

ASSESSMENT

A Qualitative Evaluation of a Sport in Schools' Program

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Abstract

This study examines data from a range of stakeholders in one Australian state involved in a year-long trial of a primary school physical education (PE) professional development program that included external sport providers. In this program, the role of the external provider was to increase the amount of time allocated to PE in the curriculum through a school's sports program, thereby providing an additional scheduled PE class each week. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken post-intervention with the primary school principals, classroom teachers, specialist PE teachers, external providers, and the professional association partner in the project. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings support existing claims regarding limited communication between external providers and teachers, ambiguity regarding the teaching qualifications of coaches providing PE curriculum experiences, and coaches working in school programs with limited knowledge of appropriate educational pedagogical practices that match student readiness for learning.

Introduction

Researchers suggest that most Australian students reach secondary school without having attained the control of movement abilities benchmarked in the curriculum by the end of Year Four

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(Pill & Harvey, 2019). Underlying reasons for students not achieving the standards indicated in PE curricula have been reported as insufficient time allocated for physical education (PE) in their primary schooling, along with substandard quality of PE programs (Hardman, 2008; Harris et al., 2012). Such concerns about the status of PE in primary schools have existed for some time, both internationally and in Australia. In addition to adequate time allocation, concerns relate to facility provision, resourcing, and primary school teachers' pedagogical content knowledge to deliver educationally purposeful PE (Dollman et al., 2006; Hardman & Marshall, 2001, 2005; Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Pill, 2007; Tinning & Fitzclarence, 2012). PE in primary school is characterised as undervalued and prone to being treated by class teachers as recreation, not education. Further, PE is often the first casualty when there are competing demands for time and resources (such as gym space) in schools, and teachers who are not confident in teaching PE have been known to omit it from their teaching schedules (Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Lynch & Soukup, 2017). Within this context, a collaborative project involving a state-based Department for Education, university researchers, and the professional association for Health and Physical Education (HPE) in one Australian state was undertaken. Through the provision of a year-long, in-school professional development program, this project sought to increase the amount of time dedicated to PE in schools and enhance PE teaching.

To enhance the quality of PE provided by teachers, professional learning opportunities were provided to teachers through a range of initiatives. These included tailored coaching by expert mentors provided by the Education Department, as well as long-term engagement with external sports providers. These providers offered sessions to supplement the weekly PE curriculum provided by a PE teacher, thereby increasing the amount of time dedicated to "PE." Key to the external providers' role within the program was their contribution to a central idea of the program approach, termed the "ideal week" (The PEPL Approach, 2021). This was understood to comprise a minimum of two "PE classes" per week, one of these classes provided by the school's PE specialist (if the school employed one) and the other by a classroom teacher working with an external provider via the Australian Government Sporting Schools Program (SSP). Within

the ideal week idea, these two lessons would be complemented by three class-based physical activity (PA) opportunities provided by the class teacher on the non-PE days. The ‘ideal week’ concept thus ensured daily PA opportunities for children in curriculum time during the school week.

PE in the Australian Curriculum

Schools in the jurisdiction where this project occurred follow the Australian Curriculum (AC) for Health and PE (HPE). The AC: HPE has two strands that equate to the two subjects, Health Education and PE; The Personal, Social and Community Health Strand and the Movement and Physical Activity Strand (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority: [ACARA] 2021). The purpose of the AC: HPE includes students’ development of movement skills that promote immediate and long-term PA participation (ACARA, 2021). Questions, however, have been raised as to whether this is being achieved (Pill & Harvey, 2019). Insufficient provision of curriculum time and teacher expertise to deliver the remit related to movement ability and efficacy represents a serious public health issue as well as a student curriculum attainment issue (Dollman et al., 2006).

