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Research topic: Perceptions of the professionalism of Physical Education specialist teachers in Queensland state primary schools.

A project for the award Doctor of Education, James Cook University.

This program involves:

- identifying a research topic (a theoretical or practical issue of educational significance);
- designing and carrying out a research project to investigate that issue, and
- writing a substantial thesis that discusses relevant literature, the perspective and methodology adopted in the research, and the findings and significance of the research.

Addressing the research topic

To address the research topic; “Perceptions of the professionalism of Physical Education specialist teachers in Queensland state primary schools” three interrelated layers of research, providing different lenses were undertaken. The first lens was a critical literature review which identified relevant studies and provided a theoretical grounding for the research. The second lens was an autoethnographic account of being a specialist Physical Education (PE) teacher in a Queensland state primary school. The autoethnographic account gave the researcher’s voice and reflections to connect the personal to the cultural – the cultural being the perceptions of teacher professionalism. The third lens applied phenomenological research to investigate how specialist PE teachers in Queensland state primary schools defined, perceived and enacted professionalism. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research approach was used to examine the lived experience of primary PE

specialist teachers in Queensland. These three lenses informed each other in the analysis and the discussion that arose from the analysis.

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Overview

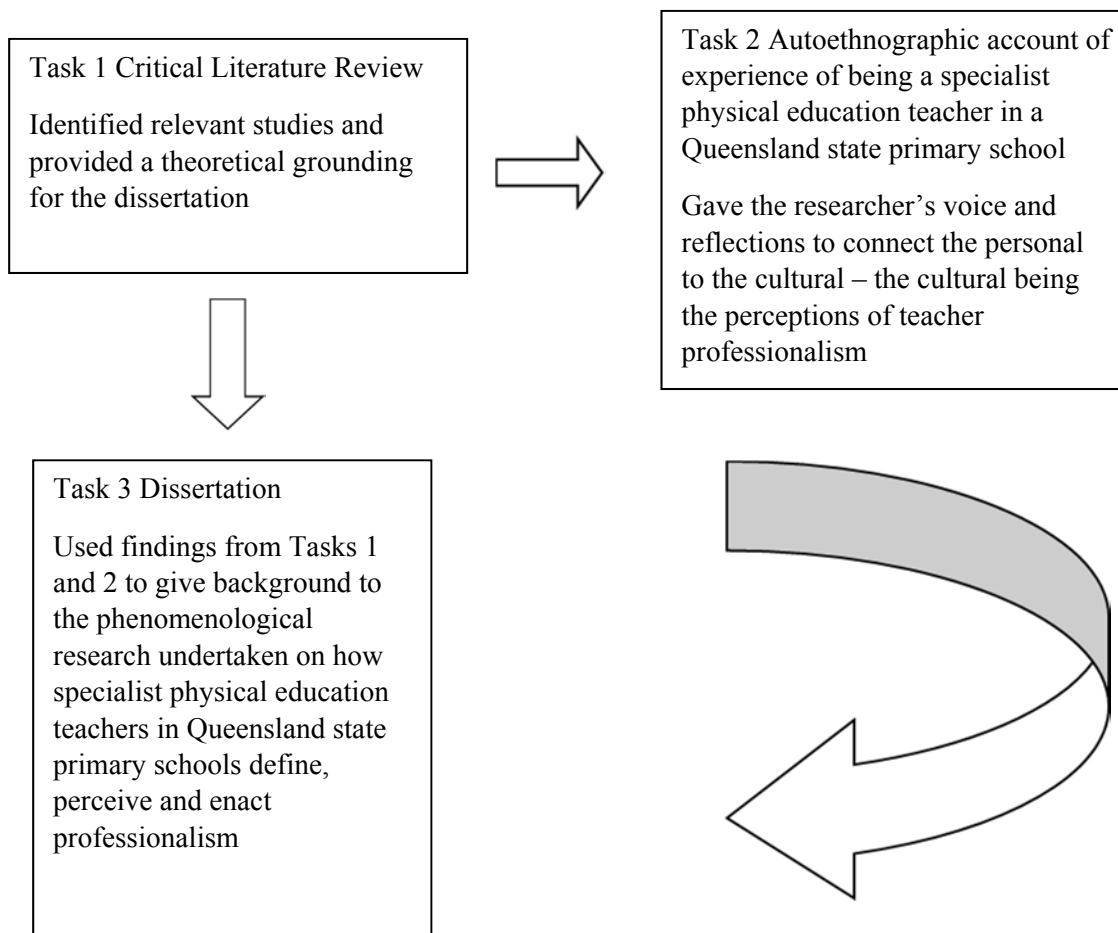
This overview outlines the thesis requirements for the awarding of the Doctor of Education, James Cook University.

