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Forming partnerships and finding solutions to address challenges of Physical Education in South Africa

Significance:

This Commentary provides evidence-informed policy guidance for strengthening Physical Education (PE) as a subject in South Africa by addressing long-standing inequalities in curriculum status, teacher preparation and professional development, and implementation at school level. Drawing on South Africa's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), UNESCO standards for quality PE, WHO frameworks, and practice-based evidence from the *KaziBantu* initiative, we demonstrate how coordinated partnerships and South African Council for Educators (SACE)-accredited in-service teacher training can operationalise quality PE in under-resourced schools. The Commentary offers insights for policymakers, education authorities and expert committees to support curriculum reforms and strengthen opportunities for continuing professional development for teachers, and advocates for sustainable, health-promoting school systems.

The development of Physical Education (PE) in 20th-century South Africa was shaped largely by European concepts, emphasising physical fitness, sports and discipline. Under apartheid (1948–1994), schools were segregated across racial lines and PE was implemented unequally, with well-resourced programmes exclusively for white learners and limited or no provision for black, Indian and coloured learners.¹ The subject for white learners (particularly boys) focused on discipline, military-style drills, and games such as cricket and rugby, which reflected British cultural values. Teacher training and available facilities reflected the broader inequalities of an education system characterised by racial segregation.

In 1994, with its first democratic election, South Africa began moving away from a past of racial segregation that had devastated the lives and education of most South Africans. However, the legacies of apartheid continue to shape the present. The democratically elected government implemented four major curriculum reforms to overhaul the highly unequal education system. Unfortunately, despite its well-developed syllabus pre-1994, these curriculum changes ultimately resulted in PE losing its status as a separate subject. It was subsequently combined with three other areas and focused on the development of self-in-society and renamed 'Life Skills' and 'Life orientation' in primary and high schools respectively, with limited lessons allocated to the teaching of PE.