PE and External Providers

In Australian primary schools, in most states, PE is the responsibility of a generalist* class teacher. In schools that employ a specialist or dedicated PE teacher, class teachers retain some responsibility for PE teaching, as typically insufficient time allocation is provided to the specialist PE teacher, and some schools have a daily PE policy (Morgan & Hansen, 2007; Spittle et al., 2022; Stylianou et al., 2022). In Australia, the generalist class teacher typically does not have specialist training in PE (Spittle et al., 2022; Whipp et al., 2011). Outsourcing PE (or at least, elements of PE) to external providers has become increasingly common, both internationally and in Australian schools, with a range of justifications offered in the literature. For example, teachers may perceive that external providers can provide superior experiences for students (Morgan & Hansen, 2007; Spittle et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2011) and/or that external providers provide students with experiences that would otherwise be absent when teachers who are not confident in teaching PE avoid

teaching it (Lynch & Soukup, 2017; Williams & Macdonald, 2015). There is also evidence to suggest that teachers perceive external provider delivery as an opportunity for informal professional development (Morgan & Hansen, 2007; Williams & Macdonald, 2015), although some suggest that this is not a major reason for outsourcing (Spittle et al., 2022).

Although there are positive opportunities associated with external providers and some external providers provide a developed curriculum that includes student assessment (Allen et al., 2024), there are tensions relating to the inclusion of external providers in Australian PE settings in schools. These include concerns that external providers lack teaching qualifications and may have limited knowledge about appropriate educative pedagogical practices required to deliver PE experiences that match student readiness for learning (Sperka et al., 2018; Spittle et al., 2022). There is also concern about the scarcity of educative or curriculum-related components in external provider programs, and the omission of student assessment (Sperka & Enright, 2018; Williams & Macdonald, 2015). These concerns may be exacerbated by the fact that there is often limited communication between external providers and teachers (Ni Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019). Concerns also exist about the Spittle et al. (2022) PE program in some schools. Collectively, the provision of external providers as a substitute for PE may mean students are receiving a “simplistic representation of physical education” (Dyson et al., 2016, p. 5) and possibly the de-professionalisation of PE and de-skilling of primary school teachers (Sperka et al., 2018; Spittle et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2011; Williams & Macdonald, 2015). Few external provider programs are evaluated, making it difficult to ascertain their value (Dyson et al., 2016).

Contextual to this study, the state professional association relevant to the jurisdiction where this project occurred asserts:

Any activity or program delivered by an external school provider and implemented during planned curriculum time must be a part of a planned, comprehensive HPE curriculum program and linked directly to learning outcomes or learning intentions of this balanced program and that ‘an external provider’s program should not be used as a replacement

for the health and physical education program or teacher' (Professional Association, 2021).

Sporting Schools Program

Globally, it is recognised that sports can exert an influence on what is included in PE (Redelius & Larsson, 2010) and how it is taught (Hogan & Stylianou, 2018). A presence in primary schools is often seen by sporting organisations as a crucial aspect of their promotion and recruitment of participants (Bowles & O'Sullivan, 2020). The project investigated here incorporated the SSP, an initiative of the Australian Sports Commission. The SSP is offered to schools via four opportunities each year to apply for funds to purchase equipment or resources, pay for teachers' participation in approved PE professional learning opportunities, and/or purchase a sport program to be either teacher-delivered or provided by an approved external provider. SSP opportunities must be provided to students at no cost to families (Australian Sports Commission, n.d.-a).

Three state sporting bodies were involved in the project as external providers, to provide a sport in schools programs during class/curriculum time. The state professional association provided project guidance to the Department and mentoring to the external providers to help ensure their programs were educationally purposeful and strengths-based in line with curriculum expectations (ACARA, 2021).

There is limited research consideration of external providers' delivery of primary school PE in Australia and elsewhere, and with that, insights into the representation of external providers and their contribution to the status of PE in primary schools are understated in the literature. This study identifies important learnings pertaining to the experience of SSP as reported by principals, teachers, external providers, departmental staff, and professional association representatives.

