The nature and scope of outdoor education in Western Australian secondary schools

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Chapter 6: Summary

6.1 Introduction

There has been very little OE-specific research conducted in WA, resulting in a gap in the understanding of current practice. The 2007 baseline data regarding OE courses in schools were used to identify issues and to provide recommendations to support the growth and potential contributions of OE in the educational settings of the future. The research design was based on previous studies that had been used to establish a profile of OE in Victorian, SA, New Zealand and Singaporean schools. It was the intention that this WA data would contribute to the overall profile of OE in Australia and beyond.

In this chapter, a brief summary of the study is provided, based on the research questions. First, profiles of the school sectors were developed, including OE: teaching qualifications (both academic and skills based), the various curriculum formats, learning outcomes, the importance of the learning area, the existing barriers and the support measures required to further the development of OE in WA schools.

In Phase 3 of the study, longitudinal data were collected and used to explore the intention and actual delivery of the WACE Outdoor Education course, as this curriculum is used in the majority of schools in WA. Study schools were removed from the All schools sample and the initial intention to deliver all stages of the WACE Outdoor Education course was compared to the actual delivery. Trends identified in the Study schools were then compared with trends observed in All schools.
6.2 Key Findings: Phase 2

6.2.1 Overview

Numerous significant differences existed between school sectors, which resulted in differences in the nature and scope of OE delivery in WA schools in 2007.

6.2.2 Political, ideological and curricular factors

Regardless of sector type, three overarching political, ideological and curricular factors contributed to the position of OE in all of the schools. The first factor was that the TRBWA does not mandate specialist skills for teaching OE. This was particularly evident in Government schools, which had a significantly lower number of teachers with OE qualifications, certifications and registrations.

Second, in all school sectors, the principal is the gatekeeper of their school and therefore has a significant influence on the type and number of OE programmes being delivered. Government schools recorded the lowest sector response rate for this project, which may indicate a lower initial level of commitment to the inclusion of OE in the curriculum. A misunderstanding regarding the values and ideology of OE as part of the holistic development of students could be inferred, given the level of commitment to the number of OE programmes offered, particularly sequentially developed programmes and willingness to employ specialist trained OE teachers and/or provide appropriate PD for existing teachers to ensure the quality of programmes.

Third, the WACE Outdoor Education course must be taught according to a set syllabus. However, being governed by one fixed curriculum that may be offered as an elective and may be taught by teachers with insufficient training appeared to be restricting the growth of OE in WA. Almost 60% of the Independent schools and
25% of the Catholic schools were not committed to the WACE Outdoor Education course, instead choosing to deliver other OE programmes that provided greater OE opportunities for students.

These factors contributed directly to a number of key barriers that were evident across all sectors to varying degrees. A crowded curriculum, timetabling, staffing and costs associated with programme delivery influenced the opportunity for the growth OE directly.

6.2.3 Fees and OE budget

Financial issues clearly influenced the nature and scope of OE. The study found that the Independent schools charged significantly higher annual fees than both the Government and Catholic schools. OE budgets were also significantly greater, as would be expected given the annual fee structure of schools. Of the sample schools, 43% had an OE budget below $5,000 and only the Independent schools had an annual OE-specific budget higher than $25,000.

6.2.4 Staffing and qualifications

Teachers of OE were employed under various titles. The Independent schools employed more teachers as Head of Learning Area (HLA) OE than schools in the other sectors, who employed staff under the title of Head of Learning Area (HLA) PE. The Government and Catholic schools employed the most teachers under the titles of HPE and OE teacher.

Teacher titles reflected the actual teaching loads. In the majority of Government and Catholic schools, the teaching of OE represented only a part of a full-time teaching load, whereas the Independent schools employed staff to teach only OE. The Catholic and Independent schools had more staff teaching OE field-based programmes longer than 21 days and many teachers in Independent schools
taught between 51 and 100 field days. This significant difference shows a clear disparity in the role of the OE teacher within the school sectors and provides an insight into the types of programmes delivered.

A degree in HPE was the most commonly held qualification among all teachers, particularly those in Government and Catholic schools. The Government schools had fewer teachers with postgraduate degrees and the Independent schools had the highest number of teachers with a Graduate Diploma of Outdoor Pursuits. Teachers in Independent schools held more qualifications, certifications and registrations in wilderness or remote area first aid, NOLRS bushwalking (or equivalent), kayaking, sea kayaking and swift-water rescue. Clearly, the Independent schools employed more highly qualified teachers to support their greater scope of programmes.

6.2.5 Scope of OE programmes

The Independent schools offered a significantly higher number of fee-inclusive OE programmes in Year 8. In Year 9, more than half of the Government schools did not offer OE. More Government and Catholic schools had additional charges for participation but kept these costs below $299. Year 10 had the greatest delivery of programmes in all school sectors and the majority of schools charged for participation. The Government schools offered a significantly higher number of programmes in Year 11 and in most cases, kept costs below $299. Over half of the schools in all sectors offered no OE in Year 12.

