




# Physical Education Policy Research in the United States: Setting a New Orientation

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## ABSTRACT

In this critical reflection, we consider physical education policy research in the United States (U.S.) using a sociocritical lens. Our aim is to extend the discussion and critiques of physical education policy research by exploring how it is conducted in the U.S. Instead of asking ‘What is physical education policy research?’, we are more concerned with the complex, imbalanced, and unpredictable affects of physical education policy research in the U.S. Thus, we ask questions like, ‘How is physical education policy research working in different contexts?’, ‘What counts as policy research?’ and ‘Who is doing policy research?’ We examine how physical education policy research is being taken up across the U.S. and the orientation – or direction – those studies take. As such, we conclude by considering what directions, people, and elements are not included in the current orientation.

## KEYWORDS

Policy; physical education; physical activity; critical theory; social justice; curriculum

## Introduction

In this paper, we critically reflect on physical education policy research from the United States (U.S.) and the orientation – or alignment – of the field of physical education more broadly. We aim to extend the discussion and critiques by exploring how policy research gets ‘done’ in physical education. Instead of asking ‘What is physical education policy research?’, we are more concerned with the complex, imbalanced, and unpredictable affects of physical education policy research in the U.S. Thus, we ask questions like ‘How is physical education policy research working in different contexts?’, ‘What counts as policy research?’ and ‘Who is doing policy research?’ Furthermore, we consider how physical education policy research is conducted across the U.S. and how it has been orientated in some ways over others.

Context matters. Thus, it matters that all the physical education policy research we critically reflect on is from the U.S. In the U.S., educational policy is developed at multiple levels including national (federal), state, and local governments. Policies are usually established by some sort of governing body (Stein, 2004) by going through a political process (i.e., negotiations, expectations, contracts) (Apple, 2006). It is well known in the U.S. that the federal government rarely establishes educational policies – unless they relate to issues of equity (e.g., Title IX, civil rights) (Hill, 2000). Therefore, the federal government often

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defers policy decisions to individual states (Fuhrman, Goertz, & Weinbaum, 2007). Each state has a Department of Education (DOE) where legislation related to teacher licensure, academic standards, school accreditation, evaluations, assessments, and more are developed and enacted.

In addition to state DOEs, each subject area has national and state-level professional organizations that *guide* policies and practices for teaching and learning. In physical education, the Society of Health and Physical Educators America (SHAPE America) is the national organization that sets national standards and grade-level outcomes (SHAPE America, 2014). In addition to SHAPE America, each state has their own professional organization (e.g., SHAPE Maryland, SHAPE North Carolina) which is affiliated with SHAPE America. All but one state organization has adopted the SHAPE America K-12 standards as their guiding framework. This is important because state-level organizations usually recommend panel members when DOEs are developing state-level policy. As such, while state policies are sometimes different than the SHAPE America K-12 standards, members within the organization (both state and national) have influence on policy development by serving on committees and panels. Thus, professional organization standards tend to act as a guide rather than policy.

Notwithstanding the multifarious policy landscape outlined above (multiple governments, organizations, documents), many in the U.S. tend to treat policy development and implementation as a linear process. Such a perspective theorizes once a policy is legislated, it works in a downward fashion changing practices and solving social issues it was meant to address (Stein, 2004). In physical education, there has been an assumption that mandating a time requirement will lead to schools' compliance and increasing time in physical education. Thus, it is theorized young people will be more physically active and this will ameliorate highly complex health issues like obesity. Leaving aside that policy implementation is complex and non-linear, such underlying assumptions ignore the sociopolitical contexts of policies (Apple, 2006) and the different actors (e.g., teachers, unions, politicians) that affect how policies unfold. That is to say that such an approach starts from a (misguided) assumption that policies are meant to solely operate for the benefit of the public and are independent of private ambitions (Apple, 2006).

Within physical education alone, private third-party vendors (e.g., FitnessGram®, SPARK-PE) are paid extensive sums of money to provide educational and assessment services. Not to mention, organizations (like SHAPE America) are active in political lobbying and advocacy because they are under pressure to serve their members' interests. University researchers also compete with organizations for grant monies to evaluate or augment physical activity (PA) programs in schools. These are just a couple examples of how people (and groups of people) have personal stakes in the political process and agenda-setting of physical education policy. As such, not all policies are developed (or researched) in good faith (Floden, 2007). When we consider that different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) can be accrued during policy development, implementation, and research – they are no longer straight-forward processes meant to benefit young people. Rather, the persons who research policies may also benefit professionally, financially, and politically (Penney, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on U.S. physical education policy research from a sociocritical perspective. We are particularly concerned with how policies take on agendas in physical education and what (and who) gets neglected as we travel down these

political pathways. We are interested in how public health has come to dominate U.S. physical education policy research, which we argue is an anathema to the democratic goals of education. It is important to note this paper is not an exhaustive literature review, but rather integrates prominent research on physical education policy in the U.S. In examining these studies, we chose to inform our reflection with policy literature in education more broadly. Thus, we continue this paper by explaining the U.S. educational policy landscape.