The portfolio of work submitted contains:

1. A peer reviewed journal article; “Professional insiders/outside? Teacher professionalism and the primary school Physical Education specialist.” co-authored with Professor Dinan-Thompson and published in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education* (2013). 4 (3), 235-248. This is a national journal published online by Taylor and Francis on behalf of ACHPER Australia. The article explored the positioning of PE specialist teachers in Queensland state primary schools in discourses of teacher professionalism through a critical analysis of literature on the concept of teacher professionalism, the history of physical education in Queensland state primary schools and the status of the subject. This analysis provided a theoretical grounding that informed further research.
2. A peer reviewed journal article; “Insideness and outsideness—an autoethnography of a primary physical education specialist teacher.” co-authored with Professor Dinan-Thompson and published in the *European Physical Education Review*. (2015.) 11 (15), 1-15. This is an international journal which publishes contributions from Europe and all regions of the world in the fields of physical education, sport and leisure. This article is an autoethnographic account of the three years the author spent as a PE specialist teacher in a Queensland state primary school. It gives an authentic voice to the perception and enactment of teacher professionalism as experienced by the author. The conceptual framework of Place and Placelessness (Relph, 1976) was used to investigate the places and spaces occupied by a primary PE specialist teacher.

3. A Dissertation of 50,000 words on “Professionalism and the primary physical education specialist teacher in Queensland state primary schools.”

The portfolio can be represented through three tasks which are described in the diagram below;



Background

Queensland has employed specialist Physical Education (PE) teachers in state primary schools for over sixty years yet there is continued debate on the role of these teachers and the delivery of the subject. The situation in Queensland differs from other states and territories where physical education is delivered by the generalist/classroom teacher. Declining rates of employment for trained physical education teachers have been identified in Australia with “only 35% of primary and 57% of secondary schools employing trained PE teachers”

(Australian Sports Commission, 2017, p.11). There has been discussion in other state and territories about adopting the Queensland model and employing PE specialist teachers in primary schools (Curry, 2011,2013; Morgan 2008).

The implementation of a national curriculum; the Australian Curriculum (AC), and the emergence of national standards for teachers; the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), have contributed to considerations about how teacher professionalism is defined and enacted. Therefore, this research is opportune in that it investigated how recent developments in education in Australia have influenced the definition, perception and enactment of teacher professionalism by an identified teacher group. It could be conjectured that the implementation of a national curriculum which recognised Health and Physical Education (HPE) as a core learning area and the construction of explicit national teacher standards would create opportunities to enhance the teaching of the subject and the professionalism of its practitioners. However, the Australian Sports Commission's *Intergenerational Review of Australian Sport* (2017) stated that; "despite its inclusion in the national and state curriculums, sport and Physical Education (PE) is becoming increasingly marginalised in schools" (p.11). The *Intergenerational Review of Australian Sport* (2017) attributed this marginalisation to a declining rate of trained teachers and lack of systemic support by state education departments. How primary PE specialist teachers in Queensland state primary schools define, perceive and enact professionalism underpins their teaching practice. An examination of the enactment of professionalism as a phenomenon could lead to increased attention on addressing the marginalisation of physical education in primary schools.

