

# Smooth Sailing or Stormy Seas? Atlantic Canadian Physical Educators on the State and Future of Physical Education

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## Abstract

This article summarizes results from a recently completed study that focused upon the current state and possible future of physical education within Canada's four Atlantic provinces. Data from both large-scale surveys and eight follow-up focus group interviews are shared as they relate to the state and future of physical education, possible reforms in physical education, and two elements of NASPE's *PE2020* framework (physical education teacher education [PETE], curriculum). Results suggest physical educators within Atlantic Canada are largely satisfied with the state of physical education, with few (external) negative observations. Moreover, there is little-to-no perceived need for internal reform within the discipline. Physical educators also provided insightful information related to their beliefs and practices regarding PETE and curriculum. Results might be of particular interest to those similarly engaged in "futures" inquiry within physical

education. More specifically, this research attends to the call for physical educator-informed reform efforts.

*Keywords:* PETE, curriculum, physical education, reform, teaching

## **Résumé**

Cet article résume les résultats d'une étude récente sur l'état actuel et l'avenir possible de l'éducation physique dans les quatre provinces du Canada atlantique. Les données tirées de sondages à grande échelle et de huit entrevues de groupe complémentaires que présente l'article ont trait à la situation actuelle et au futur de l'éducation physique, à de possibles réformes dans le domaine et à deux éléments du cadre *PE2020* de la NASPE (curriculum pour la formation à l'enseignement en éducation physique). Selon les résultats, les professeurs d'éducation physique du Canada atlantique seraient généralement satisfaits de la situation actuelle de l'éducation physique, peu d'observations négatives (externes) étant faites. De plus, ils jugent peu nécessaire, voire aucunement nécessaire, de procéder à une réforme interne au sein de la discipline. Les professeurs d'éducation physique ont aussi fourni des renseignements très utiles sur leurs croyances et leurs pratiques quant à la formation à l'enseignement en éducation physique. Les résultats peuvent être d'un intérêt tout particulier pour les personnes qui mènent des recherches sur les avenues futures de l'éducation physique. Plus précisément, cette étude répond à l'appel à des efforts de réforme qui s'inspirent des professeurs d'éducation physique eux-mêmes.

*Mots-clés :* formation à l'enseignement en éducation physique, curriculum, éducation physique, réforme, enseignement

Attending to futuristic predictions is not an exercise confined to the realm of science fiction. Contemplating the future—in this case, the future of physical education—helps ensure the discipline is not forced to make changes based on what other disciplines are doing or have done. It also helps to ensure that changes within physical education are not unnecessarily influenced by trends or fads du jour. More importantly, as Kirk (2010) has suggested, studying the future allows those in the discipline to control their own fate or create their own destiny—at least to a certain degree.

For at least three decades, physical education pedagogues and researchers have been attempting to predict what kind of future lies ahead for physical education. Unfortunately, these predications have, more often than not, been less than idyllic. For example, Tinning and Fitzclarence (1992) initially acknowledged a crisis within physical education, as they suggested in-school physical education programs were simply becoming “out of touch” with postmodern youth culture. Similarly, and more than 15 years later, Lawson (2009) suggested that we might see “more of the same” as outdated programs continue to be out of sync with today’s students, schools, and societies. Moreover, Locke (1992) and Kirk (2010) both raised the possibility of the extinction of physical education from public school programs altogether.

### **Thirty Years of “Crisis”**

A brief selection of writing from the 1980s to the present, by some of the field’s most notable pedagogues and researchers, provides an overview of the issues and discussions related to physical education’s place within contemporary schools. Consider the following point about physical education, offered at the 1981 American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) National Convention:

I have no trouble envisioning the rapid extinction of high school physical education in the next two decades. As it is currently programmed and currently taught in most places, it probably deserves to die out.... Too many students are apathetic about it. Too many students are disruptive within it. Too many students have already become cynical about it. The vast majority have learned to tolerate it, not to expect too much from it, and not to give too much to it. (Siedentop as cited in Dodds & Locke, 1984, p. 78)

Dodds and Locke (1984), themselves, have been more direct. They suggested that “physical education as it now exists in many American public schools is not worth saving. None at all would be better than what we have” (p. 76).