### ***The education policy landscape in the U.S.***

To explore the education policy landscape, it is important to have an understanding of the context in which educational policies operate in the U.S. Unlike other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the U.S. has a de-centralized system of governance. There are three ‘groups’ that play a role in the development and implementation of policy: (a) federal government; (b) state governments; and (c) Local Education Agencies (LEAs) (Fuhrman et al., 2007). Whilst there has been an increase in national oversight since the 1950s, the U.S. constitution ultimately places educational authority at the state level. Thus, many policy studies in physical education focus on individual state policies or comparisons of state policies.

In addition to structural aspects of policy enactment, it is important to understand the landscape of educational policy research. According to Floden (2007), educational policy research falls into three paradigms: (a) economic, (b) case studies/organizational, and (c) critical. Economic approaches treat education as a process where we take particular factors and use them to predict financial costs and/or performance outcomes. Economic approaches generally use causal statistics and statistical modeling to see if policies translate into tangible outcomes (e.g., higher test scores). Case studies, on the other hand, examine *how* policies are implemented through specific cases. In case studies, researchers usually draw on qualitative methods to describe different actors and facilitators involved in policy implementation (e.g., teachers, principals, resources). Case studies ultimately aim to evaluate if a policy does what it intends by examining the augmentations and limitations during the implementation process.

The last approach, critical research, is different from the above two because it explores social injustice, power relations, and privilege. Critical researchers may examine how policies work for some people at the expense of others (e.g., socioeconomic status, race). Critical studies are important because they provide insight on the complexity of policy as well as problematize how some things may be taken for granted during policy implementation. The reason why critical researchers aim to understand what is hidden (or taken for granted) is because their work aims to make the world a more equitable place. This paper falls into the critical paradigm and seeks to see what is being hidden (or left behind) in current physical education policy research.

### ***Who we are and why that matters***

Who we are and our relationship to policy *matters*. All three of us consider ourselves education scholars interested in issues of equity and diversity. We argue it is important to consider our positioning, experience, and personal orientations as we continue along

through our arguments and analysis on physical education policy in the U.S. Dillon's research draws on social theories to examine equity and diversity in health, wellbeing, and education. Prior to academia, he was a public school teacher in the U.S. as well as a district supervisor for health, physical education, and sports. In his role, he wrote district policies as well as consulted on state policy committees. Dillon received his PhD from the University of Auckland where he learned about international (and sociocultural) approaches to education. Thus, he has an interest in examining policy work in the U.S. from this perspective.

Jen's research centers around social justice and equity issues in physical education both at the higher education and K-12 levels. As a secondary teacher in the U.S., she was on the committee to develop the first set of physical education state standards in Rhode Island. As a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, she was part of the 'PE Metrics' taskforce to develop policy and assessment with SHAPE America. More recently, Jen has further engaged in curriculum and policy development at the state-level in her academic position at Kent State University in Ohio.

Sue's research focuses on social justice and student-centered pedagogy in K-12 physical education and teacher education. Originally from England, she taught secondary physical education before moving to the U.S. for graduate work. She is very active in the state organization for health, physical education, recreation, and dance where she has been involved in curriculum and policy work. Sue has been working with the Ohio Department of Education's work on K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards.

Considering the above positionalities, all three of us are concerned with equity and diversity in health, wellbeing, and education. Given our dedication to equity, we are often drawn to epistemological stances that critically analyze how power, oppression, and privilege operates in our world. In this paper, we align our work to sociocritical perspectives by drawing on feminist, queer, and intersectional concepts to help us reflect on U.S. physical education policy research. We find theory to be useful as a toolbox to help us see the world in a new way. To do so, we draw from the work of Sara Ahmed (2006).

## **Theoretical concepts: Orientations and brackets**

To critically reflect on physical education policy, we draw on Ahmed's (2006) concepts of orientations and brackets. To be orientated means to be familiar. Ahmed (2006) stated, "Orientations are about the direction we take that puts some things and not others in reach" (p. 56). Orientation in this paper refers to the different directions policy research has taken in physical education. In taking a direction – or being aligned to particular perspectives – research(ers) are orientated by broader agendas in education and society (in this case health promotion). Being aligned to something is an important part of being orientated. Just like physical education classes are aligned to objectives, research is aligned to particular theories, methods, and goals. Therefore, orientations are directions – or instructions – about the where, what, and how (Ahmed, 2006). Orientations are also social, meaning there may be significant social pressure to stay 'in-line' and follow particular pathways. Indeed, our research agendas are often dictated by political agendas, monetary influence, and leaders in the field. Thus, we are pressed into lines – or orientatations – through social mechanisms as well as choosing those lines ourselves. These choices and pressures also mean we are

moving away from other things, elements, and people. We consider these elements we move away from as ‘bracketed.’