The research topic arose from the observations of the researcher who had made the transition from a secondary school to a primary school setting. The cultural practices surrounding professionalism experienced by the researcher were markedly different in the

primary school from the secondary school. At the time of the researcher's employment in the primary school consultation from educational stakeholders was being sought on proposed national standards for teachers. Due to her position on the executive of a peak professional teachers' association the researcher was asked to contribute to the discussion on national teacher standards. The researcher's placement as a primary PE specialist teacher, the beginnings of a national curriculum, and the conversation around national teacher standards coalesced to suggest a research topic.

Research Question

The research question of this study reflected its purpose; to investigate the site and construction of professionalism for primary PE specialist teachers in Queensland state primary schools. The research question was "How does the primary PE specialist define, perceive and enact professionalism?" This question was underpinned by three further questions;

- Where are primary PE specialist teachers located in the contested area of teacher professionalism?
- What does professionalism mean to the primary PE specialist teacher, and how do they demonstrate it? (How do they define and enact professionalism?)
- Does the perception of professionalism by primary PE specialist teachers affect how they operate in the school setting?

These questions were informed by the literature review, an autoethnographic account by the researcher, and phenomenological research methods.

Task 1 Critical literature review

The critical literature review provided a theoretical grounding for Tasks 2 and 3. Three strands of literature were investigated. The first strand related to understandings of teacher professionalism. The area of teaching professionalism is “a site of struggle over meaning among its various constituencies” (Sachs, 2003, p.17) and the site of professionalism within education has been described as “contested, unstable and contradictory” (Bloomfield, 2006, p.2-3). This research project employed an understanding of teacher professionalism as an entity (Evans, 2008) and drew on the work of Sachs (2003) to investigate two discourses of teacher professionalism; managerial and democratic.

Managerial professionalism is shaped by a neoliberalist agenda which has applied market principles to educational practice. Democratic professionalism supports inclusivity, collaboration, being proactive and enquiry oriented research and actions. While they differ, they are not mutually exclusive in enactment.

The second strand of literature gave a historical perspective on education in Queensland, with particular reference to changes and developments in primary school physical education and the role of the primary PE specialist teacher in state schools.

The third strand of literature examined the status of physical education, both nationally and internationally. The examination of literature found that while physical education was accorded the status of a fundamental right (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1978) and identified as a core learning area in the Australian Curriculum (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2010) it remained marginalised, under-resourced and of low status compared to other subjects. The low status conferred on physical education had ramifications for the perception and enactment of professionalism by its practitioners.

The three strands of the critical literature review interwove to illuminate the position of the primary PE specialist teacher in Queensland state schools and provided a background to the researcher's understandings of teacher professionalism. The critical literature review gave direction on approaches to answering the research question.

Task 2 An autoethnographic account of being a specialist Physical Education teacher in a Queensland primary school

The Doctor of Education, James Cook University, sees the teacher as researcher. Autoethnography, as a qualitative research method, uses autobiographical personal narrative to examine a phenomenon, it is a "specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice" (McIlveen, 2008, p.3) and it "... displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.739). As a research method autoethnography allowed the researcher to share reflections on professionalism through her lived experience of teaching physical education in a Queensland state primary school.

To provide a conceptual framework that would assist in understanding the researcher's experiences the work of Relph (1976) was utilised. Relph's *Place and Placelessness* gave a "phenomenology of place" (Seamon and Sowers, 2008, p. 43) which informed the approach to answering the research question in Task 3. Relph identified three elements to place; the physical setting, the activities developed there and the meanings of these activities (Miceli & Hernandez, 2011, 7). Through telling her stories the researcher explored the relationship of professionalism to these elements.

The researcher identified placelessness as impacting on her role as a primary PE specialist teacher and felt constrained in enacting democratic professionalism. The existence of

performance cultures, lack of professional development opportunities and feelings of isolation were all factors in contributing to her placelessness.

