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Secondary school physical education curricular content: A meditation

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Abstract
This paper is a philosophical and theoretical meditation on how content and physical activities come to make-up secondary school physical education curriculum. Far from being a neutral entity, the secondary school physical education curriculum, and what content and physical activities come to be included and excluded, is not a 'natural' process guided by 'common sense.' Rather, it is cultural artifact that is the product of social construction. Below I review research (mostly conducted the United States (U.S.) and scholarship that have revealed important insights with respect to secondary physical education curriculum. I do so with the hopes of adapting and utilizing this work as I present a number of philosophical and theoretical points for consideration when we as a field of teachers and scholars work to create secondary school physical education curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum, Physical Education, Physical Activity Culture

Introduction
Scholarly and research based arguments and justifications for regular physical activity and the provision of school based health and physical education abound. Most of this work, however, sits at the level of broad generalization (Haskell, Lee, Pate, Powell, Blair, Franklin, *et al.*, 2007 [1]; McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2001) [2]. Far from being a 'natural' entity, school HPE curriculum is a socially constructed artifact that is imbued with values (Kirk, 2009) [3]. When it comes to considering what curricular content, and what physical activities are chosen and which ones are left out, we see a rather new and emerging research line that has historically has been of marginal interest to scholars. Below I will make an argument for the importance of the field of physical education to consider more seriously how curricular content and physical activities are chosen at the secondary level. First, I lay out a theoretical justification of this practice. Next, I will review the little research that does exist on the topic. Finally, I will suggest future areas of research.

The Societal Role of Secondary School Health and Physical Education
In response to the outcry declaring a public health crisis, a variety of organizations have published documents and action plans detailing how governments and agencies can move forward in increasing the health and physical activity of today's youth. In particular, school physical education has been pegged as a central front in battling this crisis (National Association for SHAPE America, 2016 [4]; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1996 [5]; World Health Organization, 2004) [6]. Given the ready access to youth, and the proposed focus on providing adolescents with a wide variety of physical activity experiences, it makes logical sense to assume that secondary school physical education holds potential to impact their physical activity practices and lifestyles in a positive manner. In fact, some large scale interventions have shown positive results in increasing the physical activity of youth and adolescents (Gortmaker, Cheung, Peterson., 1999) [7]. Despite the promising role physical education might play in increasing the health and physical activity of adolescents, there is research literature that should provide some perspective and caution to this optimism. Researchers who have studied student voices and perspectives have revealed physical education to be a place many adolescents find irrelevant and painful, and as such, has been failing to fulfill this promise.

Student Voices and 'How' Physical Education is taught
Physical education as a field has had to adapt to changing climates throughout its history. Over previous decades changes in economics and work life; technological innovations; cultural norms informing physicality, gender, race and ethnicity, marriage, sexuality, and religious discourse; political ideology and the actions and policies of governments, have all had complex implications for how people view and interact with various forms of human movement and physical activity. The changes in society and the populations that we serve have forced the field of physical education to periodically come to grips with the reality that traditional and popular pedagogies have become inadequate for dealing with present day contexts. These periodic moments in our field's history have resulted in a range of innovations aimed at improving teaching practices and the educational experiences of youth.
Early research on students' perspectives revealed physical education to be a space rife with the discrimination, stratification, and segregation of individuals, and where many of the experiences were meaningless and boring (Dyson, 2006) [8]. More recently, researchers are finding that the instructional styles teachers use, the management protocols they employ, and the manner in which they address social dynamics all have had a significantly negative impact for some students. Physical education has been found to be a place where many students do not understand the purpose or goals of what they are doing (Cothran & Ennis, 1999) [9]; management of curricular and social events is inconsistent and confusing (Cothran, Kulinna, & Garrahy, 2003) [10]; students desire instructional styles other than direct and command (Cothran & Kulinna, 2006) [11]; girls

are forced and relegated to the sidelines due to male domination of activity (Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010) [12]; unskilled boys who do not display hegemonic forms of masculinity are ridiculed by both teachers and "fellow" students for their lack of competency in aggressive and hyper-competitive sport (Portman, 1995; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2014) [13, 14]; students are physically and emotionally dominated by aggressive and skilled males (Ennis, 1999) [15]; sexuality (highly informed by heteronormative and homophobic norms) is used as a device of oppressive control (Connell, 1995[16]; Clarke, 2006) [17]; students are forced to participate in unsafe environments (Portman, 1995) [12]; and subject to demeaning and humiliating teaching practices (Thompson, Humbert, & Mirwald, 2003) [18].