In order to get down some paths, we likely need to turn away from others. In so doing, we may not get to experience or come into contact with certain objects, places, and people (Ahmed, 2006). In writing this paper, all three of us had to ‘put aside’ other work for our jobs, time with our friends, or perhaps being with our loved ones. We refer to this action of ‘putting aside’ as bracketing – or relegating some things to the background. What is interesting, however, is that what we tend to bracket we come reliant on to sustain our orientation (Ahmed, 2006). In other words, without our supportive families, our encouraging friends, and a job – we would not be able to write this paper. So what we ‘bracket’ is also what sustains our orientation. The things that get bracketed, however, are often overlooked. We may take for granted the role they play in allowing us to have the orientation we do. In this reflection, we consider the orientation, brackets, and background of physical education policy research.

In writing this paper, we are interested in the orientation – or direction – of physical education policy research in the U.S. We want to explore the ‘where,’ ‘what,’ and ‘how’ of this research. In so doing, we seek to understand the paths that have been made and the social pressures that have affected those paths. We also want to explore the choices physical education scholars have made on their own paths. In particular, how those choices and social pressures have bracketed some elements (and people) in our field in favor of others. We examine what has been relegated – or ‘put aside’ – to the background of physical education. And importantly, how can we re-orientate our field to re-consider the role of those elements, people, and knowledge that have sustained us for too long.

## **Physical education policy research in the U.S.**

The educational research paradigms we surveyed earlier influenced the structure of our reflection. We organized the reflection according to the three paradigms in educational policy research (economic, case studies, critical). After reading research, however, we found not all manuscripts fit neatly into these paradigms. As such, we identified a fourth paradigm: descriptive studies. Descriptive studies in physical education policy research were written to describe the current status of policy or examine policy changes. Broader policy research would classify these as reports or reviews, but they held a prominent place in our field and warrant our attention. The remainder of this paper overviews policy research using the four paradigms as a guide, critically reflects on current research, and concludes with suggestions on how we can move onward.

### ***Economic approaches***

The economic approach to policy studies is orientated toward examining causal effects of policy on performance outcomes. Notably, performance outcomes in every study were health-related (e.g., BMI, PA time). Physical educators have long claimed physical education can lead to enhanced health outcomes and reduce healthcare costs (Siedentop, 1996). Many of these claims are based on assumptions like more physical education will lead to better health outcomes. In van der Mars (2018) conceptual article on U.S. physical education policy, he stated policy development could learn from traffic deaths and smoking

policies. Such comparisons falls squarely in health and physical activity promotion and not education. Through an alignment with health promotion, he argued there was an “upswing in support from outside agencies, organizations, and the public because of the rise in overweight and obesity levels” (p. 173). Juxtaposed with these optimistic comparisons, economic policy research from *outside* the field (e.g., health economists, public health) has painted a multifarious physical education policy landscape. In this section, we consider why there is a gap in views of economic policy research from outside the field compared to the claims made within.

Cawley, Meyerhoefer, and Newhouse (2007) published arguably the most influential economic study on physical education policy in the U.S. The Cornell economics professor and coauthors argued ordinary least squares (OLS) regression is inappropriate to examine the effect of physical education policy on health outcomes. They claimed OLS is limited because it cannot: (a) control for student choice, (b) account for local policies correlated with socioeconomic status (SES), or (c) eliminate measurement error on reported time. Instead, they used an instrument variable (IV) method to control for endogeneity biases and eliminate measurement error. The study had a sample size of over 44,000 high school students. Using OLS, results initially showed an increase in both boys’ and girls’ PA levels. Once they used the IV method, however, they found mandated physical education time had no impact on boys’ PA levels, weight, or BMI. For girls, it had a positive *non-significant* effect on PA levels. Thus, Cawley et al. (2007) found mandating physical education had no effect on BMI, weight, or statistical significance in increasing PA levels.

In a different study, Cawley, Frisvold, and Meyerhoefer (2013) examined the effect of physical education time on elementary students’ (K-5) weight. This paper led to several insights. For example, one finding stated there was no evidence that increased physical education time crowds out core subjects, nor does it affect standardized test scores. Another finding was that just because states require minimum time in physical education does not translate to school compliance. Lastly, with 5th grade boys only, Cawley et al. (2013) used an IV probit model to find a causal relationship showing if time spent in physical education increases by 60 minutes per week on top of structure PA outside of schools, it can lower boys’ weight. Cawley et al. (2013) were very careful in stating the results are only valid for 5th grade boys who are physically active outside of schools and cannot be generalized to other young people.

Scholars outside physical education also analyzed relationships between obesity, PA, and policy. Riis, Grason, Strobino, Ahmed, and Minkovitz (2012) used logistic regression analysis to examine associations between policies and obesity. They found a significant *positive* association between obesity and: (a) fitness testing and (b) standards based practices. They also found positive associations with obesity and: (a) increased BMI screenings and (b) teacher certifications. To be clear, these results showed a positive relationship with measuring BMI, teacher certifications, fitness testing, and standards based practices with higher levels of obesity. The authors concluded the relationships may be due to administrators implementing policies *in response* to high obesity levels. Thus, it is no surprise there is a positive relationship between policies mandating time requirements and the amount of time spent in physical education (e.g., Chriqui, Eyler, Carnoske, & Slater, 2013; Piekartz-Porter et al., 2020; Slater et al., 2012). While the above pattern between policies and physical education time is promising, it can also be considered troubling because these initiatives were likely to be in places with higher rates of disadvantaged populations (Monnat,



Lounsbery, & Smith, 2014). So whilst time requirements may not lead to compliance (Cawley et al., 2013), they do lead to increase in structured physical education.

