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Fit for What?

Critical Analysis of Canadian Physical Education Curriculum

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Abstract

Canadian elementary students are diverse in backgrounds, abilities, and corporeal attributes. Yet little is known about how the Physical Education (PE) curriculum policies of the thirteen provinces and territories acknowledge this diversity through curriculum policies that encourage diverse bodies to be active children, and become active adolescents and adults. In this study, pan-Canadian PE policies are analyzed using a framework developed by the authors based on traditional and emerging PE models in the literature. The findings indicate that, while the philosophies of the curriculum policies include critical considerations, the learning outcomes in these policies reflect primarily more traditional PE models. The authors suggest that critical physical literacy skills would be more inclusive and empowering learning outcomes for PE curriculum policies. Future PE policy revisions should consider how to engage diverse student populations through broader understandings of activity and wellness that acknowledge present social realities.



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Introduction

Context

There are many indications that Canadian schools are changing due to the convergence of multiple influences such as immigration, globalization, patterns of employment and other economic and political factors; Clandinin, Downey and Huber (2009) have referred to school settings as “shifting landscapes” (p.142). In addition to these social demographics, students themselves are diverse in backgrounds, corporeal attributes, and abilities. The study investigates how learner differences are acknowledged and planned for in Canadian physical education (PE) curriculum policies.

Raphael finds that, despite evidence that the social determinants of health are more important to health than lifestyle choices, the public and media continue to focus on lifestyle choices as the key determinant of health. He finds also that health is often narrowly defined by medical and lifestyle models (Raphael, 2010). The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), however, uses a much broader World Health Organization definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (PHAC, 2011). This research outlined in this study investigates where PE curriculum policies have evidence, or not, of these complexities in their design.

Physical Education curriculum policies contribute to creating a foundation to support a lifetime of physical activity, health and well-being. However, there is a shortage of analysis on PE policies. One US study found that less than a quarter of research on PE focuses on curriculum (Kulinna, Scrabis-Fletcher, Kodish, Phillips & Silverman, 2009). There is a scarcity of analysis available on the overall Physical Education (PE) curriculum policy approaches in Canada, and specifically how these policies cohere around philosophies that acknowledge learner differences, broad definitions of health, and multiple determinants of health. In addition, it is important to review policies periodically with a critical lens to determine whether they support traditionally privileged populations, or if they have been reconsidered to meet the broader needs of society. In Canada, curriculum policy development is the responsibility of each province and territory. This research looks at the values and assumptions embedded in PE curriculum policies across thirteen provinces and territories, using an analysis framework constructed from the literature on approaches to PE curriculum policies.

History of the PE Curriculum

Consentino and Howell (1971) find that PE curriculum policies across Canada were originally developed in response to the need for military preparedness and the prevention of specific diseases. Early PE programs in Canada were initiated and funded by the Strathcona Trust (1911), which published an approved syllabus for physical exercises. Activities for older students, in particular boys, included gymnastics, marching, calisthenics, and military drills which were often taught by ex-military personnel and were clearly intended for the development of fitness for the defense of the country. Activities for younger students grew out of the new interest in psychology and the playground movement, a “more natural system of free play” (Brandreth, 1931, cited in Singleton, 2009, p.328) intended to support children’s intellectual, social, and physical development, and intended to have the effect of “developing in the children a cheerful and joyous spirit, together with the qualities of alertness, decision, concentration and perfect control of brain over body” (Strathcona Trust, 1911, p.3).

In the same era, the revival of the Olympic games created a second agenda for physical education in many countries. The motto of *Swifter, Higher, Stronger* was created by a French aristocrat in 1896 to symbolize the values of competition, which were to a large extent the values of wealthy Europeans who had the time for sustained leisure activities with no practical purpose (Saint Martin, 1989). Activities at the 1896 games were for males only, and included athletics (track and field), cycling, swimming, gymnastics, weightlifting, wrestling, shooting, fencing and tennis (The Olympic Museum, 2007). Elite private schools in England and Europe began sports programs echoing the Olympic motto for development of morality and virility in their students (Saint Martin, 1989). Activities to support this development were primarily European gymnastics and, after World War II, sports.

The establishment of university programs in Physical Education beginning after World War II; the funding for amateur sport in the 1960's; the Fitness Act of 1961; and the creation of *Participation* in 1976 to promote physical fitness for a lifetime, have all been Canadian federal initiatives that were responses to the low level of fitness among army recruits in World War II (Lennox, 2010). PE curriculum policies have been developed at the provincial and territorial level within this federal context.