Method

Study Context

The Education Department provided the research team with schools ($n=24$) that met the project eligibility criteria, namely, em-

ploying a specialist PE teacher who provided at least one lesson/week of PE and having class teachers willing to provide one lesson/week of PE. Further consideration was given to the provision of schools from diverse socioeconomic and geographic locations. Of the 24 schools identified and contacted, 14 agreed to participate, as confirmed by the school principal.

The project commenced in Term 1 of the school year with planning and school recruitment. The in-school program was delivered during Terms 2, 3, and 4. Project data collection commenced after university ethics committee approval for the project (project number 2134).

Participants

The data for this study come from end-of-project interviews with Principals ($n=11$), teachers ($n=9$) identified as classroom teachers (CT), $n=6$ identified as specialist PE teachers (PET), and $n=2$ indicated that they were employed as both a PE-specialist and classroom teacher), external providers registered as Sporting School providers (SSPr) ($n=3$) (who were often referred to as “coaches” by interview participants), and representatives from the professional association partner (PAP) in the project ($n=2$).

Data Collection

All semi-structured interviews were conducted by author 1 and occurred via Teams or Zoom meetings at a time convenient to the participant. Interviews with external providers were between 27–33 minutes in length; interviews with professional association representatives were 73–93 minutes, interviews with principals were between 22–48 minutes, and interviews with teachers lasted between 20–36 minutes (with two notable exceptions being interviews whereby two teachers wanted to interview together. These interviews lasted for 50 and 73 minutes each). For interviews with all Education Department staff, the questions related to their experiences of their involvement with the program and perceptions about the processes and outcomes. Questions for external providers related to their experiences with providing sessions in schools throughout this project, working with teachers, and the mentoring by the professional association. Interviews with the professional association focused on external providers and their role working with them, and what they

understood as important aspects pertaining to external providers in schools. All interviews were transcribed by a professional service provider approved by the university.

Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data was informed by Braun et al.'s (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis was led by authors 1 and 2, who immersed themselves in the data by engaging in ongoing “thoughtful and curious” dialogue to consider “what is interesting about the data” (Braun et al., 2019, p. 852). Author 1 developed a preliminary code list for each participant group that included both semantic codes and latent observations. Authors 1 and 2 then used the preliminary codes to identify key themes via constant comparison and reduction collaboratively, and to attain a consensus on the “story” of each transcript. Themes from transcripts within a specific dataset (i.e., principals, teachers, external providers, professional association representatives, and departmental staff) were then compared by authors 1 and 2 to develop a final set of themes relevant to the collated dataset. Authors 3 and 4 then provided a verification check on the process and themes. Analysis led to the identification of five themes, which are presented in the Results and Discussion section.

Author Subjectivity

As with all qualitative research, the findings are constructions informed by the inevitable relative subjectivities of the researchers. The authorship team comprised members with a variety of research experiences as well as teaching, coaching, and sport-playing experiences. These, along with scholarly knowledge, theoretical assumptions, and ideological commitments, cannot be divorced from the analysis process as these experiences and identities inevitably inform the interpretation of data (Braun et al. 2019). Processes undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the analysis, peer debriefing (for credibility), gaining deep insights to allow for thick descriptions (to support transferability), ongoing reflexivity and inclusion of participant voices (to facilitate confirmability), and provision of detail pertaining to the processes undertaken (for dependability).

Results and Discussion

Analysis of interview data provides the opportunity for key learnings in two related but distinct areas, both of which have policy and practice implications. Firstly, it provides a general understanding of teachers' perceptions and use of SSP. This initiative continues to receive a substantial investment from the Australian Government, so it is worthwhile to develop insights about its effective delivery. Secondly, this study provides insights into key interactions between external providers and schools, which identify important lessons for the ongoing relationships between schools and external providers.

