

Secondary School Physical Education Content as a Political Text: A Theoretical Overview of the Power and Factors that Lead to the Social Construction of Physical Activity Curriculum.

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Abstract

Much attention is being given to the physical activity engagement of youth in school physical education with the hopes that engagement in curricular physical activity will track into adults leading active and healthy lifestyles. Much scholarly attention has been given to a variety of areas and issues that inform physical education pedagogy. Far less research inquiry, however, has been paid to the dynamics and forces that inform how content and physical activities are selected for inclusion to the scope and sequence of programmatic curriculum at the secondary level. In this paper I overview the limited work in this area while suggesting additional factors and forces yet to scientifically examined, and do so from the perspective that curriculum is a socially constructed entity that can be read as a political text. Concluding comments suggest future lines of research resulting from the previous theoretical framework laid out.

Keywords: Physical Education Curriculum, Political Text, Youth Physical Activity

1. Introduction

In recent decades researchers have been near unanimous in their finding that regular physical activity can contribute to increased health and wellness by positively working back against a wide range of biomedical and psychosocial conditions, as well as increasing the meaning and enjoyment people find in life (Haskell et al., 2007). While researchers have struggled to find strong links between youth physical activity engagement and adult physical activity engagement (Malina, 2001), there is stronger evidence to suggest that overweight youth are much less active than their peers, and are more likely to become overweight adults (Engeland, Bjorge, Tverdal, & Sogaard, 2004). There is also much consensus that obesity is strongly related to a range of health debilitating conditions (Daniels et al., 2005; Dietz, 1998). Additionally, despite the holistic wellness and life enhancing qualities that pro-social physical activity can potentially provide (Fahlberg & Fahlberg, 1997; Loland, 2006), there is a precipitous drop in physical activity during adolescence (Welk, Eisenmann, & Dollman, 2006).

With the concerns over the lack of adolescent physical activity and the relationship between in-activity and undesirable health conditions many organizations have pointed to secondary school physical education as one space to help alleviate this troublesome reality for two specific reasons. The first is that secondary school physical education can theoretically contribute to daily/weekly physical activity accumulation (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1996 (USDHHS); World Health Organization, 2004 (WHO)). The second is that the physical competencies, knowledge accumulated, and affective dispositions learned will help contribute to adolescents become more active and health adults (USDHHS, 1996; WHO, 2004). Given the ready access to most all adolescent youth there is reason to point to school physical education as a space to help aid in physical activity engagement. And while there has been an immense amount of research conducted on school physical education (Kirk, McDonald, O'Sullivan, 2006), one area given scant scholarly contention concerns significant disjuncture between the specific physical activities that comprise most secondary school physical education curriculum and the physical activities that adults majoritively participate in (Fairclough & Stratton, 1997; Fairclough, Stratton, & Baldwin, 2002; Ham, Kruger, & Tudor-Locke, 2009; Mechikoff, 2010).

It is the author's contention that the significant mismatch between curricular content adolescents are exposed to and expected to develop 'expertise' in, and what we know about the physical activities adults actually participate in, provides a serious question as to the potential effectiveness secondary school physical education can have in fomenting active and healthy individuals. The remainder of this theoretical review is to examine the limited research conducted on this phenomena, as well as suggest additional theoretical factors yet to be investigated as they may or may not relate to this phenomenon. Throughout this review curriculum will be treated as a political text, and not a fixed or natural reality.

First I will explain my theoretical orientation in treating curriculum as a political text. I will then follow this by the limited work done on the prominent role the teacher plays in physical education curriculum as a socially constructed political text. This will be followed by my use of additional research and theoretical work as I position curriculum as a fluid entity that can be informed by power dynamics imbued by other factors and actors (i.e. students) as political entities and actors. I conclude the review with an overview of potential research that can help more fully explain the complex process of constructing secondary school physical education curriculum.

2. Curriculum as a Political Text

Apple (2004) has discussed at length that many have sought to examine education and learning as a neutral enterprise free from bias. Traditional curricular theorists seek to find the best ways to impart objective and factual knowledge to people (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Apple (2004) and others (Giroux, 1997; Spring, 2008; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2004) have demonstrated that the curriculum is, despite the best of efforts by those who create/revise/theorize it, anything but unbiased and neutral. Apple says of teaching and education in general,

Education [is] not a neutral enterprise, that by the very nature of the institution, the educator was involved, whether he or she was conscious of it or not, in a political act. I maintain that in the last analysis educators cannot fully separate their educational activity from the unequally responsive institutional arrangements and the forms of consciousness that dominate advanced industrial economies like our own. (p.1)