The disputed meaning of teacher professionalism, the historical developments in physical education in Queensland and the low status of physical education examined in the critical literature review were evidenced in the autoethnographic account.

Task 3 Dissertation “Professionalism and the primary Physical Education specialist teacher in Queensland state primary schools.”

The dissertation adopted a phenomenological approach to answering the research question. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the methodology selected because it; “seeks to explore participants’ personal lived experiences” (Finlay, 2009, p.8) and recognises that people make sense of their significant experiences. The interpretative process of this methodology is the application of hermeneutics; a branch of knowledge that seeks to interpret texts. The analysis element encompasses interpretation and recognises that the researcher is central to both processes. Hence, the researcher’s assumptions are acknowledged as part of the cyclical process of interpretation and analysis in IPA.

IPA originated in psychology and takes a real-world rather than a transcendental position. This approach is suited to addressing the research question because “IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance for people” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.1). Professionalism is defined, perceived and enacted through the everyday experiences of teaching primary physical education.

In this research project semi-structured interviews were used to collect information from five participants who had experience as primary PE specialist teachers in Queensland state

schools. In IPA studies semi-structured interviews are the usual method employed to facilitate participants to talk about their lived experiences. Participant numbers are kept small as IPA is committed to idiography, where there is a focus on the individual, and on the particular which allows for a deeper analysis of texts.

The participants in this research project were selected through purposive sampling and represented five different career stages; pre-service, approximately five years experience, approximately ten years experience, over twenty years experience and former experience as a primary PE specialist teacher but now working in another position. The rationale for this selection was to reflect the career stages of the APST; Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead and to ascertain if years experience as a primary PE specialist teacher influenced the perception and enactment of professionalism.

The participants interviews were transcribed and analysed following an IPA process where a hermeneutic circle was used to identify emergent themes. Mapping and matching the emergent themes resulted in the production of two super-ordinate themes; *Professionalism as a personal responsibility* and *Physical Education as the other*. Supporting the super-ordinate themes are subordinate themes which are listed below;

Professionalism as a personal responsibility

- *individual attributes;*
- *seeking currency;*
- *the primary PE specialist teacher as role model.*

Physical Education as the other

- *perception of the subject by others (administration, classroom teachers, students, parents);*

- *the blurring of sport and physical education;*
- *the relationship of physical education, non-contact time and professionalism;*
- *the impact of performance and performativity.*

The subordinate themes were dependent on each other, and provided a foundation for a super-ordinate theme. The interdependent relationship of the subordinate theme was represented as a structure of Jenga blocks (from p.133 of dissertation: Figure 3 Relationship of super-ordinate and subordinate themes.). The subordinate themes represented by yellow, orange and pink blocks support, and are dependent on each other and provide a foundation for a super-ordinate theme represented by a blue block.



(Turning it home, 2014, retrieved from <http://www.turningithome.com/2014/01/diy-colorful-jenga-blocks.html>)

IPA follows a practice of connecting super-ordinate and subordinate themes to existing literature and discussing this relationship. The existing literature on teacher professionalism had identified the influence of neoliberalism on managerial professionalism. In this research project the participants' perception, of teacher professionalism was managerial in nature. The definition of professionalism as the enactment of a collection of personal attributes and the absence of a collective view of professionalism for primary PE specialist teachers indicated a controlled and compliant professionalism as described by Sachs (2012). The historical developments of physical education in Queensland had resulted in primary PE specialist teachers being subject to competing and fragmented discourses of teacher professionalism.

The low status of physical education was a factor in the enactment of professionalism. This low status was evidenced in the super-ordinate theme; *Physical education as the other*.

The researcher's assumptions were confirmed in the subordinate themes with one example being that non-contact time would be identified as an issue in the perception and enactment of professionalism. There were contradictions that emerged from the research. The implementation of the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education (AC:HPE) was identified as providing opportunities to enact democratic professionalism but participants had little knowledge on the construction of the AC:HPE or its underlying philosophy. Only one of the participants was aware of the APST, yet they were written to guide the enactment of professionalism. A finding that transpired was that primary PE specialist teachers reinforced their otherness through their labelling of subjects and students.