An examination of what Little (1993) calls the legacy of past reforms and policy collisions reminds us that current policies do not, as Darling-Hammond (1990) says, “land in a vacuum; they land on top of other policies” (p. 346). Current PE curriculum policies are no different; they carry with them the legacy of past political priorities. Yet schools in the 21st century have a crowded agenda that includes standardized testing and competition for spots in higher education. Both the legacy of military preparedness and the collision with other educational agendas have the potential to disengage students and place physical education at the fringe of school priorities.

Given this history of policy priorities, this policy analysis examines where PE curriculum policies are positioned in terms of their implicit and explicit values in order to frame discussion of PE policy as a necessary supporter of a broader conceptualization of health and well-being that recognizes learner differences.

Curriculum Models

While Canadian PE curriculum policies have historically emphasized control, fitness against an external standard, and involvement in team sports (Jewett, 1989), new realities include the recognition that children have different backgrounds, different abilities and different bodies. Societal change has caused greater parental caution around safe places to play after school for example, and more children are living in high-rise buildings that have no outdoor play space. For this reason, a systematic analysis of the curriculum policies was undertaken in order to clarify the orientations present in pan-Canadian PE policies and determine if the focus of the policies remains on sports and fitness, or if the policies promote broader repertoires of activity. In addition, the analysis was undertaken to determine if the policies address physical health only or include mental health, for example. Jewett and Bain (1985) suggest that patterns of decision-making based around resource allocation, instructional strategies, and activity choices reflect the values of the policy.

Resource allocation refers to the time, space and money spent on various components of PE. Does the program include facilities for a range of activities such as juggling, yoga, archery, or knitting? *Teaching strategies* can reflect the expectation of disciplinary mastery, or

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performance, in sports and such activities as track and field and gymnastics. Strategies may be aimed at preparing for athletic excellence, competition, or cardio-respiratory fitness. *Activity choices* reflect a values orientation; they may emphasize tactical games, co-operative games, individual movement activities, fitness testing, Eastern movement disciplines, outdoor activities, or a host of other possibilities. For instance, if the curriculum outlines expectations of setting and monitoring fitness goals, these expectations influence the allocation of time for measuring and monitoring fitness; teaching strategies that motivate students to improve, and activity choices that improve body composition. These reflect also the value of individual responsibility and a definition of health as *fitness*.

In another approach to differentiating among models of PE policy, Bernstein (2000) addresses the value orientations, or logic, of performance vs. competence. Performance orientation sees learners as acquirers rather than creators of knowledge, a Piagetian view aligned with passive assimilation of external knowledge. This discourse is seen in traditional PE programs that emphasize the acquisition of specific skills and attitudes. Evaluation can emphasize what is missing as opposed to what is created. Grading leads to diagnosis and remediation. Terms such as “enhancing performance” and “maximizing performance” would be consistent with performance logic. Competence orientation, on the other hand, assumes that all are inherently competent and that there are no deficits, only differences. Competence logic assumes that students are active and creative in the construction of meaning, reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) view of constructivist learning.

An examination of curriculum models (Jewett, 1989; Kulinna, 2008; Culpepper, Tarr & Killion, 2011; Mandingo, Francis, Lodewyk & Lopez, 2009; Pangrazi & Corbin, 1999, Siedentop, Mand & Taggart, 1986, Hellison, 1985, Hopper, 2002; Whitehead, 2001; Wright & Burrows, 2006) can be summarized into three models. *Traditional* models emphasize a) competitive sports and games; b) fitness defined using a medical model and seen as a result of individual effort, goal setting and measurement; c) expectations of performance; and d) direct instruction. More current models reflect a second model, *constructivism*, and promote physical literacy: the emphasis is on movement skills, body awareness, individual responsibility, interaction with the community, and competence instead of performance. A third model, which Wright and Burrows (2006) call *critical physical literacy*, addresses empowerment, critical analysis, identification of power imbalances, questioning of assumptions, advocacy, and action for social change. This model mirrors what Nutbeam (2000) and Anderson and Booth (2006) have called critical health literacy. Critical health literacy recognizes that social, economic, and environmental circumstances have a significant impact on individual health (p. 260). Nutbeam describes it in terms of “more advanced cognitive skills, which, together with social skills, can be applied to critically analyze information, and to use this information to exert greater control over life events and situations” (p.264). Just as critical health literacy is characterized by empowerment, critical analysis, identification of power imbalances, questioning of assumptions, advocacy, and action for social change (Thomson & Robertson, 2012), *critical physical literacy* has similar considerations (Wright & Burrows, 2006).

