

*The second part of 'Writing History' features **Garry Powell**, author of the forthcoming PMI Press publication*



Valuable Steps: A History of Physical Education in Victoria

Garry's inspiration to write *Valuable Steps* came in 1990 from Harvey Cox, retired Supervisor of Physical Education who said to him 'Powelly, you've got to write the history of phys ed. You're the only one who was there in the early 60s and who is still involved today'.

Garry indeed began his career in 1963 as an itinerant PE teacher for the Education Department's Physical Education Branch. Over the next 49 years he has taught PE at primary and secondary levels and continued to teach PE 'hands on' while performing other roles such as Vice Principal and Principal. Garry has been a tertiary lecturer in PE also. As a retired teacher and Fellow of the Australian Council of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) the new millenium has seen him sit on many physical education committees and reviews. He has also written seven published teacher reference books on physical education.

Having made the decision to write a history of PE in Victoria, in 1991 Garry set about gathering images and documents via ACHPER and the PE Staff Association (PESA) as well as many retired physical educators.

'The response was overwhelming!' he says, 'At one stage I had a garage full of boxes containing photos, notes, books and booklets. In 1995 I started researching the archives of the Education Department that were held in Treasury Place. This continued for eight years. Simultaneously, I was given unfettered access to the material left to ACHPER by such doyens in PE as May Cox, Rosalie Virtue, Lorna McConchie, Eunice Gill, Merlene Neagle, Brian Nettleton and Peter Fryar. The next eight years were spent putting all this information into a book that would be an accurate history, be thought provoking and provide a *good read*.'

On the subject of readers, Garry says that *Valuable Steps* will be a compusory read for all physical educators and an invaluable resource for secondary and tertiary students of PE, as it will be the most comprehensive book written on the history of PE at the state level.

'But so too will it interest the general populus.

All of us have been to school and all of us have experienced physical education in some form. This will bring forth memories and be able to place any reader into the 130-year time frame.'

Garry says that the benefits of PE are well researched and recognised both in Australia and overseas. 'It's a bit like climate change - our governments are reluctant to openly endorse it because it will require them to spend a lot of money. But again, like climate change, we need short term pain for long term gain.'

Regular, quality physical education at primary school promotes for children:

- correct body growth
- decrease in postural defects
- development of healthy physiology
- development of neural pathways and therefore overall cognition
- increased interest in school activity
- enhanced learning in other subject areas due to increased enthusiasm for school
- remediation in language for the kiniesthetic learner
- better self image and confidence
- working as a member of a team

Most of all he says, 'Enjoyable physical activity and physical education at school is the basis for lifelong habits and the capacity to make informed choices.'

Garry outlines the models of delivery of PE in Victorian schools from the early days of the colony to the present day:

- In the early days PE was taken on a daily basis by military personnel brought in from outside the school system
- From the 1930s-60s PE was delivered by classroom teachers and visiting intinerant specialists in combination. In all primary schools in the state system District Inspectors enforced that the content and time allotment of the subject was adhered to. During this time, all primary teachers received basic training in the teaching of PE as a part of their pre- service training. This enabled a successful combination of generalist and specialist teaching in the subject.
- In the 1970s and early 1980s PE specialists were appointed to all government primary and secondary schools. At primary schools these were above the pupil:staff ratio. The results were amazing - there was a huge increase in the quality of the physical education being taught, better teacher satisfaction and school morale.
- In the late 1980s supernumerary staff allocation was abolished. All staff allocations were left to individual schools. This led to most schools choosing to have more teachers in classrooms in order to decrease pupil numbers in each grade. Most specialists were abolished in primary schools - not just in physical education, but also in music, art and foreign languages. Now the teaching pf PE was left to the expertise of each class teacher.
- Additionally, with changes to the structure of

teacher training in the 1970s it became possible to do pre-service training with minimal exposure to some subjects. PE, music and science saw the greatest decline. Subsequently, these subjects became neglected in primary school curriculums, and this trend continues to the present.

Garry says that physical education today is in a 'strangely dichotomous situation. At secondary school level it has never been better - all have PE departments with numerous PE specialist trained teachers.

'At primary school level and in its allied tertiary institutions it has never been worse. This is in conflict with the research showing that the prime age for acquiring physical skills is in the prepubescent years 7-11. These are students in Years 3-6. Yet we are abandoning children in this group, with skill acquisition coming in at secondary school level when it is too late for many children. And without the necessary skills many teenagers then choose not to be involved in PE because they feel incompetent - possibly cutting them off from a lifetime of enjoyment of sport and all the associated health and social benefits.

'The more affluent private primary schools have specialist teachers taking PE, and though there are recommendations for content and time allotment these are often not accommodated nor enforced at state schools. Sport, music and other extra curricular activities have also become opportunities afforded more often to privileged children.'

Garry says that the rapid increase we are seeing in obesity, diabetes and other lifestyle diseases can be put down in a major part to a lack of physical activity. 'The diet debate gets a lot of publicity but the second part of the equation - body movement - gets very little.

'But at the prime ages for the acquisition of physical skills children in general are becoming more sedentary - they are walking to school and playing outside less often because of safety concerns, and they are entertained at home by modern technology such as x-boxes, computers, iPads, iPhones, and more television stations than ever before.'

Garry hopes his history of physical education will get the public generally, and those involved in physical education in particular, thinking about the role of physical education in our schools and beyond. 'What is needed is a government to allocate funds or to legislate and enforce that physical education specialists take regular quality physical education programs in all primary schools.'

Valuable Steps is scheduled for release in July. It will be the 14th PMI Press publication.

If you would like to go on the list to receive an information sheet/order form at the time of publication please call Christine on 9510 3393 or email christine@pmi.net.au

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