In response to these realities, physical educators created a number of instructional approaches and curricular models aimed at fomenting a more beneficial space for children to learn about movement and physical activity. For example, Muska Mosston created a 'spectrum' of instructional teaching styles due to the "outrage" he felt when children were denied opportunities to learn and move in meaningful ways (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002, p.v) [19]. Mosston's creation of the 'spectrum' was an acknowledgement to the diversity of the ways physical activity is experienced (physically, mentally, emotionally, socially), and also of the range of abilities and backgrounds that students brought with them to the learning environment (Byra, 2006) [20].

Likewise, Siedentop developed the Sport Education model because of his dissatisfaction with the heavily dominant multi-activity curriculum model (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2004) [21]. He saw the multi-activity method of organizing curriculum resulted in, "short unit[s] dominated by isolated skill drills followed by poorly played games. Less-skilled kids were often overshadowed by more-skilled students who dominated play, and many students were left frustrated and plain bored" (Siedentop *et al.*, 2004, p.2) [21]. While the Sport Education model is primarily concerned with creating competent and literate sports people, others have sought to create physical education curriculum that dealt with wider and more pervasive social circumstances. Hellison (1995) [22] developed his *Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility* (TPSR) model as a way to help students who he saw as suffering from a variety of 'social pathologies' to "take more responsibility for their well-being and helping them to be more sensitive and responsive to the well-being of others" (Hellison, 1995, p.4) [22].

Some physical educators have sought to adapt or blend particular curricular approaches as a way to focus on more specific social circumstances. Hastie and Buchanan (2000) [23] blended TPSR with Sport Education into what they called "empowering sport" as a way to help a group of sixth grade boys address their struggles with fair play. Ennis and her colleagues (1999) [24] framed elements of the Sport Education model with elements of peace education as a way to address many of the challenging realities experienced by youth living in urban environments. Kinchin and O'Sullivan (2003) [25] developed a unit on volleyball that combined elements of Sport Education with a cultural studies approach that focused on social issues such as gender, body image, and participatory discrimination. Teachers at Project Adventure (2013) [26] created a K-12 outdoor and adventure education curriculum that has the twin benefits of teaching student about many non-sport physical activities, and also has a number of curricular activities aimed at helping students develop pro-social character elements as well as being a contributing member of a group or team. Perhaps the most pressing social issue facing our field today is obesity, as there have been number of large scale school based interventions having been implemented with the hopes of increasing the health of today's youth (Trost, 2006) [27]. The theme that cuts across all of these efforts to improve physical education for more students is the focus on 'how' curriculum is framed and instruction is delivered. While these innovations have been and continue to be important resources for teachers working with children, there are some who are suggesting that this is only one part of making physical education more relevant for today's youth.

Student Voices and 'What' is taught in Physical Education

Researchers are increasingly recognizing that the experiences of students in physical education will be impacted not only by 'how' it is taught, but that 'what' is taught plays an equally important role in how students engage with movement and physical activity. Currently, researchers have been finding that adolescent students find the content and curriculum provided in secondary physical education holds little relevance to their worlds (Carlson, 1995; Chen, 1999; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992) [28, 29, 30, 31]. Many adolescents have expressed a desire for less competitive activities and more lifetime-oriented physical activities (Carlson, 1995; Olafson, 2002) [27, 32]; that they do not like participating in team sports (Carlson, 1995; Olafson, 2002; Strean, 2003) [27, 29, 33]; and are presented with activities to which they have no access in or out of school (Dagkas & Stathi, 2007) [34]. Furthermore, researchers have documented girls as having less equitable opportunities to engage with activities that are relevant for them (Vertinsky, 1992) [35] and that ethnic minorities are funneled into activities stereotyped as being for 'them' (Chappell, 2002; Harrison, 2006) [36, 37].