Despite contrary evidence proffered above, policy researchers from within the field have made an assumption that physical education plays an integral role in health promotion. School-based physical education has been coined ‘the pill not taken’ (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009) based on work of PA intervention programs (e.g., SPARK). In policy research, Lounsbery et al. (2013a) developed an assessment tool to understand PA policies within individual schools that was more ‘user-friendly’ than the School Health Index. They justified the creation of the tool based on the assumption school-based physical education is “an important component” (p. 496) in meeting PA recommendations. As part of their instrument – within the physical education component – they included standards-based curriculum, teacher credentials, and resources. When we consider the above studies, the inclusion of these indicators (e.g., standards, certification, fitness tests) have no empirical basis. Therefore, much of what orientates physical education policy research in the field is based on personal beliefs and values.

Lounsbery et al. (2013b) used the same assessment tool to examine the above factors relationship to PA record in physical education classes. They drew on data from 65 schools in three geographic regions (cluster sampling) to measure relationships between time in physical education, policy, recess, and PA environment. Using OLS, they found few differences in physical education time between schools regardless of policies. This result contrasted the results above (e.g., Chriqui et al., 2013; Piekartz-Porter et al., 2020). Lounsbery et al. (2013b) did find schools may be treating physical education and recess interchangeably. They also found physical education programs were massively under-resourced due to time restrictions, short staffing, and material circumstances. The main conclusion they came to, however, is that physical education programs that are evaluated through accountability mechanisms were associated with greater time allocated for physical education. As such, they conclude all programs should be evaluated annually, although they never stated what was meant by evaluation.

In a follow up paper, McKenzie and Lounsbery (2014) claimed teachers should be individually evaluated on their ability to increase PA within physical education and in school-wide program settings (e.g., after-school, recess). Other physical education researchers have similarly advocated for a focus on policy and increasing PA. Mears (2008) used descriptive and comparison of means (ANOVA) statistics to analyze self-reported data to claim physical education policies have a positive *effect* on increasing PA of young adults. The statistical operations used, however, does not measure effect nor can they control for measurement error. What is notable here is that orientation of these researchers from within the field are solely focused on public health outcomes and ensuring time is allocated for physical education.

As we critically reflect on economic research outcomes, we walked away with three key considerations. The first is the statistical and methodological approaches used by economists and health promotion experts were highly sophisticated. By nature of their field, they have rigorous training in quantitative methods and methodologies (e.g., econometrics). Therefore, it is hard for physical education researchers that study curriculum, teaching, research, theory, and policy to produce research at the same caliber. Second, we were disappointed to see health-based outcomes as the only measure of physical education policy effectiveness. Physical educators are trained in multiple areas and teaching is guided by four learning domains (affective, cognitive, psychomotor, and social) to address a wide-range of

outcomes. Yet, educational outcomes were bracketed – or put aside – in order to focus on children’s weight, BMI, and PA levels.

Lastly, it was clear that values within physical education heavily influenced the orientation of economic research. We argue physical education policy researchers within the field are more akin to entrepreneurs. Ball, Maguire, Braun, and Hoskins (2011) defined entrepreneurs as policy actors that champion particular policies they are personally invested in. Such entrepreneurialship was apparent as physical education researchers promoting teacher certifications, fitness testing, and standards based approaches despite evidence of their contrary relationship. We are keenly aware these researchers are well-intentioned and trying to promote physical education. Yet, we also wonder what (and whose) values have been bracketed as researchers draw on their beliefs. Thus, economic policy researchers engaging in policy work have the ability to set agendas that are not inclusive of the field’s values as a whole.

### **Case studies**

To date, there is only one case study to our knowledge that has examined U.S. physical education policy. If it is true there is only one manuscript using a case study approach, it illustrates U.S. based physical education policy researchers are less interested in the actual process of policy implementation and the experiences of teachers, young people, and communities. As such, focus is placed on outcomes (or products) over process. In this lone case study, Dyson, Wright, Amis, Ferry, and Vardaman (2011) examined eight schools across two different states – four in Mississippi and four in Tennessee – to explore how physical education policies were produced, communicated, implemented, and contested. The researchers conducted over 70 interviews, 40 school visits, collected documents, and conducted audit trails across all schools.

Dyson et al. (2011) drew on the socioecological model and argued new physical education policy requirements led to un-funded and un-audited mandates. In other words, schools were told to meet specific requirements (e.g., time, resources, assessments) but were not given the means to do so. In addition to a lack in funding, schools were not being held accountable for meeting mandates by state level DOE. Given these results, there are three factors worth dwelling on. The first is that by engaging with administrators, teachers, and schools – Dyson and colleagues orientated their research toward different policy actors that are most affected by policy implementation. Instead of bracketing the lived experiences of our communities, these researchers explored them. Second, this paper is one of two that explicitly used a theoretical framework. Indeed, a theoretical framework is a normal requirement for rigorous research, but many studies bracketed this important component.

