The opportunity to go this year’s conference would have to be the main highlight in itself as it provided the opportunity to meet with past and present colleagues, teachers from interstate and overseas. I was fortunate enough to spend a fair bit of time at lunch one day discussing the issues we face with interpreting the curriculum and how we are trying to implement it with Prof. David Walsh from San Francisco State University. Discussion was centred around how we as teachers can compete in a world in which students come to school with problems and issues, poor diets, lack of sleep and where it’s more important to have more likes on your face book page than actual real friends.

Another highlight from the conference was attending a session run by Amber Heaft, a teacher from Prospect North, about student leadership and lunchtime play activities in schools. It was great to hear how she had taken an idea and concept that I had presented at a previous conference several years ago to an entirely new level across her school. It was wonderful to see that she had further developed the notion of how important student leadership in schools is and the experience students can gain and the positive change it can make in a school.

The most interesting issue that I came across was an article that I was given during one of the conference sessions by associate professor Rob Jenkins which was titled the ‘4 Properties of Powerful teachers’. I found this article extremely interesting and thought provoking. He states that powerful teachers possess the following qualities: personality, presence, preparation and passion, and that you need to reassess what you do in the classroom everyday so that you approach each and every day as if it’s the first time you’ve ever taught, with passion and enthusiasm.

Another interesting issue of note was the information and statistics presented by Griffin Langley during his lecture on play. He insists that play – ‘Is mucking around and child driven’, and that children today don’t do enough of it. He presented some staggering statistics, for example:

- only 19% of students in schools are meeting their minimum daily physical fitness requirements.
- current research suggests that a child has approx. 2hr a day of TV time and that a 10 yr old in one year will watch a staggering 1900+ hours of TV. (Approx. 80 days)
- 68% of Australian children aged between 3-7 have a smart phone or device and spend approx. 23 hr a week on it.
- most Australian children spend less than 2 hours a day outside
- 25% are obese and 14% have mental health issues

It is interesting to note that the amount of TV watched is consistent with a student survey that was done by a class last year in my school to ascertain what can be done to improve students' participation in sport and physical activity. The solution is of course to create more engaging play spaces and to educate parents that physically active students perform better academically. To explain to them that sport isn’t enough and that as parents they need to be on-board when it comes to encouraging their children to be more physically active. In conclusion parents need to talk more to their children and to engage them more in conversations, to take them outside to explore, and that Physical education needs to be supported by physical activity which is being active. (Walking, climbing, running etc.)

Personally one of the major issues I still think wasn’t addressed at the conference was the fact that the Federal and State government still view Health and Physical Education as one subject as they are contained in the one curriculum document.
Having been a teacher for over 20+ years and a specialist sports teacher for at least 12+ of those years I still am amazed that our State government doesn’t see the difference.

As a PE Specialist, to me Physical Education provides the best opportunity for students to gain the skills and knowledge needed to participate in a wide range of physical activity that helps them to maintain and sustain an active lifestyle. It provides the essential platform for specific skill development, physical fitness, and team skills, decision making and social skills. It is where they learn to set goals, evaluate their own fitness and develop an understanding of the benefits of physical activity on a healthy lifestyle.

In summary, ‘Physical education programs offer the best opportunity to provide physical activity to all children and to teach them the skills and knowledge needed to establish and sustain an active lifestyle.’

“Quality physical education programs offer learning opportunities, appropriate instruction, and meaningful and challenging pedagogical experiences for all participants.”
(Maine Public Schools- Maine USA.)

Health education is more about giving students a knowledge base that will help them mentally, emotionally and socially to avoid health risks by teaching students healthy behaviours. In Health students learn about basic health concepts, how the human body works and the influence they can have on it, and skills to know how to deal with complex emotional and social issues. In essence it assists students in living healthier, happier lives.

They should be viewed separately not as one subject but rather as complementing each other.

The greatest statement during the conference that made an impact on me was during the Fritz Duras Memorial lecture by Dr. Graham Dodd who stated, “Kids who are more active achieve more! They are more attentive in class, cause less discipline and behaviour issues.” In essence, ‘We move to activate the brain. It is the first organ to benefit when we move.’

This got me thinking a lot during the rest of the conference as to, ‘How do I influence change in my school?’

I believe the biggest issue facing most Primary Schools is the constant battle to find a balance within the crowded curriculum for extra physical activity. At Plympton Primary all of our students enjoy 2 x 45 minutes lessons a week in PE and most class teachers go out every morning for at least 15-20 for morning fitness. So the challenge is really how to get students to be more active at home. A difficult task given that sport has to compete with an ever increasing technology presence. (Game consoles, IPADs, Smart phones, Internet.) The rising cost to parents of club sport and the lack of school based sporting activities due to funding cuts makes it even more challenging for parents.

So what changes can and will I need to make at Plympton Primary?

At the staff level I believe I need to challenge staff to look at the purpose behind morning fitness and what exactly does that mean. Are they teaching the students something new each time or are they just playing an old boring game like golden child that the kids don’t really like but at least they’re not doing school work? Do I need to up skill my staff with some PD at staff meeting and outline that physical activity is about having fun while learning something new? To educate them that students need to be more active and constantly moving when doing sport. To rewrite the school’s understanding of what exactly being active means. This would involve developing daily fitness activity folders on a variety of different skills and games that teachers could then teach their students.

At a school level I need to look at how this impacts within the classroom. Do kids need to be standing up and walking around the class more often rather than sitting down? Do we need to purchase physio balls to replace chairs and get higher desks so that students have to stand rather than sit? The research says yes but at what financial cost? How do we modify our play space to allow kids to be more active? Providing them with extra equipment to use isn’t really the answer.
As a school community we need to educate our parents on the benefits of turning off the TV and letting children explore outside, walking to the local playground without fearing for their safety, climbing trees and walls and splashing in muddy puddles without fear of being told off.

At a cluster level we need to look at developing a network/Hub group of PE teachers to look at how we can better work on driving and creating change within our community. I intend to focus on sharing ideas, pooling equipment, looking at developing units that encourage students to be active, and to share my expertise with others in a mentoring role so that as physical educators we don’t have to go it alone.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the Teachers Registration Board for the opportunity to attend the 29th Bi-annual International ACHPER conference. It was a fantastic opportunity to listen to what PE and Health Teachers are doing interstate and overseas, to meet past colleagues, lecturers and student teachers (who are now teaching in their own right). I came away from the conference with a sense of renewed enthusiasm for developing new and exciting programs for my school in addition to a desire to make a greater contribution to mentoring student teachers (and young graduates) at both university and school level.