Schools' Utilisation of Sporting Schools and External Providers

In the participating schools, although principals must sign off on applications, it was the PE teachers who were predominantly responsible for decisions regarding the application and expenditure of SSP funds. However, principals must sign off on the application. There was only one case where the principal assumed responsibility for the sign-off task

Principals understood that teachers used SSP grants to bring external providers in to provide PE lessons to students, to augment PE teachers' existing programs, to introduce new sport opportunities to children that are not able to be readily provided by the school, and to help establish links with community sport clubs. Classroom teachers, on the other hand, appeared to be unfamiliar with how SSPs were utilised in their schools, or with what they did. Typical of their responses: "The [PE Teacher] will explain all that. He has organised the Sporting Schools stuff yeah. That would've been [name], our PE teacher, who did that" (CT1). This suggests limited engagement with the providers by the class teachers when providers run the programs with the class teacher.

Similarly to principals' assertions, the PE teachers shared that they also used external providers to 1. bring an external voice to engage students with a higher level of expertise in the sport than what the PE teacher could provide; 2. provide new or a variety of sports outside of the experience of the PE teacher or facilities within the school; 3. build school connections to community sport opportunities; and 4. provide students with another 'activity session during the

week. These reasons align with previously published literature exploring reasons for the utilisation of external providers or outsourcing of PE in schools (Morgan & Hansen, 2007; Sperka & Enright, 2018; Williams et al., 2011).

Existing research also suggests the utilisation of external providers as a form of professional learning (Morgan & Hansen, 2007; Williams & Macdonald, 2015). Data provided by the PE teachers also confirmed this as a common reason for the PE teacher engaging with SSP. Typical of responses were: “I’ve used Sporting Schools, predominantly, to support my own learning” (PET6). Another PE teacher elaborated:

If I have found 2-3 new ideas from having a coach in for a couple of lessons a week. I am like ‘oh, that’s great’. I can implement that into my teaching and make sure the kids get some of the correct terminology and knowledge and skills that I may not have in every sport. So, I have found that that’s to be the best way to using Sporting Schools personally (PET2).

Impacts of Teachers’ Perceptions of External Providers

Hogan and Stylianou (2018) reported that the SSP enabled national sporting organisations to ensure funded providers are accredited and registered with their relevant bodies. However, teachers in this study reported that while there are some providers “that are pretty good...there are some that are well below par” (PET2). Throughout interviews, a commonly used phrase was “hit or miss,” a colloquialism meaning as likely to be unsuccessful as successful. For example, one teacher shared:

With Sporting Schools, some people that come out do an amazing job. Some other people, they’re okay so but it varies... It’s really ‘hit and miss’ and you go “I won’t get those people back again” or “That person’s amazing” (Teacher 17).

Two key issues arise from teachers’ experiences with the variations in quality of what the external providers offer in schools. The first relates to how PE teachers elect to spend SSP funding, and the second relates to concerns about teachers modelling their approach-

es according to their observations of external providers. Firstly, the inconsistency of standards and the inability to trust the quality of the external providers have discouraged PE teachers in this study from engaging providers through the SSP. Instead, the PE teachers elected to use funding for purchasing equipment, especially when there is a limited school budget for equipment. For example:

I find it very hit and miss in terms of coaches. So, what we need to do is go ‘all right, we will get coaches for maybe 1-2 lessons’, and I will kind of pinch [copy, use, steal] some of their ideas and then I will deliver it in more of a beneficial way for the kids. Then I can also have equipment that keeps our stocks good and equipment good and the engagement in that sport good as well (PE 2).

Given the objective of Sporting Schools is for partner organisations (that is, national sporting organisations) to “provide greater professional development opportunities for teachers” (Deloitte Access Economics, 2020, p. 25), the fact that teachers are being ‘turned off’ from this opportunity impedes the capacity for this investment to achieve what it sets out to achieve.