Just as Apple (2004) positions education as a political enterprise, he goes on to say the same of the curriculum that is *chosen*,

The knowledge that now gets into schools is already a choice from a much larger universe of possible knowledge and principles. It is a form of cultural capital that comes from somewhere, that often reflects the perspectives and beliefs of powerful segments of our social collectivity. Social and economic values, hence, are already embedded in the design of the institutions we work in, in the "formal corpus of school knowledge" we preserve in our curricula. (p.7-8)

For me, curriculum "is comprised of content to be learned and/or activities to be engaged in by students. This content and/or set of activities are, on some level, planned and intentional" (Ferry, 2011). By political, I am referring to the power dynamics that are at play in various fields, institutions, and contexts where multiple actors and interest groups compete for legitimacy and space to operate in ways they wish (Spring, 2008).

Education in general, and curriculum specifically, needs to be seen as socially constructed and a historically rooted political struggle, where a variety of fields and interest groups will seek to influence what 'knowledge' and content gets taught to students (Apple, 2004; deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Spring, 2008). This is readily seen when institutions and individuals are faced with varying degrees of governmental intervention and oversight. The political nature of the curriculum is underpinned and imbued by the social and cultural values laden in the content that is included (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1997). This theoretical position fits with Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) discussion of the historically grounded tensions and struggles between the hetero- and orthodoxies that function within fields. Curriculum then, must be analyzed and studied within the context(s) it is created and implemented (Pinar et al., 2004).

3. Teacher as Primary Political Actor in Selecting Curricular Content.

The process by which the specific content and physical activities come to comprise secondary physical education curriculum is a new and burgeoning line of inquiry. A couple of caveats exist pertaining to the work that has focused on the content and physical activities offered in secondary physical education. First, the study of content has largely been a historical treatment (Kirk, 1998; Phillips & Roper, 2006).

Second, this work has been largely theoretical in nature (Fahlberg & Fahlberg, 1997; Kirk, 2009; McCaughtry, 2009, McCaughtry et al., 2008). Third, this research has often been focused on the perspective of students, and has often been done from some form of action research methodology (Azzarito et al., 2006; Carlson, 1995; Chen, 1999; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Olafson, 2002; Portman, 1995; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). The recent research that has been conducted on the selection of curricular content has been focused on the role of the teacher. In these studies, biographical and emotional ties with certain content, and psychological and emotional aversion to *the thought* of teaching other physical activities they were unfamiliar with position the teacher as they key power figure when curriculum is being constructed (Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013, 2015). The teachers taught whatever they wanted to and deployed a range of rationales for resisting the examination of additional and/or alternative options. This once again reveals, that far from being a neutral set of tools to be used in physical educating a student, the content that comprises a curriculum is constructed in a political context where power is exercised. What has been sealed from view, however, than other than the teacher, serious examination of other factors or interest groups have been left unexamined in the context of constructing curricula.

4. Secondary Physical Education Curriculum as a Political Text

In physical education a variety of social and cultural institutions and movements have had a significant influence on the content and curriculum at the secondary level (Kirk, 1998; Lawson, 1988; Mechikoff, 2010; Phillips & Roper, 2006; Wright & Harwood, 2009). Lawson (1998) notes that curriculum design is in fact a politically laden “exercise in problem setting,” where particular models and content will win out and gain prominence depending on society’s concerns, and the role in alleviating said problems can be played by a quality experience in physical education. In Lawson’s view, curriculum then remains or becomes dominant, residual, or emergent in light of these concerns (Kirk, 1999; Lawson, 1988). Today, this dynamic is no more readily seen than when we focus on obesity. Currently, there is a variety of government and field related agencies that seek to influence what happens in physical education, in the name of curbing the obesity crisis and fomenting healthy and active lifestyles (Wright & Harwood, 2009). The policies which have resulted from the social concern of obesity have been analyzed by scholars revealing that the purpose and value of physical activity is reduced to addressing physiologically based biomedical concerns, which position particular physical activities to be more readily ideal and proposed for inclusion than others (Wright & Harwood, 2009). Thus, far from being a neutral enterprise curriculum in this instance is a product of social construction based on the prioritizing one issue or goal ahead of all others, with little to no justification, and these proponents have done so using wider fields of biomedicine as their rationale for this position.

