29th ACHPER Conference, Adelaide 2015

Attending the ACHPER conference provided many highlights for the 2015 calendar, both professionally and socially. Being surrounded by teachers who are passionate about teaching life skills through educational subjects such as Health and Physical Education is truly encouraging and reflects perhaps the most paramount core value within my own teaching pedagogy. This year’s conference theme 'Value into Action - a Brighter Future' focused on the importance of physical exercise for cognitive development as well as social, emotional and physical wellbeing and the need for educators to facilitate the marriage of all subject areas to physical activity to stimulate and focus the mind and activate the maximum potential of every student.

Keynote speakers over the three days explored practical concepts to promote the values reflected within the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). They include examining how success, challenge and failure strengthens personal identities and builds relationships, practicing and refining fundamental movement skills, influencing actions and behaviours which enable inclusiveness, all using a strength-based approach.

To David Walsh, Professor at the San Francisco University, this means using physical education to engage students and strengthen teacher-student relationships, but also allowing class counselling times, awareness discussions about morals reflected through behaviour, debriefing and a reflection each day to understand how the skills of physical activity can be transferred and integrated into their everyday lives.

Alfred Deakin Professor, Jo Salmon challenged us to make changes in the physical and cultural environment for our schools, not just by increasing physical activity, but rather decreasing sedentary time during the school day. According to studies conducted by Jo at the Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research (C-PAN), 70% of a student’s time at school is spent sitting down. This sedentary lifestyle has been compared to an astronaut’s; the wastage of muscle and bone and negative impacts on overall health provides evidence that when we live like this, we get sick. However, changing our ‘sitting culture’ requires making alterations to daily routine and play equipment. The Transform-Us! program designed by Deakin University for primary years’ children, incorporates various approaches intended to reduce and interrupt children’s sitting and promote physical activity and includes delivering standing lessons each day, taking short (two minute) ‘active breaks’ each 30 minutes, giving ‘active homework’ to establish healthy exercise habits at home, and providing playground markings and novelty sporting equipment such as circus balls, ribbons and hoola hoops for playtime at recess and lunch.

Similarly to Jo, keynote speaker Griffin Longley from Nature Play WA delivered a realistic and relevant lecture about children and technology, stating that guidelines for maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle requires no more than two hours of screen time each day, not including time spent at school on computers or digital devices. Griffin identified some alarming statistics that reflect the current trends for children and technology; 68% of kids
aged 3-7 have a smart phone and spend almost 23 hours a week on that device, when children don’t spend any time in front of a screen their vocabulary includes around 6000 words per day, compared to a mere 500 words when in front of a screen, and perhaps most shockingly, that kids are getting less play time than those who are institutionalised in prison. Griffins’ solution is to go back to ‘play’ as sport alone does not give children enough physical activity. This requires making technology an ally and not asking children to ‘leave their technology inside and come out and play’ as this creates a constant battle. However, if we incorporate technology into play through activities such as geocaching, we can encourage nature play without resistance and maintain a healthy active lifestyle.

The active workshops during the ACHPER conference were particularly impressive and gave practical demonstrations of engaging techniques and content for PE. Andreas Olascoagas’ session -How to engage more students in early PE- showcased his eccentric personality and reminded educators to be weird and wonderful when teaching children. I took many things from his lessons, from games designed to explore space and levels, to using diverse and funny names and in particular, noises, when referring to familiar games and rules to keep things fresh and new. At the end of the session, Andreas explained his philosophy about the ‘rule of three’. This concept summarises a child’s ability to multitask; watching television, listening to music and chatting and therefore when giving instructions, teachers should follow this rule and do so in sets of threes.

Kirsty Crouch, PE educator at Immanuel Primary School, devoted an entire active session to fun games which require minimal space and equipment. At first, the concept of the games seemed basic and straightforward, but as the class progressed through each game, we realised that every ‘game’ targeted many more skills other than motor skills and coordination. In our teams, we learnt the importance of communication, co-operation and developing and executing strategies. Kirsty’s experience as an educator allowed her to teach us the very best of ‘all-inclusive’ games, and despite being designed for primary aged children, every one of us in that session developed a friendship and left with a smile on our face from the thrill of participating in a highly active, fun and engaging PE lesson.