Sanford and Rich (2006) [38] speculate that the historically narrow range of content offered in physical education curriculum has led some researchers to position students' apathy toward the curricular offerings as *their* problem. There is evidence to refute the claims that position students as inactive or lazy, as research is showing adolescents are active, and specifically, with activities outside those offered in the school curriculum (Flintoff & Scranton, 2001; Green, 2004; Olafson, 2002; Tinning and Fitzclarence, 1992) [39, 40, 32, 31]. This reality has led some to call for a significant shift in the kinds of physical activities we present to our students (Kirk, 2009; McCaughtry, 2009) [3, 41]. If we are looking to increase the physical activity levels of adolescents as they move into adulthood, with the hope that they continue to regularly participate in physical activity, then it makes logical sense to me that we provide them with activities that they are eager to engage. One way to do this is by creating more congruence between contemporary physical activity culture and secondary physical education curriculum.

Over the past few decades we have witnessed a significant increase and diversification of physical culture. Kirk (2009) [3] describes physical culture as "a specialized form of corporeal discourse concerned with the meaning-making centered on the bodily practices that constitute organized and institutionalized activities such as sport, exercise, dance, outdoor and adventurous activities, and so on" (p.141). People produce and reproduce physical culture by engaging in physical activities

that are "highly codified" and "embedded in beliefs, knowledge, and broader individual and social practices" (Kirk, 1999, p.65) [42, 3]. Drawing on the work of Marcel Mauss (1973) [43], Kirk helps us see that the various talents, gifts, language, and techniques associated with a range of physical activities are contextually based social constructs (Shilling, 2005) [44]. It is the selection of particular gifts, talents, techniques, and physical activities that give particular physical cultures and sub-cultures their distinctive features, foment platforms where deep affect is experienced (McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2001) [2], and become sources where members derive powerful kinds of meaning (Kretchmar, 2000, 2005) [45, 46].

In wider physical activity culture what 'counts' as a legitimate physical activity has become near limitless. In fact, Ham, Kruger, and Tudor-Locke (2009) [47] found that U.S. adults engage in a wide variety of physical activities. Twenty-five different physical activities were reported by at least one percent of respondents from two national surveys in the U.S., with another 19 activities reported by less than one percent of the respondents. Of these activities those that were most popular, in order from most to least, included: walking, running and jogging, yard work, biking, weight training, dancing, being active on a treadmill, basketball, golf, and swimming. Many of these activities could be considered 'lifetime activities' as they can be engaged in through the majority of one's lifespan and require less social and material resources (time, money, other people, space, etc.). Many are also time nowhere to be found in secondary school curricula, and where they do exist, are often facilitated poorly.

Kirk (2009) [3] contends that it would make sense for school physical education to inform and be informed by larger physical culture, and, as such, we should see a level of congruence between the two fields. In some ways there is, given the dominance of large-sided team sport in both society (Coakley, 2007; Mechikoff, 2010) [48, 49] and secondary school physical education programs (Fairclough & Stratton, 1997; Fairclough, Stratton, & Baldwin, 2002; Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013; Ferry & McCaughtry, 2015; Mechikoff, 2010) [50, 51, 52, 53, 49]. While on the surface, sports may seem innocuous enough, neither sport nor curriculum are value free (Apple, 2004; Chen, 1999) [54, 29]. The reality is that schools are political spaces where particular forms of culture and ideology are produced and reproduced and function to privilege and marginalize particular knowledge and values (Apple, 2003; Giroux, 1997) [54, 55]. The dominance of sport in the secondary curriculum sits in contrast to the very diverse patterns of larger physical activity culture and the desires of many of today's adolescents. As a result, there appears to be an increasing friction and tension between secondary school physical education content and what is popular in a variety of adolescent physical cultures and sub-cultures. It is possible and likely that something will need to give.

Kirk (1999, 2009) [42, 3] notes that the field has had one "seismic" shift in its history between the 1880's and 1990's (from a focus on gymnastics to sports related skills) and speculates that we are heading for another one. Furthermore, it is likely that this upcoming shift will be predicated by a 'crisis' moment heavily informed by the previously discussed tensions and frictions that appear to exist between the types of physical activities to which adolescents are attracted and what gets offered in secondary physical education (Kirk, 1998; McCaughtry, 2009) [56, 41]. While this moment may be a cause for concern to those in our profession, Kirk (2009) [3] and McCaughtry (2009) [41] see it as an opportunity for the renewal of secondary physical education.

