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SAFETY ASPECTS IN PE AND ECA

Review by Alan Ch'ng T. H. and Harry Tan E.K.

INTRODUCTION

Activities during physical education lessons and extra-curricular sessions may expose students to risk of injury and harm if those activities are not properly conducted or supervised. The probability of such incidences occurring can be expected to increase as schools:

- i) implement more quality physical education lessons;
- ii) increase training of sport teams;
- iii) conduct **Trim and Fit** (TAF) programme activities.

It is therefore essential that teachers and administrators of schools be aware of their responsibilities as officers of an educational institution toward minimizing, and where possible, removing the risk of injury and harm to the students under their charge. This responsibility is expected of teachers since they are often told that they are parent substitutes (*in loco parentis*) in schools (Lowe, 1986a).



Sam Cheah

The Ministry of Education in its “*Handbook for Head of Department / Physical Education*” (1997) provided some guidelines and rules (see Chapter 8) for the safe conduct of PE, TAF, and other physical activities conducted by schools. Teachers should refer to these guidelines to help them perform their professional tasks more competently where safety aspects are concerned. This article aims to highlight the legal concept of negligence and suggest further strategies and precautions that schools can undertake to address safety concerns in PE and ECA.

THE THREE ELEMENTS OF NEGLIGENCE

Negligence was defined in 1856 (Lowe, 1986b, p. 3) as :

“...the omission to do something which a reasonable man, guided upon those considerations which ordinarily regulate the conduct of human affairs, would do, or doing something which a prudent and reasonable man would not do”

Negligence is therefore not an act or omission which involves intention but rather it is that *behaviour* which fails to measure up to a certain standard regarded as desirable in a given community (Healey, 1996).

Three elements must be present before negligence can be established (Gillam, 1991, Lowe, 1986):

- i) the existence of a *duty of care*;
- ii) a breach of the *duty of care*;
- iii) damage suffered by the breach of that *duty of care*.

Duty of Care

The school owes a duty to the parents that care is exercised in the activities conducted by its officers. Since the doctrine of *in loco parentis* applies, a duty of care is cast upon teachers and principals to ensure that all students who are closely and directly affected by their acts or who rely on them for their safety are not placed in a position of risk or injury. In assessing whether a party has breached the duty of care, it is necessary to ascertain the standard of care (Gillam, 1991). The standard expected is that of a *reasonable* man. The concept of foreseeability is relevant to the standard of care in that a reasonable man in the position of the teacher would do or avoid acts which he or she could foresee might cause damage or injury to the students. For example, a *reasonable* man would avoid conducting a games activity on a defective surface with holes and jagged protrusions and would foresee the risk of harm to students in that situation. It is likely that the standard by which the teacher is judged is that of the careful, prudent parent (Lowe, 1986b). Teachers should be aware that generally, different standards of care apply where children

are involved because children are presumed to be less capable than adults of taking care of themselves (Healey, 1995).

Damage

The damage must be a result of the breach of duty on the part of the teacher (Lowe, 1986b). It would be necessary to determine whether the teacher could have reasonably foreseen that damage would occur from his/her act or omission. In order therefore, to reduce the teacher's legal vulnerability, it is important for teachers and school administrators to identify potential hazards and develop strategies and management practices that could minimize or remove the risk of harm and damage.

CONCLUSION

Schools today are constantly working towards more quality programmes that can motivate teachers and students toward higher performance in academic and ECA endeavours. The challenge for schools in the area of PE and ECA is to maximize the potential of students in sport, games and outdoor pursuits and at the same time minimize those risks of injury and harm associated with the activities. A strategy of maintaining a safe environment and exercising due care of the students should be adopted by teachers and supported by the school administration to meet this challenge.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Safety Principles

An effective risk management strategy must be proactive in the sense that it not only concerns proper supervision of activities but also includes regular inspection of the school's facilities and equipment, in-house briefing and if necessary, training of teachers. The adoption of safety principles and practice of good planning and supervision of activities will promote a safer environment for learning. The following safety principles were adapted from Figone (1989) and Opie (1993). They also take into account the harsh tropical environment which is not conducive to prolonged exercise.

2. Exercise careful planning in activities and training programmes.

Planning considerations must include the class size, playing area, the nature of the activity, available equipment, the teacher's expertise, skill and training, and the time of the day the activity is conducted. Teachers should also avoid unrealistic expectations of their students' performance and endurance for physical work and training.

3. Ensure that all equipment is secured to its supports and in the case of implements, check they are in good working condition.

For example, rackets and hockey sticks that have cracks and fault lines should not be used and must be replaced. Frayed ropes at outdoor fitness stations should be replaced or removed. It is also necessary to equip sport stores or the ECA team with the necessary protective equipment that is essential to the game concerned. For example, the face mask in hockey. Such a strategy will reduce the overall risk of injury to students playing the game either in training or competition.

4. Implement health screening procedures to identify students who may be medically unsuited for PE lessons or ECA training.

Such screening should be done at the start of each year or training season and must be repeated after a long vacation or off-season. The Ministry of Education recommends that teachers use the *Pupil Medical Record* form to perform this task. Teachers must excuse students who are medically unfit for the day from participating in PE lessons or training.

5. *Take precautions to ensure that general conditions of an activity do not involve unnecessary risk.*

These precautions must extend to the condition of the playing/training area which should be clear of hazardous objects. In addition, teachers must ensure that only proper equipment is used and that activities during training are suitable and within the abilities of students. Another strategy in ensuring a safe environment is to set useful rules of conduct during the activity.

6. *Exercise adequate supervision of pupils' activities.*

Inadequate supervision is a common accusation in relation to injuries suffered by pupils in schools (Opie, 1993). The nature of an activity must be carefully considered (Figone, 1989) and if an activity has a high risk of injury (e.g. tackling in rugby), then closer supervision is necessary. Other considerations for proper supervision are the size of the class/group, the playing area, equipment used (e.g. javelins!), and the influence of individuals within the class or group. It may be necessary to include a briefing by the Head of Department or the administrators of the school on aspects of supervision and areas or activities of the school which require closer supervision, in the induction of new teachers.

7. *Regularly inspect all equipment to ensure that it is in optimal operating condition.*

Such a practice minimizes the risk of equipment giving way or breaking when it is in use, thus exposing students to possible injuries.

8. *Locate a first aid kit at various locations so that immediate help can be rendered to students with minor injuries.*

It would be better if ECA teams are equipped with a kit of their own instead of relying on a centralised kit which may be inaccessible at the time of injury. The contents of the first aid kit should be maintained regularly and expired items replaced periodically. Teachers should also be trained in basic first aid so that they can render help and take responsibility and control of the situation when an injury occurs. According to the Ministry of Education, PE teachers should be familiar and knowledgeable in basic first aid and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (Ministry of Education, 1997).

9. Be mindful of the physiological stresses imposed upon students by the hot and wet environment when training.

Adequate opportunities for drinking and cooling off may be necessary if the weather is extreme. Teachers need to be able too to identify symptoms of heat illnesses so that timely emergency action can be taken to minimize damage. Teachers should also monitor the environmental haze conditions so that appropriate decisions can be made to conduct or cancel PE/ECA sessions

10. Organise and structure outdoor activities to cater to the different levels of pupils' experiences.

Outdoor activities in the form of camping, trekking, sea and water activities carry with them some inherent risk of injury. Students new to outdoor activities may misinterpret or not recognise possible risk in the activities (Grant et al., 1996). These students are hence more likely to be injured or harmed in outdoor activities. It is the responsibility of the teacher and those in charge to progressively build up the experience of students and educate them on the management of risk in outdoor pursuits.

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