowledged throughout the intervention period for the important role that they played in the study. Their rights, needs, values, desires and privacy were respected and protected appropriately throughout the study.

## Results

The primary aim of this study was to analyse the sport coordinators' impressions and expectations of each of the four PD workshops conducted. The participants were asked to state their expectations before each of the workshops started. For the first two workshops, they worked in groups to narrate their experiences. For workshops 3 and 4, each individual was given the opportunity to express his or her own expectations for the upcoming workshop. Although the themes identified in both the group and individual responses were similar, there were many more sub-themes which emerged when the individuals personally expressed their expectations. The participants expected specific content to be included in the intervention. For instance, they requested a particular pedagogy which involved more active interaction to be used to present the programme and trusted that their context would be considered throughout. Hence, educators had to take into

consideration their learners' needs, interests, potential, and acquisition of specific skills. Ongoing PD was also revealed as important to optimise the participants' experiences. The themes which emerged are discussed further below.

The development of PE pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) was predominantly identified as a factor to be included in future workshops. Within this theme, a number of different needs were specifically mentioned: for example, guidance was sought regarding lesson planning and class management, as well as activity ideas. Examples of responses in this regard were, "*Help us to do a lesson plan*" (group 1, workshop 2), "*How to handle 50 or more kids in one class*" (group 2, workshop 2), and "*teach us more activities*" (group 3, workshop 2). The second theme on pedagogy identified the need for participants to learn through practical engagement in activities rather than a lecture-style delivery of content. Context was also seen to be important, as the sport coordinators expected the facilitator to take into consideration what they brought to the PD experience and to understand the environments in which they taught. The theme of ongoing PD was latent in the expectations expressed by the participants, specifically. However, revision to consolidate the work covered in previous workshops was stated as important and needed, as indicated by a participant who declared: "*In the next workshop we must revise first*". It was only as the intervention progressed that it became clear that the sport coordinators needed to revisit the content, preferably through practical engagement, at each subsequent workshop in order to consolidate their learning, thus indicating a need for ongoing PD. Understanding the sport coordinators' expectations guided the facilitator in planning both the content to be included and the pedagogical approach to be used in subsequent workshops.

Although it was important to acknowledge the sport coordinators' expectations of what they would gain from the training, it was crucial to understand their reactions to the PD programme as implemented. The themes stemming from the various data sets showed that the sport coordinators' reactions to the intervention were the same as those identified from their expectations of the workshops. The content of the workshops, the pedagogy used to present the content, consideration of what the participants brought to the intervention and the need for ongoing training were themes identified by the sport coordinators.

When asked to indicate what they found to be most beneficial, the participants agreed that it was the content of the programme they valued most. The development of PE PCK specific to Foundation Phase PE teaching was regarded as most important. There were only 32 participants, yet the number of responses identified was often more than this, due to individuals giving multiple responses to the open-ended questions. From the responses received during the workshops, most participants referred specifically to improvements in their knowledge, understanding and skills required for Foundation Phase PE teaching. The respondents acknowledged the value of content that had specific relevance to their

Foundation Phase teaching. For example, a participant stated that, "*The good about it is we learn what we need to know about teaching Foundation Phase PE*".

The data showed the importance of the intervention. Engaging in practical activities was highly appreciated. Participants valued "learning by doing". Again, the need to consider the context was highlighted in the data collected. Understanding who the participants were and what they brought to the study was vital, as this determined both the content included and the pedagogy of the intervention. In this context, the facilitator too plays an important role, as he or she would need the ability to adapt both the content and the way it is presented to optimise the experience of the participants. As a result, the facilitator was often mentioned. A participant ended his final workshop evaluation feedback with the statement: "*Thanks to our mangers [managers] for bringing someone who understands PE so well to come and give us light*". The need for ongoing PD was only identified as the intervention progressed. The data revealed that the sport coordinators needed to revisit the work covered over time in order to improve their understanding of PE teaching. Many participants felt that more and longer workshops should be organised. For example, a participant suggested the need "*to extend or to give more days*" to the workshop.