Quennerstedt (2008), drawing on Dewey’s transactional approach to meaning-making, discourse theory, and Foucault’s work on power relations, presents an integrated theoretical framework to analyze the meaning and assumptions that underlie the subject content in physical education. He found that the subject content matter in Swedish physical education contained a predisposition towards exercise physiology as the foundational basis to define health and include content. Likewise, Gard (2008) found one health curriculum, while extolling the importance to provide children with the knowledge and skills to make ‘healthy’ ‘choices,’ is in reality, not interested in developing self-directed and critically thinking learners, but instead, seeks to inculcate a set of ‘truths’ that sit on questionable and unclear assumptions. It is entirely one thing to analyze the content of policy that is created; it is quite another to examine its effects when implementation is attempted in school settings. The larger point is that one is hard pressed to find any form of curriculum or curriculum policy that is not constructed with a clear bias toward some form of societal agenda or value framework, and that said frameworks are rarely justified *alongside other potential competing curricula, value frameworks, or research findings*, thus suggesting the political nature of the text created with the hopes of inculcating some form of knowledge or competency.

5. Curriculum Reform Efforts as Evidence of Power Relations-Top Down

There seem to be two general methods of analyzing and implementing large-scale curriculum reform; from the top down, and from the bottom up (Jewitt, Bain, & Ennis, 1995). Scholars have been more favorable of bottom up initiatives because the increased level of teacher control is believed to lead to a higher level of success (Jewitt, et al., 1995; Sparkes, 1991). In contrast, top down approaches have been critiqued by a number of scholars because the teacher’s lack of central involvement will significantly compromise the chance of ‘real change’ (Sparkes, 1991). One reason given for the unlikelihood of real change to happen in top-down initiatives is the belief that teachers will only ‘go along’ with reforms as a way to survive, not because they actually buy into what is being asked of them (Sparkes, 1991).

Furthermore, in top-down initiatives that have little or no oversight, how teachers read the 'text' cannot be controlled or discussed, leading to the likelihood of inaccurate readings or readings that confirm one's own beliefs (Curtner-Smith, 1999; Sparkes, 1991), once again pointed to the power relations involved and the contest nature of reform approaches. It needs to be noted, however, that top down approaches come with a significant amount of crucial resources and support that otherwise might not be available in more bottom up approaches (McKenzie et al., 1997).

5.1 Curriculum Reform Efforts as Evidence of Power Relations

Pinar and his colleagues (2004) discuss a variety of theoretical models available, focused on reforming curriculum and fomenting educational change from the ground up. Examples include work by Freire (1970), McLaren (1989), hooks (1994), and Weiler (1988). In general, all of these models seek for scholars and teachers to work cooperatively and democratically to help educators identify issues of inequity and injustice that are at work in their classrooms, schools, and society, and to address them, in part, by including and altering curricula that are focused on specific issues. Below, I will discuss two recent examples of bottom up curriculum reform in physical education.

5.2 Curriculum Reform Efforts In Physical Education-Bottom Up

McCaughtry (2006) documented the efforts of one teacher, Tammy, whose gendered reading of the sexist physical culture that her school reproduced led her to create girl friendly curriculum and learning spaces. McCaughtry (2006) describes the political maneuvering that Tammy had to employ in order to attain permission, facilities, and space to enact her reform, and to do so in a way that did not raise flags or considerable concern. To do this, Tammy used a variety of 'cover stories' as a way to hide her own 'secret stories' that ran diametrically to the 'sacred stories' of her school. These actions allowed Tammy to integrate more diverse content, like walking, jogging, strength training, in-line skating, hiking on nature trails, aerobics, rope jumping, and other non-competitive activities. Tammy also included activities and content that addressed social concerns particular to women, such as body image and eating disorders. Finally, Tammy organized a community health fair and focused her recruitment efforts on attracting local female health professionals as a way to show her students that potentially empowering opportunities were available for them in the human movement field.

A more recent effort by Oliver (2010) focused on PETE students' ability to co-construct curriculum with their adolescent students. Using democratic and egalitarian methods, Oliver (2010) worked with her majors in their developing the conceptual framework and ability to create a student-centered curriculum with their students. Oliver's students were challenged repeatedly to employ and reflect on their efforts, resulting in a deep and nuanced understanding of the difficulties and benefits of enacting curriculum in this manner. A key finding relevant for my study was the students' desire for an increased variety of physical activities.

5.3 Curriculum Reform Efforts in Physical Education-Top Down

Sparkes (1991) notes there are three kinds of change that can result from top-down reform efforts; superficial, teaching practices, and 'real'. Superficial change includes things like curriculum texts, equipment, and other teaching materials. Teaching practices includes the introduction of new and/or different teaching styles and approaches. 'Real change' is a deep and significant change. This occurs when teachers' beliefs, values, and ideologies are altered significantly from where they were before the reform took place.