In recent times, McCaughtry (2009) [41] and his colleagues (McCaughtry, Tischler, & Barnard-Flory, 2008) [57] have provided a strong call and comprehensive framework for revamping physical education curriculum. McCaughtry's ideas (grounded in Deweyan philosophy) serve as a foundation for creating culturally relevant physical education curriculum by choosing and framing content in ways students find fun, relevant, meaningful and "cool." Their call includes a radical shift in the content offered, positioning outdoor and adventure education, Yoga, Pilates, martial arts, hip-hop dance, stepping, Tai-Chi, Latin dance, skateboarding, hiking, rock-climbing, cycling, biking, running, triathlons, student-designed games, (insert pro-social and culturally-relevant-physical-activity-here) as just a sampling of the activities that have gained prominence in adult and youth physical activity culture in recent times and thus, should have a greater presence in the curriculum (Dyson & O'Sullivan, 1998; Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006; Humberstone, 1990, McCaughtry, 2006; Wall, 2005) [58, 59, 60, 61, 62]. McCaughtry and his colleagues see this as a powerful way to increase the physical activity and resultant health of adolescents, while at the same time aligning the curriculum with what is relevant in physical culture. The idea of creating secondary physical education curriculum that shows congruence with larger physical culture and youth culture holds promising implications for the health and well-being of youth. In addition to choosing curricular physical activities that are prevalent in wider physical activity culture, what else should we consider when selecting content?

Utility and Meaning: Considering Both When Constructing Curriculum

Curriculum can be designed with many purposes in mind; utilitarian ends (technological, rationalistic approaches and concerns, and meaning (intrinsic values for the activity itself) are two such purposes. Experiences that are created solely with a technological and rationalistic perspective, however, are likely to ignore the cultural and humanistic elements of movement and physical activity (Fahlberg & Fahlberg, 1997) [63]. In physical education, Azzarito (2009) [64] has documented the increased presence of "corporate curriculum" as one response to the obesity crisis. Here, well intentioned researchers use technological rationality to create and implement "top-down," "business minded," "bottom line" approaches to school curriculum (p.184). These approaches are narrowly conceived, position ethnic minorities as racialized 'others', and strip "culturally sensitive" approaches to being active of the very elements that make them attractive and relevant in the first place (Azzarito, 2009, p.185) [64]. These researchers have focused on creating curriculum that can be "implemented" in a variety of settings and, using objective measurements, demonstrate its ability to increase the physical activity of students, for no other reason than to simply move. Imagine cultural and ethnic dances with which students are eager to engage being stripped of the history, context, beliefs, and traditions that make them meaningful and attractive, as well as being taught in scripted ways that require minimal skill and understanding on the part of the teacher. Regardless of the position one might hold, it should give us pause to think of any physical education professional seeing these outcomes as

acceptable, let alone desirable.

The Fahlbergs (1997) [63], drawing from the early work of Ken Wilber, make clear that technological rationality is not the problem, per se, rather, to use *only this form of rationality* when emancipatory reason is also required for meaningful and engaging physical activity experiences is what becomes problematic. They explain,

A technical process and an experimental research method can help determine what type of exercise facilitates body fat reduction, but an emancipatory interest can help explicate the social and psychological dynamics that compel many people in our culture to have an unhealthy obsession with exercise as a means of weight control or attaining the "perfect" body—an obsession that limits health and freedom. (Fahlberg & Fahlberg, 1997, p. 66) [63].

By emancipatory reason, the Fahlbergs "simply mean the rational process in which emancipation can be realized by bringing critical scrutiny to bear on unquestioned and limiting assumptions, as well as bringing self-reflection to bear on unconscious process and content" (Fahlberg & Fahlberg, 1997, p. 66) [63].

This broader and more empowering conception of health does not treat the body as an "absolute material entity" (p.66), positions "any concept of health [as] context dependent" (p.68) and as such, requires us to develop "a broader conceptualization of health" (p. 69), one that includes the partial truths offered by contemporary physical activity culture. The Fahlbergs (1997) [63] advocate for human movement as a way to increase human health, freedom, consciousness, and development by framing these experiences through emancipatory reason, or put more simply, "to emphasize those aspects of movement that are *human* rather than the merely biological or mechanistic" and to focus "on the *human* moving rather than on the movement of the human" (p.70). In fact, many scholars have suggested that it is the 'meaning' humans derive from physical activity that we should focus on when designing physical education curriculum (Kretchmar, 2000[45], 2005[46]; Loland, 2006[65]; McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2001[2]). Providing adolescents with exposure to physical activities which retain the contextual elements that make them attractive and meaningful, increases the likelihood they will engage more regularly in physical activity and in ways that increase their biological and psychosocial health. It is also possible this engagement may result in an increased sense of belonging, a bonding with one's culture, community, and peers; as well as an increased sense of empowerment, fulfillment, and joy.