Secondly, this stated intention of Sporting Schools (to provide professional development opportunities), combined with the multi-faceted context of this study’s finding of teachers reporting poor- or low-quality experiences offered by external providers (such that they opt not to engage providers) and that many primary school teachers lack PE content and pedagogical knowledge, illuminates another concern. If teachers are unable to discern what constitutes ‘quality’ in terms of PE delivery (that is educationally purposeful, strengths-based, and with content that aligns to student achievement outcomes) elect to model their future approaches to delivering PE based on their observations of external providers who are not necessarily providing ‘quality’ experiences, then there is risk to the quality of the teachers’ future PE provision. This concern is heightened by Williams and Pill’s (2019) suggestion that teachers often fail to use evidence-based documents to formulate or underpin their understanding of what constitutes quality and that there is often “no commonality in how teachers defined quality physical education” (p. 1200).

Learnings from the PEPL project

The PEPL project involved selected external providers working with teachers and in schools. This context provides valuable learning opportunities that could be applied within the general Sporting Schools Program context, as well as insights for future sport in school program developers.

External Providers' Connecting to Curriculum Expectations for Student Learning

The 2020 SSP Evaluation noted an “absence of a joined-up approach between education and sporting agencies in the implementation of the SSP” (Deloitte Access Economics 2020, p. 7). Interviews with external providers revealed that they experienced some initial implementation difficulties related to delivering sports in schools. For example, there was a lack of understanding about which classes the external providers were working with, their specific role or component within the project, and their engagement with the professional association. These uncertainties manifested in a few ways. Providers delivered a relatively unchanged program for the project compared to what they had previously offered schools, despite the differences in their period of engagement (i.e., three terms rather than 4-8 sessions). An example of responses within this theme:

I don't necessarily know how it differentiates or how it's meant to differentiate from what is our traditional Sporting Schools wherefore we're meant to be doing something that's slightly different and the next level or whether. It is literally the same as what we're doing in other schools (EP3).

The project involved a professional association, which was available to provide mentoring and curriculum/educational support to the external providers. This relationship was meant to prevent this situation of delivery uncertainty from occurring, but the opportunity appears not to have been fully utilised by all external providers. External providers recognised were initially not understanding or appreciating the support that the association could offer. However, with time and ongoing engagement, the providers became more understanding of their responsibility to make their programs educationally purposeful. Two of the external providers were very positive

and appreciative of the opportunity to receive in-situ feedback from the professional association education consultant. For example:

He's [the professional association representative] has been able to come out to a number of our sessions, and with his intimate knowledge of the sport curriculum in both the primary school and the secondary school space, we felt really lucky that we were able to get that feedback (EP1).

Two of the providers held both managerial and coaching positions within their sport. The third provider interviewed, who did not engage in any coaching or active participation in the project and was, instead, responsible for scheduling other coaches to attend schools, declined to encourage observation and feedback of the coaches they delegated to schools. They expressed the perspective that it was unfair to put their coaches in the position of being observed when they were not fully cognisant of the project and its objectives. From this, we understand that professional associations are well-positioned to provide important advice and support to national sporting organisations working within schools. However, for these external providers to acknowledge their contributions, there must be recognition of their value. Further, trust and rapport between a professional mentor and external provider are essential to enhancing the learning potential of an SSP (Patton et al., 2005).

External Providers as a Learning Opportunity for Teachers

During this project, the external providers were able to deliver a lesson during curriculum time, as taken by the classroom teacher (i.e., not during specialist PE lesson time). This was designed to provide classroom teachers with the opportunity to observe and directly work with external providers. In this study, the classroom teachers indicated that outside this project, they had little previous opportunity to attend PE-specific professional development activities. However, in contrast to previously published literature indicating the potential for external providers to deliver primary school teacher professional development (Morgan & Hansen, 2007; Williams & Macdonald, 2015), interviews with classroom teachers in this study suggested that they did not necessarily utilise the external provider presence as a learning opportunity. As earlier noted, when asked about SSP, the classroom teachers all deferred to the PE teachers.