6.2.6 Types of OE programmes

This study found a significant difference in the intention to offer OE programmes other than WACE. Almost 60% of the Independent schools and 25% of
the Catholic schools were not committed to the WACE Outdoor Education course, choosing to offer other OE programmes instead.

The Independent schools had a far greater number of students participating in sequentially developed and extra-curricular OE-based programmes but had fewer students participating in the Year 12 WACE curriculum. The Independent schools also had a greater student participation in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. Only one Catholic school was involved in Outward Bound. Both the Independent and Catholic schools were more likely than the Government schools to integrate OE into other curriculum areas. Teachers from all school sectors reported that they catered for students with educational support needs; however, fewer Government schools included these students into existing mainstream OE programmes.

6.2.7 Outdoor Pursuits

Bushwalking had the highest level of overall participation across all school sectors, with the Independent schools recording the greatest number of days and students involved in this activity. The Independent schools also had the most student involvement in ropes courses and snow skiing and was the only school sector that had students involved in scuba diving programmes. The Government schools had the highest number of days and students involved in snorkelling. It was clear that the choice of pursuits offered was influenced directly by variables such as timetabling, budget, availability of equipment, staffing, staff training and the ease of access to local environments.

6.2.8 Learning outcomes

In general, the learning outcomes associated with OE were consistently rated high across all the school sectors. On average, schools reported the top three outcomes to be improved social relationships with peers, increased cooperative
behaviour and increased responsibility. All sectors considered environmental conservation and improved physical fitness as the lowest-rating outcomes, suggesting that participation in OE was not seen to promote physical activity and an active lifestyle.

6.2.9 Barriers preventing the growth of OE

Competition with other curriculum areas, time required of teachers and staffing levels were the greatest barriers. Timetable restraints were the greatest in the Catholic schools and the Independent schools were least affected by inadequate training/qualifications of staff. Equipment resources were not a major concern in the delivery of OE programmes.

Teachers agreed that further training and qualifications were required to deliver OE programmes. A senior first aid, bus driver licence and bronze medallion were considered the most valuable qualifications. The Independent schools had more staff trained in wilderness first aid, kayaking, sea kayaking, caving and sailing. Although schools are responsible for providing the funding and time to allow staff training, this level of school support was lacking, particularly in the Government and Catholic schools. Many responses suggested that teachers would be willing to undertake both skill-specific and postgraduate education if they were adequately supported. In addition, teachers commented that maintaining and delivering OE programmes took a great deal of time and stressed the constant threat of burnout.

6.2.10 Support measures required

While the required support measures that teachers identified were not linked directly to the three greatest barriers (competition with other curriculum areas, time required of teachers and staffing levels), teachers in all school sectors believed that PD, additional resources and increased budget were needed to deliver OE
programmes. However, specific teacher comments suggested that more support was required from the DOE regarding gaining/maintaining qualifications. This research found that universities needed to provide greater OE training in undergraduate courses, including minor and major offerings, to ensure teachers are better equipped to teach the WACE Outdoor Education course.

6.2.11 Safety and legal issues

The Government schools showed the highest level of concern with respect to risk/litigation. The Government schools used the DOE Guidelines, the Catholic schools had their own guidelines and the Independent schools had developed their own specific school policies.

Comments linked safety and legal issues directly to barriers, particularly cost, timetabling and the requirement to release staff to maintain the necessary student/staff ratios. Although the Government schools recorded the greatest concern for risk and safety, somewhat paradoxically, they were least likely to engage in PD opportunities. A common theme from the teachers was that while they believed they delivered safe programmes, if all the safety regulations were followed, the students would never leave the school grounds, which would ultimately lead to a reduction in student participation in OE.

6.2.12 Professional associations

Overall, the participants acknowledged the value and need for professional associations, particularly for Outdoors WA, as the peak body. As OE is positioned under the HPE learning area, PE teachers were more likely to engage with ACHPER than with Outdoors WA. Australian Canoeing and the universities were deemed to be of least value. Most respondents were able to identify relevant professional associations; however, many teachers in the Government schools expressed
uncertainty about what many of these professional organisations offered. Few teachers in the Government schools held national registration in NOLRS or Australian Canoeing. All sectors, to varying degrees, reported the need for support from external organisations to assist in providing additional specifically trained instructors to aid in programme delivery.

6.3 Key Findings: Phase 3

6.3.1 Overview

Sector differences clearly affected the uptake and delivery of the WACE Outdoor Education course between 2008 and 2013, with significantly more Government and Catholic schools electing to engage in this curriculum. The results from Phase 2 provided an insight into the effect that the underpinning issues of policy, the school principal’s attitude and the curriculum structure had on OE. These issues could be considered to form the basis of why schools chose to, were directed to or had to engage in the WACE Outdoor Education course to maintain the presence of OE in their school.