Third, in Dyson et al. (2011), school-based administrators chose not to provide adequate resources to programs because of cash-strapped budgets. As far as meeting mandates, many administrators and teachers retro-fitted old practices to align with new policies or ignored unaudited mandates. In consequence, many teachers felt marginalized and limited in their programs (Dyson et al., 2011). When policies are legislated but not funded, audited, or enacted; it could lead to further disenfranchisement in the physical education community. This case study demonstrates policies do not follow linear paths – or orientations. Rather, there are numerous factors at multiple levels that facilitate and/or impede policy intentions. As such, the ways in which policies manifest are heavily reliant on the context in which they



are implemented. We should mention, this case study did bracket some important topics and people related to race, gender, as well as social issues. Therefore, one could argue the experiences documented in this case study represents one particular perspective of policy work in physical education.

### **Descriptive studies**

Descriptive studies in physical education policy are overviews that outline policies and policy changes. The best example of descriptive studies are the ‘Shape of the Nation Reports’ (SHAPE America, 2016). These reports are meant to survey each state’s physical education policy landscape. The report is justified by SHAPE America on the premise that state physical education policies that align to their recommended practice indicators (e.g., time requirement, fitness testing, BMI tracking, teaching licenses, and others) can help battle obesity and other health-related diseases. Under the ‘benefits’ section, SHAPE America claims physical education plays an active role in preventing multiple public health issues including but not limited to obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, heart disease, and cancer (SHAPE America, 2016). As noted in the economic research, many of the practice indicators evaluated are *believed* to improve physical education’s ability to enhance health outcomes. Therefore, these recommendations are orientated toward public health, traditional values of the field, as well as a commitment to the physical educators that comprise the SHAPE America membership. In so doing, the values-based recommendations are often orientated toward the best interest of the organization and its members.

Dauenhauer, Keating, Stoecker, and Knipe (2019) examined the Shape of the Nation reports to assess for trends over 15 years. The paper measured significant and non-significant policy changes from 2001 to 2016. They illustrated significant policy increases related to mandating standards, credit requirements, assessment requirements, and fitness testing. Non-significant policy changes also occurred including an increase in state-allowed physical education waivers. Dauenhauer et al. (2019) work served to provide an understanding of how policies have shifted. It cannot be determined, however, why policy changes were made, if schools complied, or if these changes had any effect on practice. We believe Dauenhauer and colleagues’ analysis illustrates the influence SHAPE America has on policy – as many of the indicators they lobbied for (fitness testing, etc.) have been increasing nation-wide. Therefore, future policy work may want to consider examining external agencies’ role in policy development and enactment.

McCullick et al. (2012) published a research note using a descriptive approach. In their analysis, they examined which of the 50 states mandated physical education, which state mandates followed national guidelines, and how clearly written the policies were. McCullick et al. (2012) started their analysis couched in two major assumptions:

Firstly, *if* it is accepted that increased amounts of PE instruction *can* provide increases in physical activity (Cawley et al., 2007) and teach students to be physically active for a lifetime, *then* SBPE [school-based physical education] should be legislatively mandated . . . Secondly, *if* SBPE is mandated, *then* it should be assigned the appropriate amount of instructional time . . . (p. 201, original emphasis)

The first assumption is based on one of the minor results from Cawley et al. (2007) that physical education has a positive non-significant effect on girls PA levels. The second

assumption, however, gives us an understanding of the authors' motives and values in writing this paper: *we should have more physical education*. You will not get an argument from us here – we agree with Quennerstedt (2019) “the only real sustainable aim for physical education is *more* physical education, where different ways of being in the world as some-body are both possible and encouraged” (p. 612). With that said, this aim – of more physical education – illustrates the inherent values and orientation of the field. Thus, it comes as no surprise when McCullick et al. (2012) concluded 82% of states have mandates, but only 12% of states actually followed those recommended guidelines. Thus, this research was about ‘sounding the alarm’ and bringing attention to the lack of accountability in providing physical education for young people.

Eyler et al. (2010) conducted another trends analysis by examining the content of state-level physical education legislative bills (proposed policies) enactment, evaluation, and funding. The authors examined 781 proposed policies and tracked four major components (required minutes, moderate to vigorous physical activity [MVPA], teacher certification, and equipment/facilities). The authors used descriptive statistics to analyze data, finding of the 781 proposed policies, only 163 were passed and enacted. Furthermore, a majority of the proposed policies (509/781) did not address the four components they deemed essential. Eyler and colleagues argued a large number of policies were proposed in response to federal mandates on youth wellness in schools (e.g., Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act) (Eyler et al., 2010). What is interesting about this study is federal programs tend to orientate their legislative goals toward helping disadvantaged and diverse communities. Yet, any mentioning of social issues (e.g., socioeconomic status, race) were bracketed and relegated to the background.