Data from this study indicate that classroom teachers felt further learning was not required. Typically, in the existing literature, primary school classroom teachers have reported that they lack confidence and competence to deliver a quality PE program (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). It is possible that in this study, PE was perceived by the classroom teachers as being the responsibility of the specialist PE teachers and thus the external providers. Having typically been initiated by the specialist PE teacher, it meant that it was not something the classroom teachers needed to pay attention to. It may also be that the classroom teachers did not recognise or believe that the external provider-delivered sessions offered an effective learning opportunity for them. Here, we refer to our earlier reporting that the quality of sessions delivered by external providers is perceived as "hit or miss."

In contrast to comments from the classroom teachers, the external providers reported greater engagement from teachers in this project compared to their delivery of sessions in other schools (not involved in this project). The providers shared that external to this project, they were aware that teachers observed them to see "exactly how we run these sessions" (EP2), but that within this project, there was an enhanced level of interest in what the providers were doing. They believed the teachers asked more questions about skill development, games, and small group management than in their other school program deliveries. Typical of the external provider comments, "more intentionally [engaging] with the teachers in the project than what we would normally do with Sporting Schools" (EP1).

Within regular SSP delivery, external providers provide between 4-8 sessions. In this project, engaging with the same teachers and students over three terms might have provided the external provider perception that there was greater rapport between teachers and providers. If we are to accept the external providers' understanding of events, then a future consideration for the SSP might be to explore the potential for extending the sessions beyond the current 4-8, such that teachers and external providers might engage more meaningfully and with learning purposes in mind.

Readiness to Provide an Educatively Purposeful Program

The professional association involved in the project maintains a clear position on the role and responsibilities of external providers and teachers in delivering HPE in schools, consistent with the

description detailed in the introduction. According to one of the professional association representatives, it is important to be “really clear” about what is PE curriculum time and what is PA time in the school schedule, especially regarding services provided by the external providers. This person emphasised that, “anything within curriculum time needs to have that real focus on educative purpose, focus and linking [to the Australian Curriculum].” Interviews with representatives from the professional association and external providers revealed varying degrees of readiness among external providers to undertake educationally purposeful work that extended beyond the provision of “just” a sports session.

Through serving as mentors to the external providers in this program, the professional association representatives considered that many SSP providers need substantial support to ensure they are delivering a program that aligns with the AC: HPE and provides students with a PE experience rather than an incursion PA sport experience. For example:

They [external provider SSP] don't relate to the Australian curriculum; the coaches can't talk about Australian curriculum and where it [their program] fits. It's the unusual coach that can do that, so they need a lot of support to be effective in that [school] environment (PAPrR1).

SSP that align with the curriculum are believed to increase relevance to schools and enhance program credibility (Australian Sports Commission, 2017). Attention to this by national sporting organisations is necessary and may present as a strategic way to be more appealing to schools (Hogan & Stylianou, 2018), as alignment with the curriculum directly addresses the need of teachers to report student attainment against curriculum standards.

There was also a view from the professional association representatives that one of the core tenets of the SSP, the use of a Game Sense coaching approach (Sport Australia, 2021b), was not understood by the coaches in this project. They considered that the external providers understood the benefits and techniques of keeping students engaged as a sound pedagogical approach to games and sport in PE (Light, 2014; Pill, 2011). However, what the coaches understood as a ‘game sense approach’ was not what they were facilitating with students.

They thought they were using a game sense approach. They know the language; they know the words but when I provided the feedback, I said why did you teach the skills first? And they said because they needed the skills to play the games. I said “well, that’s not a game sense approach”. In a game sense approach, you play the game first and then you use the game as the springboard into teaching the kids what they need to successfully play the game. (PAPr1)

One sport (Net/court sport) had a program resource developed in accordance with the AC: HPE and with lesson plans consistent with the Game Sense approach for schools and coaching providers to use in teaching their sport in schools. However, even with this one sport, the professional association representative found the coaches offering the SSP lacked knowledge of the sport program resource provided by the national sport body to guide educationally aligned work in schools. The other two sports (Invasion game sports 1 and 2) lacked a similar resource to guide coaches working in SSP. The observations suggest there is more work to be done by external providers and their national or state sporting organisations to be ready to engage within the AC: PE focus area of Games and Sports in a strengths-based, educationally purposeful manner, meeting the remit of the SSP. Potentially, the outsourcing of sport teaching in primary school PE constrains and possibly presents a naive understanding of curriculum content expectations and appropriate pedagogy to primary school teachers (Sperka & Enright, 2018).