A more aspirational enactment of professionalism by primary PE specialist teachers in Queensland state schools may be achieved by increasing the opportunities for primary PE specialist teachers to meet, discuss different types of professionalism, and collaborate to create and share knowledge. Such opportunities may lead to a democratic professionalism which sees knowledge creation and transformative practice enhancing the teaching of physical education in primary schools.

Significance

Over the course of this research project papers and reports were produced that had relevance to the project. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) produced a policy document; *Quality Physical Education* (2015) which gave guidelines to policy makers to “inform the provision of quality physical education across the full range from early years through secondary education” (p.5). In 2014 there was a review of the Australian Curriculum initiated by the then Federal government in response to

concerns expressed by principals that the primary school curriculum was crowded. Reports on the physical activity of Australian children were produced in 2014, 2015 and 2016 by Active Healthy Kids Australia. ACHPER Australia promoted the importance of physical education in the Australian primary school curriculum with the production of position statements and identified the challenges it faced (Turner, 2015).

This research is timely and significant because of the continued implementation of the AC: HPE and the discussions occurring about the employment of PE specialists in primary schools (Australian Sports Commission, 2017; Curry, 2011, 2013). *Quality Physical Education* (UNESCO, 2015) called for a focus on primary school physical education and who teaches it. This research project identified a lack of clarity about the role of the primary PE specialist teacher and factors that compromised the enactment of democratic professionalism such as limited professional development opportunities and the relationship of primary physical education with non-contact time. For the principles of *Quality Physical Education* (UNESCO, 2015) to be actioned the findings of this research project should be made available to both practitioners and those responsible for policy making in education. How professionalism is defined, perceived and enacted by primary PE specialist teachers has direct implications for how they teach physical education to students. The research project's findings have relevance nationally and internationally as systems make decision about the employment of specialists in primary schools.

Limitations

It could be argued that the small number of participants (six in total) in this study is a limitation. The numbers include the researcher who produced an autoethnographic account of her life experiences as a primary PE specialist teacher. While autoethnography has been criticised for not collecting information from identified groups in field studies, it does place

the researcher in the culture or situation studied. IPA is committed to idiography where small, purposely selected samples with a specific focus or situation are researched. Both autoethnography and IPA are concerned with lived experiences and allow for a deep analysis of information. Both research approaches generate discussions which can be applied to larger cohorts.

Another limitation is that five of the six participants in the research project were Department of Education and Training (DET), Queensland employees and information collection took place in Queensland and gave a Queensland experience. However, debate about the placement and position of primary PE specialist teachers is a worldwide occurrence and teacher professionalism can be viewed as individual, local and collective.

A criticism and possible limitation is the accusation of researcher bias which could be levelled at this research project. Both autoethnography and IPA acknowledge that the researcher cannot be removed from the research. In this research project the assumptions of the researcher are stated and referenced against the findings to give transparency.

Summary

The project adopted three lenses to investigate the research topic on the perception of professionalism of Physical Education specialist teachers in Queensland state primary schools. The lens of a critical literature review foregrounded the study, a personal lens was applied by the researcher in her exploration of her lived experience as a primary PE specialist teacher, and the lived experiences of other PE specialist teachers in Queensland state primary schools provided a cultural lens. The three lenses give a layered approach to the project while having commonalities. Both autoethnography and IPA are concerned with lived experience and both have a dynamic relationship between the part and the whole through connecting the personal to the cultural. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) described the

relationship between the part and the whole as, “to understand any part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole you look to the parts (p.28). In autoethnography and IPA the relationship between the text and the researcher is one where they inform one another. The researcher brings their biography to the text and the text changes the researcher’s biography. In this research project the critical literature review, the lived experience of the researcher as a primary PE specialist teacher and the life experiences of the participants coincided to produce confirmations, contradictions and new insights.

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