Critical physical literacy within the PE curriculum policy would encourage students to examine which activities in the PE program of schools are allocated the most space and time. Students would be encouraged to question whether the focus of extra-curricular programs would be on walking, jogging, or team sports, for example. Students would have opportunities to question, advocate, and act on these understandings. Given the present decline in enrolment in

PE beyond compulsory participation, and the research on limited engagement by elementary students and teachers (King, 2003; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007; Dwyer et al, 2003) students and communities would be involved in the re-imagining of activity choices that are inclusive and engaging despite learner differences.

The questions asked by this research are: “What philosophies and values underlie individual provincial/territorial curriculum policies?” and “To what extent are any elements of critical physical literacy reflected in the policies?”

Research Methodology

The authors examined Canadian PE curriculum policies to determine the approaches and orientations which were dominant. Policy analysis, according to Collins & Hayes (2007), encompasses a range of tools that are used to study policies and how these policies came to be and content analysis examines the substance of the policy in a focused, methodic way.

The first step in this research was to undertake a literature review to determine present and past approaches to the teaching of physical education, both nationally and internationally. The authors created a PE Policy Analysis Framework (Table 1). Key phrases which distinguished a PE model or approach were extracted from the literature to create a list of areas of focus and student outcomes related to a particular curriculum approach (Table 1).

Next, a database was created of all the currently-available, online Canadian PE curriculum policy documents. All provinces had their formal policy accessible online at the time of writing, with the exception of Nova Scotia whose policy was under review at the time and not available. An online version of the existing policy was accessed through PHE Canada. Only the formal curriculum policy was examined; some provinces had resource documents available online along with the policy, while others did not. In some provinces, PE curriculum policy is paired with Health. In others, Health is a separate policy, sometimes paired with Career Planning or Personal Development. In the case of combined PE and Health policies, the sections that addressed health issues such as smoking or sex education were not included in this analysis. Health policies and the health portion of combined Health and Physical Education policies were examined by the authors separately (Thomson and Robertson, 2012).

A digital search of key words and phrases identified from the literature was undertaken for each curriculum policy of the provinces and territories, across the elementary grades. Using blind review, the authors annotated each curriculum policy and its learning outcomes, identifying the areas of focus and relating them to the PE Policy Analysis Framework. This provided a determination of the PE model with which different sections of the policy were most closely aligned. Next, the authors met to compare their analyses of the documents, and a joint review of each policy was undertaken for a second time. At this stage of the research, each curriculum policy was analyzed for its internal consistency – to examine, for example, whether or not the philosophy of the policy matched the student outcomes and the assessment tasks. The findings indicate the most common discourses evident in the policies. Appendix 1 contains the links that were used to access curriculum documents.

Policy Analysis Framework.

The PE policy analysis framework identifies three categories of curriculum policy, each one encompassing multiple, similar models of PE curriculum. There are three levels for the PE

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policy analysis framework as outlined above: (1) *Traditional* PE curriculum models reflect an emphasis on competitive sports and fitness, and individual behavior change. (2) *Interactive/constructivist physical literacy* models reflect a social/developmental approach to physical activity. (3) *Critical physical literacy* models address empowerment, critical analysis, identification of power imbalances, questioning of assumptions, advocacy, and action for social change. In the section that follows, each category and its related discourse are expanded upon.

Traditional Curriculum

Traditional formal PE curriculum policy in Canadian schools can be traced as far back as private schools in England and Europe in the 19th century, which began sports programs for the development of morality and virility in their students (Saint Martin, 1989). Their legacy of “salvation through sports”, or “muscular Christianity” (Consentino & Howell, 1971, p. 10) has influenced the models developed for Canadian school systems over the ensuing decades. These activities pulled together physical activity and morality in a way that persists today in widespread beliefs that the fat body is the result of gluttony and sloth (Hovard and Sibley, 2007). As Wright and Burrows (2006) express, “the appearance of the body is assumed to be an indicator of not only good health but the work done on the body, and the dispositions to managing the self that this is taken to imply” (p. 278).

Curriculum policy based on a traditional model focuses on “team affiliation, etiquette, fairness, appreciation, traditions, values, strategies, and structure, along with the skills, movement patterns and content knowledge need to participate in the sport” (Kulinna, 2008, p.220). Activities are primarily game oriented. The emphasis on sports reflects a larger social phenomenon in which qualities such as competitiveness, aggression and instrumentality are seen as the epitome of masculine values (Kidd, 2013; Wellard, 2002).