Recent Research

A couple of caveats exist pertaining to the work that has focused on the content and physical activities offered as a part of secondary physical education curriculum. First, the study of content has largely been a historical treatment (Kirk, 1999; Phillips & Roper, 2006) [56, 66]. Second, this work has been largely philosophical and theoretical in nature (Fahlberg & Fahlberg, 1997; Kirk, 2009; McCaughtry, 2009, McCaughtry *et al.*, 2008) [63, 3, 41, 57]. Third, this research has often utilized action research approaches, and has been focused on the perspective of small groups of students (Carlson, 1995; Chen, 1999; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Olafson, 2002; Portman, 1995; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2014) [28, 29, 30, 32, 13, 14].

Work from the teachers' perspective has been a more recent and limited development. Ferry and McCaughtry (2013, 2015) [52, 53] conducted two such studies. In the first study Ferry and McCaughtry (2013) [52] found a group of teachers who had a significant biography with sport and developed a sporting 'habitus,' that led them to choose physical education as their profession. This sporting disposition also provided a significant amount power and positive emotional affect for the teachers as they chose to teach curriculum almost completely made up of sport. When questioned about teaching non-sport content these teachers deployed strategic rhetoric as excuses and reasons for their limited curricula. In the second study, Ferry and McCaughtry (2015) [53] found that teachers curricular content decisions were based on a sense of emotional 'comfort' that was highly informed by elements of their gendered identity; elements many might consider masculine (this included the female teachers as well, although to a lesser degree). Ferry and McCaughtry (2015) found that these secondary physical education teachers were comfortable teaching (or could see themselves teaching) content that was viewed as masculine (flag football) and/or gender neutral (swimming, outdoor recreation activities), and taught little to no physical activities that were considered feminine (Zumba, Dance). The mere thought of teaching feminine content was enough to threaten their gendered identities, let alone actually considering to teach them. While these two studies more deeply explain the reasons why an overwhelming amount of sport exists in the secondary physical education curriculum (and in particular large sided team sport) a number of questions remain and should be pursued by scholars in future research efforts.

Future Directions

First, new and limited research into the role that teachers play in selecting content leaves sealed from our view many other forces that could impact this process. Future research should consider the role that different institutional factors may play in the construction of curriculum (e.g. state and national standards, district physical education administration, school principal, professional development, teaching colleagues, geographical climate, facilities, equipment, and liability). In addition, the research on students' perceptions that is cited in this review is a bit dated, and the direct focus of these studies was not necessarily curricular content and physical activities. Future research should be designed with student perceptions of physical activity culture and school physical education curriculum as the primary focus. What's more, using a matched approach where student perceptions of curricular offerings and those of their teacher (s) could be quite illuminating. The limited research on teachers' perspectives have revealed many reasons why secondary school physical education curriculum is dominated by sport. What about teachers who offer a more diverse curriculum? Who are they and why do they do so? What about teachers who have changed and altered their curricula over time? What did this process look like? Why did they undertake the change? What about teachers who show significant agency in teaching an activity that is far from their knowledge base, experience, and comfort zone? What compelled these teachers to take such leaps? Finally, what about other stakeholders (e.g. administrators, parents, classroom teachers, etc.)? What are their perceptions of secondary school physical education curriculum? This review has focused on the U.S. Context. What does curriculum look like in different countries and what

factors influence what content and physical activities are included and excluded?

Conclusion

Creating a secondary school physical education curriculum that is more in line with contemporary physical activity culture and adolescent physical activity desires, holds much promise for increasing the physical activity levels and health of all students, especially those previously underserved and marginalized. Developing a more nuanced understanding of how the dispositions and autonomy many secondary physical education teachers possess, and how this and other factors affects their content decisions will be crucial in working towards the inclusion of physical activities with which adolescents are eager to engage, as well as helping to address current public health concerns.

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