While all three external providers considered their coaches to be ‘professional’ due to the paid nature of their engagement, there were differences in how coaching was perceived, with some viewing it as a career or vocation, while others saw the coaching workforce as a highly transient and often temporary or casual one. An example of the latter was the reference to the expectation that: “realistically, I expect them to disappear after two to three years when uni is done” (EP3). It is perhaps not unrealistic then to consider that how the external provider coaches were positioned within the broader sport organisation would impact their capacities (and potentially desire or motivation) to be educationally purposeful in implementation of sport in schools’ programs (Buddelmeyer et al., 2013).

One provider shared that it was good for their coaches to be exposed to this program as this will help the coaches “build their skills as to how they can better manage that in the future” (EP1). The more extended period of engagement during the school year also provided increased opportunity for the external providers to develop their insights into class and teacher dynamics. For example, one EP reported “each of the teachers have their own individual class routine and understanding of how they work within their class environment... that created a wonderful understanding for us, through that consistency.” Working within the same project also enabled the three different sports, which otherwise would be unlikely to come together, to develop rapport, discuss approaches, and recognise the similarities between their practices and goals (albeit within different sport codes). In this way, they were able to develop a learning community/community of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wegner-Trayner, 2015), which they recognised as something different and valuable. Illustrating this:

I think we're all in this business to get kids active. It is valuable sharing and hearing from other codes, I suppose, because more often than not, they've probably come across the same issue I have, and if you chat and you can work out 'I've had that as well' and see how they've – see if we can apply it to our sport. It was great to sit down and talk with those guys (EP2).

Professional learning communities are widely advocated within continuing professional development programs for teachers (Armour & Yelling, 2004, 2007; Beni et al., 2021) and identified by Sport Australia, in “supporting the development, education and training of coaches” (Australian Sports Commission, n.d.-b). Like that described by Garner and Hill (2017), it was the EP2s’ perspective (outlined above) that the external coaches from different sports benefited from insights into the practices of others. There did not appear to be feelings of competition between the different sport providers as has been observed previously (Lemyre et al., 2007).

Despite the positive aspects recognised by the sport providers from their engagement in the project, interviews with the Education Department staff involved in the project indicated that they believed one of the sport providers was not interested in the partnership area

they had been assigned. This was attributed to the lack of local community clubs for that sport in the area where the schools the provider was allocated to work with were located. This highlights the importance of aligning the sport with community opportunities, as sport providers are not altruistic in their approach to schools (Hogan & Stylianou, 2018), and the provision of sport in school programs is a business decision (Allen et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study included an analysis of data provided by a range of stakeholders involved in the implementation of a year-long PE project that included a sport in schools program in curriculum time. Key insights include that teachers' perceptions about the quality of sport in schools' programs being "hit or miss" highlight concerns about the quality of some external sport providers' curriculum offerings for schools. Further, conflicting ideas concerning the extent to which teachers utilise external providers for professional development to enhance their content and pedagogical ability to deliver quality PE were evident. Additionally, this study highlighted that there are varying degrees of readiness of external providers to participate in educationally purposeful and pedagogically sound sport experiences in lieu of class teacher provision of PE in primary schools.

A limitation of this study is that only three external providers were involved across the 14 schools in the project, which was delivered in one Australian state. Further research with primary schools and external providers across the range of sports providing sport in schools programs in place of PE, alongside PE, or in addition to PE is needed to understand whether the outsourcing of PE teaching and school sport experiences is beneficial to Australian primary school teachers and students' attainment of student movement and participation achievement expectations.

*"Generalist" refers to a teacher who is responsible for teaching across all learning areas (Mills et al., 2020).

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