Although physical education curriculum originally developed in Canada had an agenda of military preparedness, fitness is now usually defined using a medical paradigm, including cardiorespiratory endurance and muscle strength, as opposed to vitality or well-being. The emphasis is on measuring fitness, setting fitness goals and taking individual responsibility for one’s level of fitness. Rich, Holroyd and Evans (2004) identify this as *healthism* a discourse that implies that individuals are largely responsible for their own health-making choices.

Traditional models of PE curriculum policy would have an emphasis on sports and sport related skills, fitness and the measurement of fitness, and individual responsibility for health.

Constructivist/Physical Literacy

Constructivist discourse revolves around the assumption that cognitive skills and the development of cultural values originate in social relations and culture (Vygotsky, 1978). The physical literacy model is placed alongside the constructivist model because it stresses the “importance of the interaction of an individual’s physical abilities within the social and cultural contexts of movement” (Wright & Burrows, 2006, in Mandingo et al., 2009, p.5). Physical literacy was characterized by Whitehead (2001) as, “more than physical movement, it must include an ability to ‘read’ the environment and to respond effectively” (p. 130), and as “a capacity through which we can come to know ourselves and the world more fully” (p. 134). In the PE curriculum setting, constructivism often refers to the development of individual responsibility and leadership, such as in Hellison’s (1985) model.

Physical literacy includes the concept of mindfulness (Anderson & Booth, 2006), which calls us to be fully engaged in the present place and moment and, according to Lu and DeLisio (2010), to focus on *process* rather than *product*. Kentel and Dobson (2007) use the related term *movement literacy*, which entails knowing through movement, knowing about movement, and knowing because of movement. Curriculum policy that focuses on movement skills reflects a physical literacy approach. Mandingo et al. (2009) point out that, despite its frequent association with sports and athlete development, physical literacy is intended to be developed through a broad range of diverse activities.

Richardson (2003) identifies two forms of constructivism: psychological and sociological. Psychological constructivism focuses on how individuals create meaning and share that meaning through group processes. Sociological constructivism addresses how knowledge is determined by social forces of power, economy, culture and politics. In terms of PE curriculum policy, a constructivist approach would attend to an individual's background and would facilitate group exploration and the creation of shared meaning. It would also introduce the development of meta-awareness, and the "provision of opportunities for students to determine, challenge, change or add to existing beliefs and understandings through engagement in tasks that are structured for this purpose" (Richardson, 2003, p. 1626). Singleton (2009) sees many of the current constructivist approaches as psychological constructivism, and suggests that especially at the secondary school level, they often miss "an essential aspect of sociological/critical constructivism [which] is to engage students in the knowledge production process while examining the ways in which power operates to privilege some people and marginalize others" (p.337).

Curriculum policy based on this model would address movement skills, body awareness, interaction with the community, and competence.

Critical Physical Literacy

The critical perspective parallels Singleton's (2009) clarification of sociological constructivism. Critical health literacy is directed at understanding issues of population health and how policies affect it and includes an action component of "personal and community empowerment" (Nutbeam, 2000, p. 266), the model implies a community action approach, a focus on the political content of health education, and the overcoming of structural barriers to health (p. 259).

Wright and Burrows (2006) point out that physical literacy does not acknowledge how particular repertoires of movement are "socially constructed in relation to gender, class, race and how particular forms of movement have relevance for a particular social and cultural context" (p.74). Critical physical literacy PE curriculum models recognize diversity and attempt to include all groups of society in physical activity, address the complexity of physical education, and confront issues of social justice and equity in physical education classes. Singleton (2009) states that "an essential aspect of sociological/critical constructivism is to engage students in the knowledge production process while examining the ways in which power operates to privilege some people and marginalize others" (p.337). Critical physical literacy takes into account "what abilities are recognized, valued, nurtured and accepted, while others are rejected by whom, where and why in schools" (Wright & Burrows, 2006).

Critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2005), and therefore critical physical literacy, is grounded in a social and educational vision of justice and equality. It addresses the way that dominant

power operates to manage knowledge. Critical physical literacy would involve questioning why a curriculum policy would include particular skills, values and attitudes, specifically in terms of how these skills, values and attitudes reflect economic and political agendas. It questions traditional policies that take an individual, logical, decision-making approach to fitness and physical literacy, even though the structure of the school day and the built environment of the school affect students' capacity to act on those individual decisions. A critical physical literacy approach can be seen when alternative activities such as Eastern movement disciplines are given the same opportunities, spaces and funding as traditional team and fitness activities.