Sparkes (1991) also emphasizes curricular change can be analyzed and implemented from one of three perspectives: technological, ecological, and cultural. Technological change includes the content that is offered in the curriculum. Sparkes (1991) notes, that while technological alterations may result in superficial change, it may be a significant first step towards 'real change.' Ecological change is concerned with the school's political and bureaucratic constraints (Stroot, Collier, O'Sullivan & England, 1994). Cultural change represents significant 'real change' of the beliefs and values that are indicative of teachers that work within a department. Sparkes (1991) notes that, like 'real change,' cultural change is the hardest to foment and the kind teachers are most resistive to.

One reason that Sparkes (1991) offers for the resistance to curricular reform concerns the positioning that can result from implementation. Teachers whose values, beliefs, and practices run counter to reform efforts will see their social positioning damaged, whereas, teachers whose pedagogy is congruent with the reform are set up to be justified and see their stature increase or improve; as always power is at play.

Teachers who sit on the sideline during reform are likely to see their social positioning change in ways that are contingent upon the degree they participate in the reform activities (Sparkes, 1991). A particularly insightful example of the politically charged role content plays in top-down curricular reform was provided by Curtner-Smith (1999).

Curtner-Smith (1999) studied the implementation of national physical education curriculum policy with a group of secondary physical education teachers. He found that the shape and level of implementation was varied according to the general orientation the teachers held toward teaching physical education, which was either conservative, eclectic, or innovative. Conservative teachers, when faced with national physical education reform in the UK, adopted a masculine sport perspective. These teachers saw little practical relevance in the reform, and did not think it would benefit their students. Both stances resulted in little change in the content offered to students. Interestingly, these teachers used 'rhetoric' to give the impression that they were in fact implementing the reforms in ways that were analogous to Tammy's use of cover stories (McCaughtry, 2006).

Innovative teachers on the other hand, offered a wider array of physical activities to their students. Furthermore, these teachers viewed competitive sport as both sexist and counterproductive. When innovative teachers worked in departments that were headed by more experienced and conservative teachers, they enacted reform efforts 'strategically' to avoid critique from colleagues, again, similar to McCaughtry's (2006) teacher Tammy. Eclectic teachers sat on the political fence but, were documented as offering a wider range of content to their students than conservative teachers.

In line with the occupational socialization literature, Curtner-Smith (1999) found that these teachers' physical activity biographies were in harmony with their perspectives of the reform, and their subsequent (non)efforts to address the broader reform. Most of the conservative teachers were men, grew up playing competitive team sports, experienced traditional forms of physical education, and came from PETE programs that reinforced this disposition. Eclectic and innovative teachers, on the other hand, were more balanced by sex, engaged in more lifetime-oriented physical activities in their spare time, experienced 'relatively' progressive physical education, and came from PETE programs that promoted curricular diversity. Regardless of their perspective leanings, all these teachers injected their own political readings of how the reform should have been implemented, and resulted in very different content decisions among the different groups of teachers. Curtner-Smith's (1999) study and other research on reform efforts (Cothran et al., 2006; McCaughtry et al., 2006a, 2006b) reveal content and curriculum considerations play a significant and political role.

Together these studies reveal that the degree of 'real change' that is seen will be significantly mediated by the teachers' perspectives on the legitimacy of particular physical activities (Apple, 2004), which will also mediate the practical considerations of their implementation (McCaughtry et al., 2006a, 2006b). Regardless, much of this reform and curriculum research has treated content and specific physical activities as a point of evidence or reference, not the specific area of investigation, and thus leaves sealed from view how the most foundational aspect of our field, subject matter, course of study is made up of, which is one that is incredibly diverse; so more so (arguably) than any other school subject matter.

I find it troubling that each physical activity in the vast array that could potentially be taught in physical education settings, each of which are imbued with their own inherent qualities from which different skills are rewarded, knowledge required, social and cultural mores govern, and from which related but distinct benefit packages result are often chosen to comprise a curriculum based on political power positioning. To choose among such an array of activities when creating curriculum is a socially constructed one; one that is a political and from which the results are sure to reward one set, or sets, of 'gifts' over others (Kirk, 2009). Among a diverse set of populations do we find this an acceptable manner in which to choose curriculum? If we accept the theoretical positioning laid forth above, then more research needs to be done on the role of the teacher, but more importantly, on different institutional (e.g. national standards, state standards, district curriculum, parents, community members, school administrators, classroom teachers, facilities, equipment, and additional resources) and student level (e.g. social class, race/ethnicity/culture, gender, sexuality, ability, physical activity biographies, etc.) factors, and how each inform and are informed by the content selection and curricular construction process as individual entities, as well as parts of larger wholes. To do so would further enhance the chances that youth will be provided an education that more fully prepares them to be physically educated and literate for the 21st century.

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