The non-active workshops I chose to attend covered a variety of topics that I felt don’t get addressed at schools and aren’t explored to their full potential. Phil Doecke is the Director of the Bachelor of Education in Primary Education and Disability Studies at RMIT University and focused his session on inclusivity to students with physical, intellectual and social disabilities. Phil highlighted that nationally, 4-7% of students have a disability and as teachers it is our obligation to ensure that no child is excluded regardless of their abilities. This means Physical Education lessons need to be modified to include students and should be done so using the ‘TREE’ principle; identifying and modifying the Teaching strategy, the Rules of the game, the Environment and the Equipment.

SHINEsa’s Jill Spurling delivered an honest and powerful session, addressing the need to talk about sexuality and sexual health with our students. Relationships and sexual education within the Australian Curriculum is cross curricular but the outcomes can be specifically found under general capabilities and complement the key learning outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework (COAG 2009) which states that ‘children have a strong sense of identity and wellbeing, are connected with and contribute to their world, are confident and
involved learners and effective communicators.’ Jill explained that teaching sexual education requires more than just knowledge. Children need to have the skills and strategies to negotiate through various situations, particularly in a world saturated by media and technology which portray negative body images and provide easy access to information, which out of context makes it difficult for children to make well informed decisions. This workshop offered practical activities and ways to ‘build the language’ of sexual education so that young people can begin having conversations and celebrating sexual diversity. Most importantly for educators, it is imperative that we understand that sexuality begins at birth. It is a lifelong and ever-changing process which is a part of one’s identity and therefore must be taught and advocated with respect and realistic expectations and methodologies that are relevant to current generations.

Another workshop which discussed difficult subject matter was Jan Stirling in her session entitled; Effective, honest and direct feedback. As an active player and coach within the basketball community, Jan is a personal role model and holds the utmost respect among athletes across every sporting code and level. Giving direct and honest feedback within a school setting is seen as delicate and something that I believe, teachers often avoid for fear of misinterpretation which can escalate into harbouring hostile teacher-student and parent-teacher/school relationships. This can be an unfortunate consequence if the feedback is seen as personal and poorly timed, but it is an extremely important aspect of teaching physical education in order to build resilient champions and leaders. Jan’s credibility comes from many years of being an experienced elite coach at the highest possible level and she maintains that providing effective feedback requires supporting negative feedback with hard data, focusing on specifics rather than general behaviours and adjusting the feedback to fit the past performances of the individual and their level of development. These guidelines may be better applied within a coaching scenario, and to those who wish to be ‘coached’ to success, however giving and receiving honest feedback is a part of life and by providing an example of the best way to deliver feedback will give students the tools to teach others, and ultimately achieve success.

In conclusion, over the course of the conference we were invited to reflect on our quality of teaching in accordance to the National Curriculum. Robert Randall, Chief Executive Officer of ACARA emphasised that the new curriculum will only make a difference if we work with it. The document should provide opportunities for affirmation and also facilitate questions about areas for improvement within our own organisational, teaching and assessment skills, and while the focus of the conference remained on the propositions for Health and PE, we are reminded that the aim for personal and social capability for students is cross-curricular.

“Students with well-developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, develop resilience and a sense of self-worth, resolve conflict, engage in teamwork and feel positive about themselves and the world around them. The development of personal and social capability is a foundation for learning and for citizenship.” ACARA

Just like we teach our students, the knowledge and understanding without application of information would be deemed unsuccessful learning, and so it is vital that I turn the values I have gained from ACHPER into action. I believe my contribution as a relief teacher to
schools and the communities, comes through my teaching strategies and content. If I can teach my students the facts about how and why physical activity benefits the body and improves learning, I can instil positive ideals that they can teach to others. If I can excite students with games and activities that build friendships and enjoyment, then they will play them with others. Most importantly I can be a role model, nurturing and moulding leaders by teaching students behavioural traits; to be humble, inspirational and to work hard both on and off the sporting field.

ACHPER reinforced that it is our responsibility to shift the power to our students by emphasising the bigger picture. As Health and PE educators, it’s not just about ‘the game’; we are teaching honesty, acceptance, respect, teamwork, resilience and all the skills needed for life, but this is something that can only be accomplished when students are provided with the opportunity to nourish their body and mind through physical activity.

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