Critical physical literacy would advocate participation rather than performance. It would encourage students to make their schools and neighbourhoods more conducive to physical activity. In critical physical literacy classes, the enjoyment of physical movement would be an important outcome, achieved through activities that are designed for every shape and size of body. Critical physical literacy also clearly reflects the Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion by its attention to realizing aspirations, satisfying needs, and changing or coping with the environment (WHO, 1986). Critical physical literacy model outcomes would involve understanding the power implications of activity choice, questioning advocating and acting on those understandings, and addressing the social determinants of health.

This PE Policy Analysis Framework is a vehicle also for dialogue and knowledge mobilization (Levin, 2008b). An understanding of the values and philosophies underlying PE policy can become a tool for making PE policies more relevant, and for addressing what Levin (2008a) terms "the strong inertial forces around existing practices" (p.7) which do not acknowledge the "shifting landscapes" mentioned earlier by Clandinin et al. (2009).

Table 1 summarizes key elements of these three curriculum policy categories, the PE models that are encompassed within them and the curriculum outcomes that reflect that framework in policy.

Table 1
PE Policy Analysis Framework

Category	PE Model	Areas of Focus/Outcomes
Traditional	Mastery (Jewett)	Competitive sports and games
	Social reconstruction (Jewett)	Fitness defined using a medical model
	Games and sports (Kulinna)	Fitness goal setting and measurement
	Fitness and wellness (Kulinna)	Fitness as a result of solely individual effort
	Fitness (Culpepper, et al.)	Expectations of performance, body perfection
	Sports/Games (Culpepper, et al.)	Direct instruction
	Multi-Activity (Pangrazi & Corbin)	
	Fitness Education (Pangrazi & Corbin)	
Constructivist/ Physical Literacy	Command (Singleton)	
	Learning Process (Jewett)	Movement skills not associated with a particular sport or game
	Self-Actualization (Jewett)	Cooperation
	Ecological validity (Jewett)	Body awareness
	Physical Literacy (Whitehead)	Individual responsibility
	Individual and social development (Kulinna)	Interaction with community
	Interdisciplinary (Kulinna)	Emphasis on competence, not performance or body perfection
	Skill Theme (Culpepper, et al.)	
	Play (Singleton)	
Psychological Constructivism (Singleton)		
Critical Physical Literacy	Social reconstruction (Jewett)	Critical analysis
	Sociological Constructivism (Singleton)	Action for change
		Advocacy
		Emphasis on student as a competent being
		Examination of environmental influences on activities/activity levels
	Well-being	

Findings

This policy analysis determined that all three categories of the PE Policy Analysis Framework were reflected to varying degrees in PE policies across Canada. Elements of critical physical literacy were scarce, with most curriculum policies reflecting a combination of traditional and physical literacy/constructivist elements. In the section that follows, findings for each category are based on the available provincial curriculum documents (Appendix A).

Because of the significant differences in scope, organization and format among the provincial policies, techniques such as word counts proved misleading. For instance, some provincial policies were organized in documents that encompassed all grades according to one theme, while others separated one document into grade levels. Manitoba curriculum is presented as separate documents that address themes such as *Movement* and *Fitness*, and written across grades from K to S4, the most senior grade. Other policies, such as Quebec, were of a more generalized nature with fewer specific outcomes, while still others presented groups of grades such as K-6 and 7-9 in Newfoundland, or Gr. 1-8 and 9 in Ontario. As well, the current Nova Scotia curriculum was not available either online or in print to the authors at the time of the submission of this article. These artifacts of policy and policy development and redevelopment make the development of a snapshot view of policy more complex than simply counting words and phrases. The areas of focus in Table 1 were used to identify components of the curriculum that aligned with the three frameworks. Specific provinces are mentioned as examples of the models found within the various documents, and not as a comprehensive list of all examples of the particular model. Specific comparisons among provinces are not suggested and should be made with caution.

Traditional Models

Provinces vary in their emphasis on competitive games and sports. Québec's expectations of learning to "interact with others in different physical activity settings" focus exclusively on team activities with desired behaviours including "a fighting spirit" and "a desire to surpass oneself" (Quebec, 2004, p.281). Other provinces, although less explicitly focused on competitive team activities, use sport-related skills to illustrate body movements in teaching physical literacy or movement skills. Team sport skills such as catching, throwing, kicking, dribbling, and striking are words found frequently in all policies. There were differences, however, in their prevalence. Overall, there are more references across all provinces to *leadership*, *fair play*, *rules* and *games* than to *enjoyment*, *cooperation* and *well-being*, especially in the higher grades. Sport references increase over the grades; for instance, neither the Alberta nor the Manitoba curriculum mention "co-operative play" past Grade 6.