The sport coordinators' reactions to the training were positive. By listening to their views as the PD programme unfolded, each subsequent workshop was planned with a better understanding of the participants' needs. We continuously revised the content previously covered, ensured that the content included in the intervention was relevant and had value, and adapted the way the content was presented to enable the participants to learn by doing. We also considered and respected the individuals' contexts throughout. For instance, in responding positively to the value of the workshops, a participant stated that, "*I know clearly now what is required from the Foundation Phase curriculum*." Listening to the sport coordinators' stories about their participatory experiences revealed the PD characteristics that should be considered in designing future PD intervention for non-specialist PE teachers and PE programme facilitators in South African schools.

## Discussion

By analysing both the experiences and the reactions of the participants to the PD intervention, four themes emerged. The findings identified the development characteristics that are necessary for the effective PD of non-specialist PE teachers and programme facilitators. These themes were: ongoing training, content, pedagogy and context.

### *Ongoing training*

Although only revealed as the intervention progressed, the findings showed the

importance of continuous training, as the understanding of the sport coordinators improved over time. The participants indicated the need to continuously revise the content of the workshops. This view is supported by literature which advocates the need for continuous PD (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson & Orphanos, 2009; Cooper, 2011). Ongoing PD ensures that the material covered in the intervention is not dealt with superficially, but rather gives the teachers the opportunity to "make progressive gains in knowledge, skills and confidence" (Petrie, 2010:19). The sport coordinators indicated that the development of their knowledge about PE and understanding of PE teaching was effective because they were able to engage fully with the content and apply what was learnt over the course of the year. They were also able to confront their insecurities, as well as revise and reinforce the knowledge required for PE teaching. Based on this feedback, organisation of once-off workshops should be circumvented when considering the design of future PD programmes for non-specialist PE teachers and programme facilitators in South Africa.

*Content*

The choice of content included in the programme proved to be vital. Throughout the intervention, developing PE PCK was the most important benefit identified in the findings. Hwang, Hong and Hao (2018) had reported that their participants valued the acquisition of PCK. This suggests that the content included in the intervention must be carefully considered. PD programmes should include content that is relevant and meaningful for the participants (Darling-Hammond *et al*., 2009; Petrie, 2010; Cooper, 2011; Petrie & McGee, 2012). When designing any future PD programme, careful thought must be given to the content of the intervention to ensure that the needs of the participants are met. Therfore, this situation must be addressed to ensure that any future intervention is designed by PE specialists who have a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum.

*Pedagogy*

While the content of the intervention was thought to be important, how the content was imparted proved to be even more significant. A facilitator needs to be "cognizant of what teachers bring to the learning experience" (Patton, Parker & Pratt, 2013: 443) in order to select the most suitable pedagogy. It was found that the most effective means of presenting the content of the PD programme was through practical engagement in relevant activities where the participants were able to "learn while doing". The sport coordinators needed to see what was expected, rather than being told what was needed. The activities included in the PD intervention gave the participants the opportunity to understand theoretical principles through practical engagement in carefully designed activities that optimised their understanding. This mode of presentation also alleviated the problem of the language of learning, as practical engagement in activities reinforced their compromised understanding of theoretical presentations. Guskey and Yoon (2009) debated the meaning of "best practice" and their findings

indicated that both practical learning and exposure to examples of practical activities were essential for effective teaching. This preferred mode of presentation was also observed by Armour and Makopoulou (2006) who encouraged and facilitated practical, active and interactive professional learning. The sport coordinators were also given the opportunity to apply what was learnt, a method supported by Patton *et al.* (2013) when trying out planned activities and lessons.
Training manuals and additional resources facilitated the participants' learning at the workshops as well as during their practice sessions. The sport coordinators valued these resources, which augmented the development of their knowledge and skills. The participants preferred the pre-planned unit and lesson plans to being left to do their own planning. Yet, just including "packaged" lessons was inadequate, as the sport coordinators needed to be given the opportunity to engage and work with learning materials to improve their own planning and presentation skills.