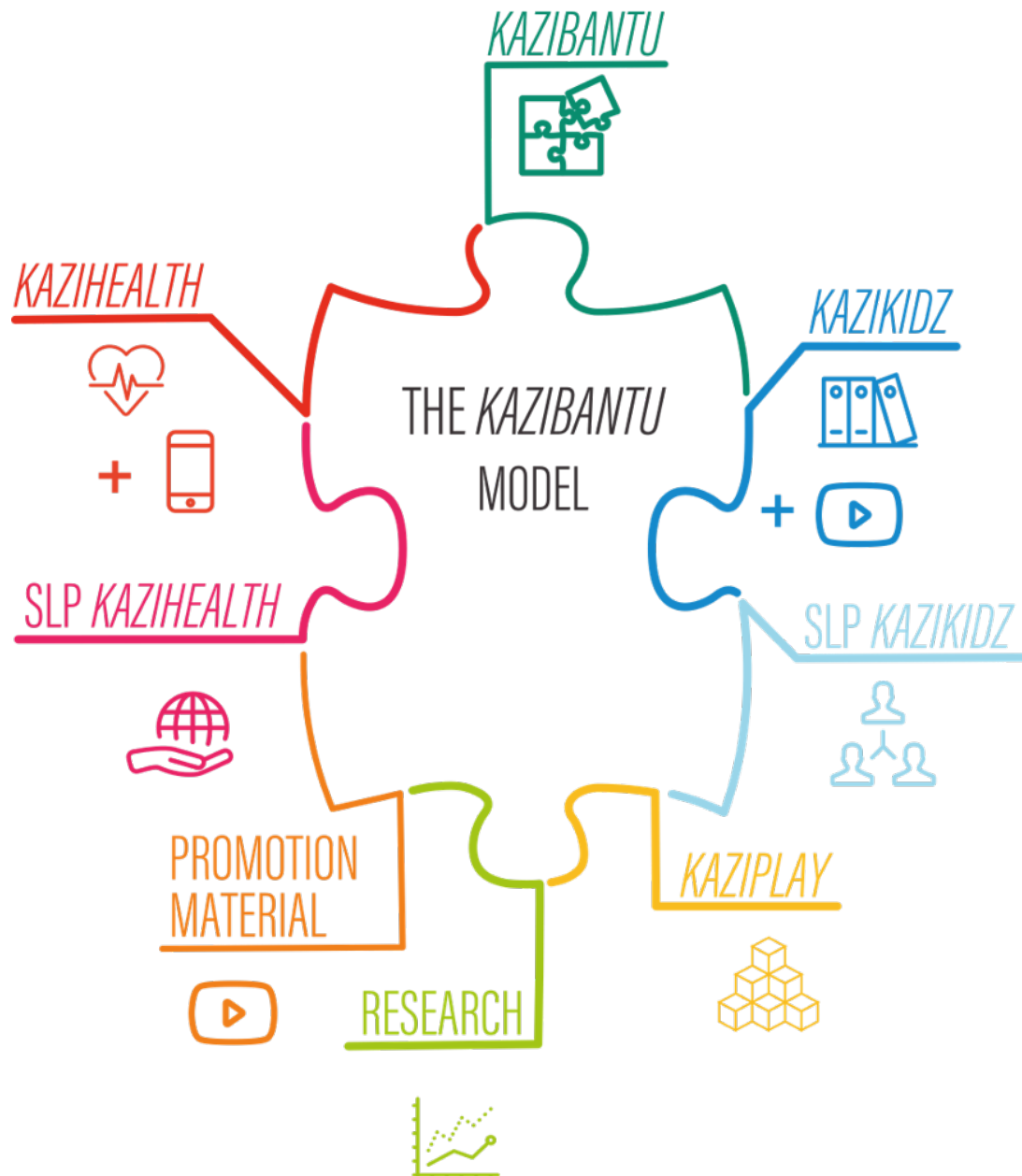
After the subject PE lost its independent status, it was seen as less important than other academic subjects and was pushed into the margins of the curriculum. It is now often taught by generalist teachers in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) and the Intermediate/Senior Phases (Grades 4–7) at primary school. These teachers are often untrained in the specific didactical and pedagogical subject knowledge needed to teach PE effectively. This subject knowledge includes structured movement learning, age-appropriate skill development, progression from fundamental movement skills to sport-specific competencies, learner-centred instructional strategies, and assessment of physical, social and affective learning outcomes. These teachers consequently have difficulties in dealing with current challenges such as large class sizes and inadequate facilities, especially in South Africa's resource-constrained schools.^{2–4} Teachers trained to implement quality PE would benefit South African children by contributing to lifelong participation in physical activity and assisting children to meet the World Health Organization (WHO)'s recommendation (for 5- to 17-year-olds) of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day. Although South African children only recently managed to achieve a rating of B- in the latest 'Healthy Active Kids South Africa 2022' report card, indicating that 60–66% of children are meeting this recommendation⁵, this may not necessarily apply to the children from marginalised communities where the schools, community and environment are not conducive to physical activity to support the health and well-being of children.

In September 2025, Gayton McKenzie, South Africa's Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture, emphasised that PE should once again become an independent, stand-alone subject in schools – a call his predecessors have also made. Such a change would require the reintroduction of a clearly defined PE curriculum, accompanied by the strengthening of pre-service and in-service teacher education at relevant institutions, such as universities, under the guidance and accreditation of the South African Department of Basic Education, the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and the South African Universities Physical Education Association (SAUPEA). These efforts should be supported by professional bodies and research initiatives, alongside the development of updated curriculum frameworks and assessment standards, to ensure the effective and sustainable implementation of PE across all school phases.

While schools are encouraged to provide adequate facilities and resources to support diverse physical activities, this remains unrealistic for many South African schools, particularly in low-income and rural areas. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-level strategy, involving (1) the training of PE teachers; (2) targeted infrastructure investment; (3) the use of low-cost and adaptable PE programmes; and (4) stronger collaboration between the Department of Basic Education, local municipalities, academic institutions and non-governmental organisations. Ultimately, through this Commentary, we seek to promote holistic education by balancing academic learning with physical development and lifelong health habits.