Fitness is measured and fitness goals as learning outcomes occur in every province except Québec, although the Québec curriculum rationale states that one goal is to develop in students "self-responsibility for their fitness" (p.272). Fitness is a significant focus in most documents, with fitness being defined in all but one policy using the medical model: flexibility, cardio-respiratory endurance, muscular strength, muscular endurance and body composition. Alberta positions functional fitness, well-being, and body image as results of physical activity. New Brunswick defines fitness in K-5 as "the ability to carry out daily tasks with vigour and alertness, without undue fatigue and with ample energy to enjoy leisure time pursuits and to meet unforeseen emergencies" (p.69) but does not define fitness in any other grade level documents.

As well as fitness themes, the concept of training emerges in all provinces. The concept of training is introduced at all levels in British Columbia and Alberta policies. In Manitoba, there was an intentional shift in the current policy from the established emphasis on physical fitness and exercise to an emphasis on physical well-being (p.4); however, expectations that address training principles start in grade 7. Similarly, the rationales for the PE curriculum policies in both Saskatchewan and PEI state that it is a myth to think that “physical education should be similar to training” (p. 10 and p. 6); however, training is addressed beginning in Grade 6. Training is referred to in the sense of improving muscular strength.

Overall, the legacy of sports and medically-defined fitness forms a strong basis for PE curriculum policies across the country, largely reflecting a traditional focus for student learning outcomes.

Constructivism/Physical Literacy models

We find that, by and large, PE curriculum policies across the country take a constructivist approach to skill development. In several provinces, this is defined as nonlocomotor skills, locomotor skills, and manipulative skills; in other provinces such as Manitoba, skills are defined as transport, manipulation and balance. Still other provinces take a Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) approach to teaching movement skills, and categorize the skills into: target, invasion/territorial, net/wall, striking/fielding, and low-organization/inventive. Rhythmic movement plays a smaller role; attention to rhythmic movement varies from province to province. Rhythmic gymnastics, an Olympic sport, is one of the means for teaching movement skills in several provinces.

Some provinces include more than others the addition of alternative activities as a means of teaching movement skills. Some provinces include yoga, tai-chi, juggling, or Frisbees. However, the choices of activity used to develop movement skills are drawn most frequently from team territorial games. For instance, *catching*, *throwing* and *dribbling* are the most common examples of manipulative skills in British Columbia. The movement strategy section of the Ontario policy categorizes the games and activities used to develop physical literacy as target activities, net/wall activities, striking/fielding activities, and territory activities. These are drawn from competitive, zero-sum games and reflect a traditional sports orientation. There is evidence of rhythmic dance movements and alternative activities as well as cooperative games in most provinces, but their prevalence decreases in the older grades.

Another constructivist approach cited by several provinces is Hellison’s (1985) approach to personal and social responsibility. In their introductions to elementary (K-8) curriculum, Manitoba and Québec address personal and social responsibility; Ontario and New Brunswick address personal responsibility. It is not always clear how these are expressed in student outcomes or expectations, but it is often expressed in the rationale as *respect for others* and *leadership*.

Critical physical literacy

Overall, there is little evidence of critical physical literacy in Canadian PE curriculum policies. Although many policies define health in a holistic way in their rationale or introduction, few student outcomes reflect a critical physical literacy model. At best, critical outcomes are mixed with traditional and constructivist outcomes so that the resulting message is somewhat mixed. For instance, the Saskatchewan PE policy begins by stating that well-being “goes beyond

a traditional focus on individual lifestyle choices and emphasizes the physical and social environments that facilitate or hinder people's ability and motivation to be active" (p.3). Despite this recognition, active living goals tend to follow a traditional fitness framework, with the expectation to "determine and monitor personal level of health-related cardiovascular, muscular endurance and flexibility fitness incorporating the use of data collection tools" (p.28). Ontario policy points out that critical literacy "goes beyond conventional critical thinking by focusing on issues related to fairness, equity and social justice" (p.61) but then provides very vague expectations at each grade to "use a range of critical and creative thinking skills and processes" (p.51) without specific outcomes.

It would appear that although the intent of a number of provincial PE policies is recognition of the need for an empowering, critical approach, this has not yet been widely translated into outcomes.