There have been several other descriptive studies, ranging in foci in physical education. Zhu, Welk, Meredith, and Boiarskaia (2010) developed a survey examining physical education policy contexts in Texas. They explored if schools had wellness councils, if grades were given, if exemptions were allowed, and if fitness testing was conducted. Zhu et al. (2010) found the trends in Texas mirrored those recorded at a national level in the ‘Shape of the Nation’ reports. Carlson et al. (2013) examined the ‘wording strength’ of policy across 16 states. Unsurprisingly, they concluded policy documents of all 16 states they analyzed were not strongly worded to promote MVPA. Importantly, the values of individual researchers orientate the purpose of physical education policies. As such, none of the descriptive policies discussed potential educational outcomes across the four domains, social issues, or anything outside of health-related outcomes.

While it is important to have descriptive research, it is clear what has been studied has been orientated toward public health, personal values, and SHAPE America. Given this, we must consider what has been ‘bracketed’ in these studies. None of the above descriptive studies used a theoretical framework. International physical education policy research, and educational policy both within the U.S. and abroad. – have been influenced by a range of theories (Floden, 2007; Penney & Evans, 2005). Yet, descriptive physical education policy research bracketed theories in favor of personal values and perceived needs. Second, these studies never examined educational outcomes that actually guide our field in practice. There were no focus on motor skills, cognitive knowledge, affective outcomes, or social outcomes. Likewise, none of these studies included curriculum as part of their overview. As noted by Lambert and Penney (2020), curricular texts are policy documents and how they are interpreted by policy actors is important. Thus, we find it interesting that we read studies

examining the ‘wording’ of policies, yet the words that guide instruction (curriculum) were bracketed and left to the background.

All of the studies were orientated toward (and by) public health promotion agendas and values. All indicators used across several studies were connected to traditional views of physical education (fitness assessments, BMI measurements, standards). In saying that, the technocratic ethos of U.S. physical education is orientating (and perhaps limiting) what physical education policy research can do. By orientating our focus so heavily on outcomes (or products), we tend to bracket the things that comprise the process. Such bracketing includes the perspectives of young people, roles of teachers, different learning domains, theoretical lenses, social issues, as well as others. We argue the need to *turn to the background* to uncover the consequences of this research orientation. This is why critical research is needed in U.S. physical education policy studies.

### **Critical research**

Critical policy research has a rich history in education more broadly (Apple, 2006). However, the only critical policy study we could find in the U.S. was published this past year. Jen and Sue (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2020) conducted a critical discourse analysis using Ball’s conception of network theory (Ball, 2003) on SHAPE America’s K-12 outcomes and teacher education standards. In this analysis, they argued policy documents paid little attention to social justice, equity, and diversity issues – thus falling out of line with broader aspirations for education. While the orientation of these documents were focused on skill performance and games knowledge; they were disoriented with the ethos and goals of education more broadly. Furthermore, they argued the SHAPE America standards are in need of a revision in order to address the current sociopolitical context of the U.S.

Unlike other policy research approaches, critical researchers do not hide potential biases and their research orientation is not bracketed and treated as if it never affected the study (Barad, 2007). Instead, critical researchers use subjective positionality to expose power relations that oppress particular persons or groups of persons. Jen and Sue’s (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2020) findings are highly relevant given the research reflected on in this paper. More to the point, given that policy research has shown that physical education can have very little (if any) influence on public-health outcomes, their paper is a timely reminder of the field’s educational roots. That is, perhaps it is time we re-orientate physical education policy studies toward physical education goals given the little effect we can have on public health.

### **Discussion: Current orientation and background**

In this discussion section, we critically reflect on the current orientation of U.S. physical education policy research. We specifically take a closer look at what has been bracketed – or relegated to the background – in physical education policy research. In like fashion, we examine how the elements comprising our background have sustained our field. In considering the contributions of the bracketed elements, we explore how bracketed elements can contribute to a ‘re-orientation’ of U.S. physical education policy research. We conclude the paper by providing a re-orientated physical education ‘policy work’ (Ball et al., 2011) agenda we believe can yield benefits for the young people we seek to support.

### **Current orientation of physical education policy research**

In reading U.S. physical education policy research, the overall orientation has a lucid goal, which is to: increase the amount of physical education for young people. In order to provide evidence to rationalize an increase in physical education, the majority of studies attempted to target specific positive relationships between physical education policies and perceived health-related outcomes and/or behaviors (e.g. time spent in PA, BMI, weight). As part of this orientation, however, there have been two interconnected themes. The first theme is concerned with outcomes and accountability. The second theme is how values informed these studies. Below we explore these themes further in relation to broader research on policy in (physical) education.

The field of physical education is predominantly driven by educational policies and agendas (Lawson, 2017). Yet, most policy research was orientated toward health-related outcomes. Indeed, the majority of studies were conducted by health economists or public health researchers who evaluated policies based on what *they* believe the purpose of physical education should be. SHAPE America (2014) K-12 National Standards and Outcomes document, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly driven by skill performance, tactical knowledge, and fitness-related knowledge. Simply put, these studies evaluated the effectiveness of policies based on their ability to yield outcomes and behaviors that physical educators are not explicitly aiming to achieve. Thus, one consideration we must ponder is: what is physical education's contribution to the democratic education of young people – and how is that educative contribution unique to our subject (Lawson, 2018)?