Writing in the early 1990s about secondary school physical education, Locke (1992) stated the following:

My assumption is that if the dominant model is not broken, at the very least there are a lot of schools in which what is done in the name of physical education is not working well. Further, what goes wrong (disturbing levels of student alienation, program marginality in school curriculum, deep and destructive role conflicts within those who teach) involves the kinds of problems that can't be repaired simply by improving existing forms of content or instruction. The level of change required is so substantial it would have to be called replacement, not repair. (p. 362)

Also in 1992, Siedentop and O'Sullivan's preface to a special theme issue of *Quest* titled, “Secondary School Physical Education” stated:

Along with many others, we have become convinced that the time is at hand for a radical reconceptualization of high school physical education and the preparation of its teachers. We have come to believe that the program configurations in many schools are dysfunctional for students—and too often for their teachers too. (p. 285)

At the turn of the century, Penny and Chandler (2000) concluded their article on the possible future(s) of physical education by stating, “We regard substantial change within the subject as a matter of necessity if it is to have educational worth in the 21st century” (p. 85). Writing almost a decade later, Ayers and Housner (2008) expressed “great concern over the quality of school-based K–12 physical education programs” (p. 62), while Lawson (2009) opined:

The need for significant reforms and, indeed, transformations begin with due recognition that today's schools are industrial age institutions. PE has been developed, organized and conducted to conform to this industrial age logic. Both PE

and schools are out-of-step with today's global societal realities, needs and opportunities. (p. 114)

In his 2010 book, *Physical Education Futures*, Kirk put forth *the idea of the idea of physical education* (id<sup>2</sup>). According to Kirk, the current dominant id<sup>2</sup> is one in which the teaching and learning of decontextualized sport-techniques forms the basis of school programs. Moreover, these sport-techniques are generally practised in a manner resembling the descriptions already detailed by others. That is, traditional or multi-activity curriculum practices are characterized by relatively short units, a dominance of command style teaching, the repeated practice of basic skills in isolation from the manner in which they are typically used in game situations, game play occurring near the end of a unit, and little-to-no progress being made from year to year (Locke, 1992; O'Sullivan, Siedentop, & Tannehill, 1994; Siedentop, 1994).

Penny and Chandler (2000), writing to “prompt and extend debates about the future of the subject, future curricula and pedagogical practices” (p. 71), suggested that the purposes and contributions of physical education to the lives of students in the 21st century must first be clearly articulated—and then curricula should be developed that directly responds to those purposes and contributions. They proposed the concept of selecting “themes” or “strands of learning,” as opposed to activities themselves, to form the organizational framework for curriculum development and delivery.

In reviewing Kirk's (2010) text, Barker (2010) suggested two reasons why Kirk's message (i.e., the need for physical education to change) “fail[s] to find traction with the audience” (p. 383). First, Barker (2010) explained physical educators “are all implicated in the state of the field” and are therefore the very ones who “are constantly reproducing this redundant, obsolete and outdated field of practice” (p. 383). Confronting physical educators with this “accusation” understandably leads to some discomfort. Second, Barker suggested physical educators generally tend to focus upon the present and are consequently ill-equipped to deal with the substantial demands that radical reform in physical education requires.

Others agree. Writing about the problems associated with secondary school physical education and specifically about physical educators' (in)abilities to change, Locke (1992) stated:

Individual teachers can respond only to what they perceive to be problems and opportunities. By the very fact that they are so deeply embedded in the stringent demands of their daily work, teachers can miss openings for change and signals of serious dysfunction. (p. 365)

Kirk (2010) himself is also keenly aware of this perceived limitation. After reviewing the research written on the future of physical education, Kirk stated, “In most of this slender volume of futures writing it is noted that teachers play a critical role in making change happen, though few writers are confident that teachers will embrace change if and when the opportunity is offered” (p. 33). Given these sorts of observations, how then are physical educators to be involved in reform efforts?

### **Physical Educator-Informed Reform**

Across this three-decade timespan, the literature has clearly been suggesting reform is necessary in physical education and that one of the essential change agents within such a reform effort must be physical educators themselves. Unfortunately, the thoughts, ideas, and voices of physical educators have been largely missing from the literature.

However, in an attempt to solicit the perspectives of physical educators (and college/university faculty, teacher candidates, K–12 students, parents, school administrators, policymakers, community members, and other key supporters), and to invite such a broader discussion, the United States’ National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) introduced *PE2020*. *PE2020* is a national program intended to challenge physical educators to reconsider their own (and their profession’s) taken-for-granted practices and to imagine and articulate future possibilities within physical education. After considering over 2,000 submissions, five themes were identified and explored by NASPE (Jefferies, 2012). These five themes were technology; connecting K–12 physical education programs and community physical activity programs; physical education teacher education (PETE); curriculum; and high school physical education. Since then, presentations, discussions, and focus group sessions related to these five themes have continued to occur across the nation.