Discussion

Several issues became evident in this analysis of PE curriculum policies across Canada. If one assumes that the purpose of a PE curriculum policy is to enhance the health of students and create dispositions for a lifetime of health, the provinces and territories have found diverse ways to construct this curriculum; their policies reflect a diverse set of assumptions and values, which recognizes provincial jurisdictional authority. That being said, what the approaches have in common is their lack of recognition of the diversity of physical skills, interests, backgrounds, and corporeal differences in students. Secondly, this analysis of pan-Canadian PE policies finds that curriculum policies have not been designed to reflect an orientation toward complex definitions of physical education as a component of overall holistic health, nor do the policies recognize multiple determinants of health or the need to empower students to improve determinants of health such as: health care systems, and environmental conditions. Instead, the overall focus in Canadian PE policies is on the skills associated with competitive team sports, the varying definitions of fitness, and a virtually total emphasis on personal responsibility. Health has been narrowly defined rather than defined as the WHO definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.

Our Canadian history of quasi-military, male-oriented sports and activities remains as a strength and a burden. Teaching students physical literacy using components of sports and games, including throwing and catching objects, reflects this narrow focus. Whitehead (2007) asks if the concept of physical literacy should include dexterity. In that case, darts or knitting could also be appropriate activities for students, but non-sport physical activity is largely missing in the policy documents.

An outcome of these policies is the use of resources, including space. In terms of land use, the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2012) publishes guidelines for playfield areas in schools. A mid-size elementary school would require about 1.2 hectares (2.5 acres) of land for a playfield, and a mid-size secondary school requires 3.0 hectares (7.5 acres). Presently much of this space is used for baseball fields, tracks, soccer pitches, football fields, and paved basketball practice hoops, rather than, for example, working gardens or walking/jogging/bicycling paths. These spaces are physical evidence of PE policy priorities, and may need to be re-examined if school spaces are allocated to enable and engage learners with activities besides sports.

Fitness vs. Vitality

Definitions of fitness in provincial curriculum policies are largely either medical or absent. Despite holistic health statements in the policy rationales, most policies seemed to equate health with physical fitness in their outcomes. It would be useful for policy developers to explore the relationship, or lack of relationship, between fitness and well-being or vitality. The most common approach to fitness in Canadian curriculum is a model of what Bernstein (2000) calls performance logic: students are seen as deficient and in need of remediation. This approach misses the element of physical activity as a contributor to social and mental health. Body awareness and physical activity are tools that help to deal with stress, anxiety, and depression. Attending a yoga class might help students feel as if they belong with their peer group without having to qualify for a sports team. In addition, research has raised concerns with activities such as charting food intake, exercise, and students' fitness levels. McVey (2003) for example, cautions that programs which are designed to address obesity can trigger *weight preoccupation* issues for students. Understanding body cues for hunger, satiety, and satisfaction after activities may be more beneficial to students than charting and regulating.

One of the limitations of the current approaches to PE policy is the lack of recognition of differently-abled or non-athletic students. This has the potential to disengage many students who are not comfortable with team/oppositional activities, or who are uncomfortable with the implicit or explicit judgements about their bodies. A large number of both male and female students experience significant struggles with body image (Robertson and Thomson, 2012); to take the position that their bodies need improving confirms societal and media messages that they should aspire to a limited range of culturally-acceptable body shapes and sizes. Our societal preoccupation with body shape may not be contributing to the well-being of Canadian students, and this requires recognition in Canadian PE policies.

Individual vs. Social Responsibility

Any exploration of social vs. individual responsibility for fitness and well-being is largely absent from provincial curriculum policies. Social and cultural contexts do influence health to a significant degree. Raphael (2010) finds that the worst thing one can do for one's health is to be poor or to have poor parents. To deny the individual's role in personal health is an act of disempowerment; however, it may be more fruitful to examine environmental elements in our school and community which are health-enhancing and which meet the needs of a small minority of students. How do we structure the school day for breaks? How is space allocated? What would students like to do on the hectares of land surrounding most schools? If we create curriculum, activities and spaces to meet the needs of only those students who flourish in competitive team sports, how then is fitness an individual responsibility? Students, teachers and communities could be engaged in dialogue surrounding how curriculum, facilities and routines are complicit in the culture of inactivity.

Apple (2004) reminds us that we cannot look at curriculum without engaging the "other aspects of a society's cultural apparatus" (p. 148). We must purposefully examine the larger picture to see curriculum policy as symptom of a pattern and not a cause. Reitz (2000) calls the kind of education that helps individuals overcome a sense of powerlessness in the face of global and local structure *pedagogia perennis*. By this he means an historical and multicultural perspective that teaches a social intelligence to inspire political action. In some universities, Physical Education programs now include Physical Cultural Studies, which examine the

sociological aspects of PE and sport, including how “space is socially produced by and produces relations of power” (Friedman & van Ingen, 2011, p. 89). The social production of curriculum policy and its inherent power relations can be a useful background for discussions about both PE policies and allocations of time, space and other resources implicit in those policies.