While the majority of studies focused on health-related outcomes, an interesting caveat was the inclusion of concepts like 'accountability.' Physical education fits within the educational paradigm and as such has been "increasingly dominated by conservative discourses surrounding 'standards,' 'excellence,' 'accountability,' and so on" (Apple, 2006, p. 51). As Lawson (2018) stated, we are in a politically conservative system that is results-driven through accountability measures – especially in the U.S. In considering the role of accountability, Bailey, Armour, Jess, Pickup, and Sandford (2009) cautioned against being held responsible for outcomes (affective, cognitive, physical, or social) without having resources and/or material circumstances to meet said goals. This becomes especially important when schools do not follow or even provide resources to meet state-level mandates (Dyson et al., 2011). Given Bailey et al.'s insight, we argue accountability needs to be addressed at the school, program, and state-levels (Dyson et al., 2011; McKenzie & Lounsbury, 2014). With that said, physical educators should choose the educational outcomes by which they are evaluated. We are *educators*, not group fitness instructors.

Leaving aside the conflation of physical activity and physical education, accountability systems in general are meant to reproduce dominant values and are based on a low-trust model of curriculum and pedagogy (Apple, 2006). Dyson et al. (2011), on the other hand, called for accountability on LEAs from state-level agencies. They argued that if state-level mandates are not being audited for compliance, schools have no incentive to address or comply with policies. Again, these calls for accountability were rationalized through health-related outcomes. Yet, we agree with McCullick (2014) that couching the justification in health-related outcomes may be akin to "writing checks that the data cannot cash" (p. 540). Given the unlikelihood of addressing health-related outcomes, we must 're-orientate' our agenda toward deliverables we *can* achieve and consider the role of outcomes and accountability within this new orientation.

Another element that heavily influenced U.S. physical education policy research were values. The term values here is two-fold. On the one hand, values refers to principles and judgment. On the other, values refers to material worth or privilege. It is notable that some values are considered more *valuable* than others. As Lawson (2018) stated, “What gets measured and evaluated is what matters most” (p. 54). By measuring MVPA and PA time in physical education, the values privileged are based on a narrow view of bio-physical outcomes (mainly health-based) rather than holistic and democratic educational aims (e.g., affective, cognitive, skills-based). Given the role of values, the tools created to evaluate policies were imbued by personal beliefs. Standards, as an example, have been largely questioned for their ability to transform physical education (see Kirk, 2014). Furthermore, the current standards have been criticized as being socially devoid (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2020) that reinforce White privilege and racism (Blackshear & Culp, *in press*). Other indicators like fitness tests have consistently produced negative experiences for young people in physical education. We argue the current values are not educative, but rather work to discipline and control young people (Kirk, 1998). Such an approach runs counter to – and brackets – the democratic aims of empowerment and embodiment in (physical) education.

### **The background**

There have been many elements and people relegated to the background of U.S. physical education policy research. It was awkward to read over 30 manuscripts without a single reference to U.S. policy experts like Michael Apple, Susan Fuhrman, David Cohen, Linda Darling-Hammond, Robert Floden, amongst others. There was only one paper that referenced international educational policy authority Stephen Ball. Other experts like Bob Lingard and Pat Thomson were ignored. Yet, educational policies have sustained the presence of physical education in schools in the U.S. (Lawson, 2018). It has been the commitment to a ‘well-rounded’ education focused on the ‘whole child’ that has kept physical education afloat. Thus, ‘education’ within physical education policy research is notably an ‘absent presence’ (Evans, 2009, p. 95).

In bracketing education, we have been left out of important theoretical conversations in politics and neoliberalism (Apple, 2006), equity and social justice (Lingard, Sellar, & Savage, 2014), as well as network analysis (Ball, 2003). One could argue a good place to start is engaging with foreign physical education policy research. As Penney (2017) has shown, policy research can no longer operate using a linear lock-step approach. Rather, policy research must be considered part of a network, unfolding on multiple levels (micro, meso, macro) (Penney & Evans, 1999) and examining both general patterns as well as localized affects (Penney, 2017). Such an approach means policies are considered a process inclusive of multiple actors (Penney, 2013). Such actors are human and non-human inclusive of curriculum (Lambert & O’Connor, 2018), teachers and teacher educators (Alfrey, O’Connor, & Jeanes, 2017; Gray, MacLean, & Mulholland, 2012; Thorburn, Jess, & Atencio, 2011), young people (Wilkinson, Penney, Allin, & Potrac, 2020), external agencies (Petrie, Penney, & Fellows, 2014; Powell, 2015), and boundaries between these actors (Penney, 2017). Thus, physical education policy research needs to be contextualized in relation to educational policy (Penney, 2008) with a goal to promote the quantity *and*

*quality* of practice (Penney, 2012). Any such agenda, must include equity and social justice (Lingard et al., 2014).