6.3.2 Initial intention to deliver: Study schools

Participants in the initial 2007 study were asked whether they intended to deliver the WACE Outdoor Education course in 2008 and if so, what stages. The PA/PB and 3A/3B courses drew the least interest and Stage 1 the most, as it provided teachers with a simple transition from the existing OE curriculum into the WACE Outdoor Education course. The Stage 2 and 3 courses were viewed with great reservation, especially regarding the ability of the course to produce a competitive ATAR. Other concerns were related to the course content, PD opportunities and resources to support teachers.
6.3.2.1 Study schools

A comparison between intention to deliver the WACE Outdoor Education course and the actual delivery showed that in most years, the Government and Catholic schools met or increased their intentions to deliver it. The Independent schools delivered fewer courses than intended across all years.

The PA/PB courses were not offered as was intended. Stage 1 had the greatest volume of participation. The Government schools had a greater intention to deliver Stage 1 courses and did so in almost all years. In most cases, the Catholic schools exceeded their intentions and in almost all years, the Independent schools did not meet their intentions.

The Government and Independent schools intended to deliver more WACE 2A/2B and 3A/3B courses but in almost all cases, failed to deliver. However, the Catholic schools exceeded their intentions in all years and in most cases, had the same or greater delivery compared to the Government and Independent schools.

6.3.2.2 All schools

From 2008 to 2010, Stage 1A/1B courses had the highest level of participation and delivery and Stage 1C/1D courses increased steadily. Overall, participation in Stage 2A/2B courses increased steadily but then decreased each year thereafter. Stage 2A/2B courses had approximately one-third the participation of Stages 1A/1B and 1C/1D. Less than half of the schools offering Stage 2A/2B courses followed on to deliver the 3A/3B courses. Both courses had approximately half the level of delivery from 2012 to 2013. This is likely to have been because of the realisation that the Stage 2A/2B courses for all of the curriculum areas including OE were unable to produce a competitive ATAR. The SCSA have now restructured the courses as General and ATAR for all of the learning areas.
6.3.3 *Study schools and All schools combined*

In most years, the *Study schools* represented approximately 30% of the total of all WACE Outdoor Education courses delivered. In 2009, the second year of implementation participation doubled in both samples. In the *All schools* group, there was a slight increase in delivery in 2010 and then it remained stable in 2011 and 2012. In 2013, there were 88 fewer courses offered. In comparison, there was a slight increase in delivery in the *Study schools* from 2009 to 2011, then a decrease of 40 courses from 2012 to 2013. These findings indicated that the research results for the *Study schools* were most likely representative of *All schools* in WA.

6.3.4 *Study schools and All schools: 2A/2B, 3A/3B*

A comparison between the *Study schools* and *All schools* groups regarding delivery of OE in WA showed that when considering only Stages 2A/2B and 3A/3B courses, the *Study schools* represented 42% in 2010 and 2011, and 46% in 2012 and 2013. These findings again indicated that the results of this research were most likely representative of all schools.

6.3.5 *Concluding comments*

When the Curriculum Framework was rewritten in 1999 to meet the needs of an Outcomes-based Education, OE was included within the HPE curriculum and not provided with any specific time allocation and so was primarily offered as an elective. Further, this curriculum structure resulted in insufficient budget for OE and the requirement of additional student costs for participation. This remains the situation in WA schools today. Although the WACE Outdoor Education course has a logical sequential development, the majority of schools delivered Stage 1 and did not move into Stages 2 and 3. Teachers delivering the WACE Outdoor Education course may have inadequate OE-specific tertiary and skills-based qualifications,
certifications and registrations. Independent schools who taught alternative OE programmes had greater integration with other curriculum areas and so contributed to a whole-school learning approach. It can therefore be hypothesised that the WACE Outdoor Education course is more restricted than this whole-school approach.

A number of barriers affected the position of OE in all schools, with the Government and Catholic schools reporting more issues than the Independent schools in most cases. In addition, both the Government and Catholic schools were less likely to engage with Outdoor Industry professional associations.

6.3.6 Strengths and limitations of this research

This is the first comprehensive study to investigate the nature and scope of OE delivery in WA. The survey tool and methodology used in Phase 2 of the project was based on similar studies and was piloted in Phase 1 with teachers from all school sectors. The recruitment process was well considered and involved multiple attempts to inform teachers of this project. The data used in Phase 3 were provided from the SCSA for all schools. Comparisons made between the All schools and the Study schools groups showed no significant differences regarding the WACE Outdoor Education course, which indicated that the information provided by the Study schools may be representative of the whole state.

To obtain the desired information, the survey required up to 45 minutes to complete. Recruitment was problematic. Direct permission from the school principals was a major obstacle, given that it was their decision whether to allow staff participation in the project. A low overall response rate of 15.3% was obtained from all school sectors (Government 9.6%, Independent 21.6% and Catholic 23.9%), creating an uneven sector representation. Inaccuracy in responses may have occurred
if the respondent was not the key teacher of OE or was asked by the principal to complete the survey. As concepts of OE may differ from the definition of OE provided in this study, the responses may not have been truly reflective of all OE options being taught in schools. Therefore, this study may not be totally representative of the OE being delivered in WA secondary schools.