Several of the provincial Physical Education policies have rationales that point to critical physical literacy and the empowerment of students. We find, however, little evidence of any specific outcomes that operationalized this rationale. Consistently, fitness is reflected in policy as an individual responsibility and a product of personal choices. The basic assumption behind the PE policies is the need to improve one’s body and lifestyle. Unfortunately, opportunities within the PE curriculum for students to improve their classroom, school, and neighbourhood surroundings are not included. Rich, Holroyd and Evans (2004) identify a *healthism* discourse in UK policies that implies that individuals are largely responsible for their own health - making healthy choices. It appears that Canadian curriculum policies also reflect this agenda, rather than a recognition that the curriculum should enable students instead of finding them deficient. Within this discourse of healthism is an obesity discourse, which focuses on the health risks related to sedentary living and the need for schools to promote individual responsibility for fitness and increased activity. This discourse does not acknowledge the social determinants of health, nor the recognition that schools need to build environments that account for what Kalantzis and Cope (2012) identify as learner differences, including corporeal differences. For instance, a report by Active Healthy Kids Canada (2012) found that in an international study that included Canada, half of the adults cite “fear of exposure to child predators as the reason they restrict their children’s outdoor play” (p. 22). This reflects a social reality beyond the individual decision-making of the child. It would appear that the process of curriculum policy development operates between the opposite positions of a political discourse of individual responsibility; and the research on health, well-being, and the social determinants of health. In this case, alignment with research is the more distant pole.

What is missing also from Canadian PE policies is the questioning of existing structures and practices for their capacity for inclusion, invitations to detect bias, and the action component of empowerment to examine the social and built environment of the school in order to implement change. The potential for such empowerment does exist within the rationales of many of the PE policies examined in this study, but the step between philosophy and actual operationalization of that philosophy in terms of activities and outcomes has not yet been realized. One first step could be the creation of a national dialogue that is a critical reflection of existing structures and practices. The purpose of this dialogue would be 1) to identify whether or not PE policies are inclusive or whether they disengage a large number of students, and privilege a small number; 2) to address the place of PE in the curriculum; if health and well-being is important to us as a society, then the current role of PE as a non-essential course may need to be re-examined, and 3) to create a more holistic view of PE that includes mental health and well-being not only in curriculum policy rationales, but in the student outcomes as well.

This dialogue should include communities as well as schools; “As a society, our collective health will be influenced by our capacity to re-claim and re-engineer physical activity into our family, neighbourhood, community and societal lives” (Ng, Gannon & Halas, 2006, p. 5). While physical education is not a panacea for these complex concerns, it can have a powerful effect on children’s experiences in physical activity and play, thus shaping their body images for

years to come and predicting patterns of activity or inactivity based on early learning experiences (Singleton, 2009).

New realities require dialogue around solutions. That does not imply that all curriculum policies need to be the same, but rather that there is both clear research and clear international standards that suggest certain fundamental, inclusive values from which curriculum should be developed. For instance, an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study of innovative learning environments concludes that:

Research into learning shows both the importance of allowing students to take control of their own learning and that learning must be a social cultural, intrapersonal and an active process. Research also demonstrates that an understanding of complex subjects can be best achieved in settings where the learner is engaged with others in the community, in activities where knowledge is being applied (OECD, 2008, p.1).

One possible way forward is to consider the potential of critical physical literacy and empowerment. In a Canadian Policy Research Networks report on social risks, Jenson (2004) refers to *well-being* as a more inclusive framework than health. Taking a similar broad perspective on PE curriculum policies would support an examination of the values and assumptions underlying them. Knowledge mobilization among provincial and territorial curriculum policy designers, researchers and communities would introduce a dialogue that would encourage an examination of the need for approaches to PE policies that are complex, inclusive and empowering. As Kentel and Dobson (2007) suggest, the challenge is to "engage in interdisciplinary conversations . . . and to initiate transformative action towards solutions" (p.150). If health, as the WHO (2003) defines it, includes "physical, mental and social well-being", then the implementation of such a complex concept becomes a considerable challenge. The inclusion of policy developers with different vantage points would facilitate fresh perspectives on the values inherent in the policies, and the resource allocation, teaching strategies, activity choices and assessment based on those values. It would be important not only to look to disciplines beyond the traditional PE perspective in the development of curriculum, but also to initiate inter-provincial conversations. The goal would not be the creation of a uniform pan-Canadian curriculum, but a clarification of the research on well-being and its implications for PE curriculum policy.

These conversations are no doubt a journey and not a destination.¹

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