Most of the above international physical education policy research was bracketed in U.S. studies. In comparison to our colleagues, U.S. physical education policy research has bracketed: young people, teachers, curriculum, equity, educational outcomes, theories, gender, external agencies, teacher educators, race, amongst other elements. Such a bracketing tells us a lot about our field's values. Furthermore, these bracketed elements are what have sustained our orientation. Without our young people, teachers, and diverse cultures – physical education would not exist. Thus, while we continue to conduct policy research – we often neglect those who make our field possible in the first place. Instead of relegating people and elements to the background, we should include them in our policy work agenda.

Lastly, U.S. policy researchers have focused heavily on state policies, accountability, and health-based outcomes. When we reflect on U.S. educational policy context more broadly, the federal government only engages in policy work related to equity. Given the goal to increase physical education in schools, we found it odd that studies bracketed and relegated equity and social justice (what are perhaps the best arguments we have to increase physical education nationwide). Instead of bracketing issues of equity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, ability), we argue the need to re-orientate the policy work agenda *toward* equity (Lingard et al., 2014). In fact, such a re-orientation may not only increase the quantity of physical education opportunities, but also the quality of our programs.

### **Conclusion: Re-orientating U.S. physical education policy research**

It has been legislated on a federal level that physical education is part of a “well-rounded curriculum” in Title VIII of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). We start this conclusion operating under the belief that *all young people have a right to equitable opportunities in physical education as a form of personal, physical, and social development*. Such development occurs across the four learning domains: affective, cognitive, physical, and social. In this way, U.S.-based physical education policy research should re-orientate its agenda toward providing *equitable opportunities* to the development and wellbeing of young people. Such an approach does not claim to resolve all of societies problems. Rather, physical education can make a contribution to the democratic aims of education through a ‘response-able’ (Barad, 2007) practice. By ‘response-able’ we argue quality physical education will develop (a) attentiveness to differences; (b) curiosity for learning and progress; (c) responsibility for self, others, and the environment; as well as (d) competency in all four domains (Bozalek, 2017). As such, young people will be ‘able’ to ‘respond’ to a multitude of wellbeing situations (not just physical health).

To attain the above goals, equity and social justice needs to be at the forefront of U.S. physical education policy research. To start, we need to examine the current inequities that occur across our country. If we begin with the assumption that all young people have a right to quality physical education, our research agenda needs to examine who is being robbed of this human right. We also need to examine the inclusiveness of policies and who they seek to serve. As noted earlier, policy documents are political documents that embody particular values. Thus, policy documents (including legislation, curriculum, standards, and others) need to be examined for their ability to aid personal, physical, and social development in response-able ways. Furthermore, policy enactment is a beauracratic process that



works to exclude some people over others. Whose voices are valued and whose voices are silenced is important – and we need to make a priority to research these equity based topics.

We also believe physical educators (and not health promoters) should drive the physical education research agenda (Penney, 2008). Future research might start with modest goals of mapping policy landscapes (Petrie et al., 2014), exploring enactment of policies in schools (Dyson et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2020), and examining boundaries between policies, curricula, and educators (at all levels) (Gray et al., 2012; Lambert & Penney, 2020; Thorburn et al., 2011). We may also seek to include voices of young people (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Such an approach will be attentive to the differences in ethnicities, genders, sexualities, abilities, and socio-economic statuses (amongst other equity topics). By re-orientating our policy agenda toward this equity focused network approach, we may be able to produce research that addresses heterogeneity, complexity, and the lived experiences of those people who have sustained our field.

Such a re-orientation should include educational theories and advancements in methods. Indeed, we often treat ourselves ‘at the margins’ of education, but education policy has sustained our existence in schools. Physical education sits at the unique intersection of biomedical, cultural, and education fields in the forms of health, physical culture, and pedagogy (Lawson, 2017). Thus, when considering the unique contribution physical education can make to democratic education, we must re-orientate our agenda toward the well-rounded nature of our subject. Such an approach will focus on all outcomes including affective, cognitive, psychomotor, and social (Bailey et al., 2009). As writers we may not agree with the performative and low-trust model of outcomes and assessment driven physical education (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Yet, we also aim to be pragmatic especially within a highly neo-conservative U.S. context. Thus, future U.S. physical education policy work needs to research what outcomes are attainable across the four learning domains, but can also illustrate our contribution to a democratic education. Importantly, physical education professionals should play an active role in deciding how they want to be evaluated. Such outcomes should be linked to equity, diversity, and response-ability.

By re-orientating our field toward equity and social justice – we can make a unique contribution to a democratic education for young people. Our unique contribution works toward young people being embodied and embedded in social life. Such an approach focuses on developing ‘response-able’ (Barad, 2007) humans that are empowered – and empowering – through deep meaningful relationships with movement, others, and their environments (Ní Chróinín, Fletcher, & O’Sullivan, 2018). Through this focus on holistic wellbeing, we can achieve the emancipatory aims of a democratic education. Thus, not only do we keep our original orientation (of increasing physical education), but we also aim to provide a *quality* educative experience for young people. One where all bodies matter, are connected, and ‘response-able’ for a life that values movement.

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