In response, the *KaziBantu* research project (among others, for instance, the *HealthKick* project or the Integrated School Health Programme) developed the open-source *KaziKidz* toolkit (see Figure 1) with various resources to support PE





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Figure 1: Overview of the *KaziBantu* Model - 'Healthy Schools for Healthy Communities': (1) *KaziKidz*: a school-based health intervention package aimed at enhancing children's overall health, and including the *KaziKidz* short learning programmes (SLPs) for the in-service training of teachers; (2) *KaziHealth*: a teachers' workplace health promotion programme; (3) *KaziPlay*: a playground and sanitation intervention supporting a healthy school environment; (4) *Research*: evidence-based research; and (5) *Promotional material*: video trailers, posters and reports.

teachers, including two short PE learning programmes for Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phase primary school teachers.⁶⁻⁸

Drawing on more than a decade of enriching collaboration with teachers in schools¹⁰, the UNESCO Chair team on 'Physical Activity and Health in Educational Settings'⁹ has, through engagement with teachers, gained a sense of the kinds of support and guidance that PE teachers in under-resourced school settings find useful and beneficial. The following examples illustrate how quality PE can be effectively implemented despite structural and resource constraints:

- **Example 1: Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS)-aligned Fundamental Movement and Indigenous Games Programme**
 - In marginalised school settings where access to specialised facilities and equipment is limited, quality PE can be achieved

through a structured focus on fundamental movement skills using Indigenous and modified games, as advocated by CAPS for the Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phases. This approach prioritises locomotor, non-locomotor and manipulative skills through activities such as running, jumping, throwing, balancing and dodging. Indigenous games (e.g. *kgati*, *morabaraba* and adapted skipping and chasing games) are deliberately integrated to enhance learner participation, cultural relevance and social cohesion.

- **Example 2: Health-enhancing Physical Education integrated within Life Orientation**
 - A second example of quality PE in marginalised contexts involves the intentional integration of physical activity with health education outcomes, as prescribed by CAPS within the Life Orientation

curriculum. Lessons are designed to combine moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (e.g. aerobic games, dance, fitness circuits and walking programmes) with explicit teaching about health, hygiene, nutrition and emotional well-being.

The work in this field has resulted in the development of two short learning programmes (SLPs) for the in-service training of teachers: the Foundation Phase PE SLP (15 continuing professional development [CPD] points) and the Intermediate/Senior Phase PE SLP (15 CPD points).

These SLPs are competency-based educational courses designed to improve targeted learning for specific needs, such as developing skills and knowledge for professional growth and enhancing developmentally appropriate teaching practices. They now form part of the in-service training of teachers, as part of their continuous professional development. Teachers in South Africa are required to earn 150 CPD points over a period of three years. The aforementioned initiatives were supported by UNESCO and are accredited by SACE and form part of the professional development and continuing education of teachers in South Africa.

SACE aims to improve the status of the teaching profession through registration, promoting a teaching code of ethics and encouraging professional development. Accordingly, there is scope to advance the delivery of quality PE – even for non-specialised PE teachers – in accordance with UNESCO standards^{11,12} in marginalised South African schools. Developing quality PE skills and awareness among teachers, particularly in low-income communities, enhances their teaching and educational skills and ideally their own well-being, enabling them to encourage health development in schools and communities. Thus, the two SLPs cover fundamental educational content and practical guidance and support for the teaching of PE in under-resourced settings. The SLPs are offered by cooperating universities in collaboration with the local Ministry of Education and other stakeholders.

Building strong partnerships between teachers, schools, universities, non-governmental organisations and the respective Ministry of Education can support the implementation of quality PE in schools in accordance with UNESCO¹¹⁻¹³ and WHO standards¹⁴; subsequently contributing to closing the gap from evidence to policy, and ultimately to practice. In practice, partnerships to advance quality PE operate through negotiated roles and shared accountability among education authorities, universities, schools and non-governmental organisations, but are often constrained by resource dependencies and sustainability challenges. Clear governance structures, mutual trust, long-term funding, local capacity strengthening, and alignment with national policy priorities are also key requirements. It is important to address how quality PE can be operationalised in resource-constrained settings, offering practical guidance for policymakers, teacher educators and practitioners committed to advancing equitable PE provision. If PE is to reclaim its educational, health-promoting and social value within South African schools, particularly those serving marginalised communities, actionable and scalable models of practice are required. Such models must align with CAPS, respond to contextual constraints and empower teachers, many of whom are non-specialists, to deliver meaningful learning experiences.

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Declarations

We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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