*Context*
Understanding the context of the participants also proved to be important. Westfall (2007:93) acknowledged that PD which "focused on specific content and [was] based on contextual factors appears to have a greater impact on teacher knowledge". An intervention, therefore, must consider both the participants themselves and the context in which they operate. Kennedy's (1998:1) criticism that many workshops "… may be guilty of being irrelevant", highlights the fact that participants will gain very little from attending workshops if the contexts in which they operate are not fully understood. Quite often, interventions are packages designed and delivered by "experts" who have limited understanding of the needs or experiences of the teachers or learners involved. If the facilitator has no understanding of the background or experience of the participants, the value of the intervention will be compromised. As Petrie and McGee (2012) noted, PD must pay attention to the individual needs of teachers and their specific contexts to be effective. Being cognisant of the existing knowledge, skills and attitudes that the sport coordinators brought to the training, and understanding their school contexts, allowed for the content of the programme to be adapted accordingly to optimise their development as PE "teachers". This understanding is especially pertinent as like many non-specialist PE teachers in South Africa, the sport coordinators had limited knowledge and experience, and worked with limited resources. Adjusting existing teaching strategies and finding alternative means of presenting PE content can optimise the PCK development of non-specialist PE teachers or PE programme facilitators. Concomittantly, different ways to assist them to overcome space and equipment deficits can be identified, and the teachers can be given solutions to addresses these needs. This emphasises the need for future PD interventions to be designed and monitored by PE experts in the field.

Finally, although not identified as a theme, it is noteworthy that any PE professional development programme facilitator should be carefully selected. It is

imperative that the facilitator is a specialist who has a passion for PE because, without this, he or she may not be able to convey the importance of the subject effectively. It is also essential that the facilitator has extensive knowledge of PE which could be imparted in meaningful ways to the participants. The facilitator needs to be flexible and adapt the programme to meet the needs of the PD participants. A PD programme facilitator should have the ability to light a spark in the hearts of the non-specialist PE teachers who have embarked on the journey towards quality PE teaching.

Although the identified features that support effective professional development have been looked at separately, it must be understood that they are interrelated. PD should be "ongoing, long-term, continuous learning in the context of school and classroom and with the support of colleagues" (Petrie, 2010:18). Effective PD is a means of improving the implementation of PE programmes in South African schools (Davis *et al*., 2005; Cooper, 2011; Petrie & McGee, 2012) by empowering the non-specialist PE teachers or programme facilitators responsible for PE programme implementation. PD programme designers must take cognisance of what each unique cohort of PE teachers or programme facilitators in South Africa brings to the table. They face many obstacles, the most significant being the lack of PE teaching experience and knowledge (UNESCO, 2015). When combined with a dearth of resources, minimal equipment and large class sizes, the obstacles faced by PE personnel may seem to be almost insurmountable. However, this study showed that these obstacles can be overcome through professional development, if specific characteristics of PD are considered in both the design and presentation of the intervention.

## Limitations

This study was constraint by the fact that it was confined to sport coordinators teaching PE in the foundation-schooling phase in the Royal Bafokeng schools of the North-West Province. As the study did not cover other provinces in South Africa in which similar programmes were presented, the findings cannot be generalised to other parts of the country. This limitation should be considered in interpreting the present findings.

## Policy implications

The findings of this study implicate the urgent need for a review and understanding of the role of decision-makers and implementers in PE programme delivery. The Department of Basic Education could formulate a PE policy which recognises the role and training of stakeholders such as external sport coordinators in the delivery of PE in schools. Although short courses on PE could assist sport coordinators with the implementation of the PE curriculum, in the current situation where there is a lack of qualified PE teachers, deliberate action should be taken to train the

non-qualified teachers currently teaching PE. The Department of Basic Education should recruit qualified PE teachers to deliver good quality PE programmes in South African schools.

## Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it is concluded that some of the inherent PD characteristics promote positive PD experiences and outcomes among sport coordinators. This particular case study has validated the understanding that PD is necessary for non-specialist PE teachers and PE programme facilitators to support them in PE programme delivery. The study also elicited the unique features of PD that must be considered in designing future interventions to empower the non-specialist PE teachers and programme facilitators in South African schools. The voice of any PD participant in PE must be heard to ensure that the designs of future interventions are effective and serve as a means to improve both the state and status of PE in schools.

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