Given the perceived crisis within physical education, in addition to this recent recognition of the importance of soliciting the input of physical educators themselves,

there is a plainly observable need for the collection, discussion, and dissemination of physical educators' perspectives. This is not meant to devalue the potential contributions of *PE2020*; indeed, *PE2020* has done more than any other initiative in North America to get the "ball rolling." However, *PE2020* is an American initiative and so it purposely fails to include the input of Canadian physical educators. Moreover, the American and Canadian contexts, though similar in many respects, are also not entirely identical. Because of the uniqueness of the Canadian physical education landscape (e.g., daily physical activity initiatives, provincial authority of education, non-standardized PETE programs, lack of national standards, generalist/specialist teaching, etc.), inquiries with Canadian physical educators are essential if we are to similarly consider reform within this country. Finally, while informally inviting the perspectives of physical educators is obviously an entirely welcome exercise, it is nonetheless essential that such efforts also occur through peer-reviewed scholarly research processes.

## **A Recognition of the (Limited) Futures Scholarship in Canada**

It is worth noting that a small number of Canadian scholars have also contributed to futures scholarship, though from a much different perspective. Whereas a number of the scholars presented above described a future scenario in which physical education is decimated or greatly reduced, Singleton and Varpalotai (2012) urged physical educators to revisit the purposes and place of physical education in the future. They suggested more holistic and humanistic forms of pedagogy be adopted. They believe this may be achieved through a "community of inquiry," whereby "health and physical education will embrace a foundation of critical pedagogy that will lead to positive change through critical self-reflection and ultimately promote forward-looking, perhaps even utopian, imaginings of the future for a 'pedagogy in motion'" (Singleton & Varpalotai, 2012, p. 4).

In an effort to begin the discussion, promote possibilities and ideas, and, if possible, describe the future, Singleton and Varpalotai (2012) asked a number of Canadian researchers to critically examine contemporary health and physical education, using the framework of a "community of inquiry" (Gregory, 2002). Their intention was to prompt physical education pedagogues to begin to think of ways that issues of social justice could be woven into physical education programs and pedagogy, engage students in

critical discourse, and create more meaningful experiences in physical education. For this to occur, a foundation must be built; this foundation must first include a shared mission or common ground amongst the physical education sub-disciplines (Forbes & Livingston, 2012). From here, physical educators (and PETE students) must be able to question existing beliefs and programs so as to move beyond the status quo and envision possible alternatives (Randall, 2012). Possible alternatives might include changing the way students experience games teaching through the introduction of “Inventing Games,” where students “engage in critical discourses about what is fair and what is fun, and how these outcomes might best be achieved” (Butler & Robson, 2012, p. 165); establishing better connections between skill development and fitness development (Lloyd & Smith, 2012); providing more opportunities for cross-curricular learning (Singleton, 2012); and engaging students in rigorous critiques of society, culture, and politics, et cetera—using, for example, the Olympic Games (Wamsley, 2012) or the traditionally “ideal” body (Sykes, 2012) as starting points for conversation.

Finally, although Canada’s Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) has not taken up futures work in the same way NASPE’s *PE2020* has, PHE Canada has been a longtime advocate for quality daily physical education in Canadian schools. Though they are not similarly soliciting physical educators’ perspectives related to the future of the discipline within Canada, they do continue, nonetheless, to recognize and award quality physical educators and physical education programs. Still, while their creation and dissemination of quality resources (related, for example, to physical literacy) and their ongoing advocacy for quality daily physical education certainly aim to improve future physical education curriculum and instruction, they are yet to approximate the futures inquiry undertaken by NASPE.

Given the limited futures scholarship within Canada, readers might then recognize the rationale for our attention to our colleagues from other nations. Indeed, we believe their calls for action and crisis response ought to be heeded by many physical education pedagogues in the West. It is into this conversation that we are headed as we consider an internationally-recognized issue (and framework), and as we focus our inquiry on our Canadian context.



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## **Attending to Canadian Physical Educators**

### **The Research Questions**

This research sought to begin a discussion with physical educators regarding their thoughts, views, and ideas about the current state and potential future of physical education. The three primary research questions guiding this inquiry were:

- What do physical educators believe to be the state and status of physical education in their province and the rest of Canada?
- What do physical educators believe to be the potential future of physical education in their province and the rest of Canada?
- What do physical educators believe to be desirable or essential changes and/or reforms so that their vision of an ideal future for physical education within their province and Canada may be realized?

Furthermore, NASPE's *PE2020* has provided a framework from which to focus such an inquiry. As such, this research also aimed to better understand physical educators' practices and perspectives related to two of *PE2020*'s five themes, namely, PETE and curriculum.

### **Study Design**

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2005) was utilized for this study. Choosing from this most popular form of mixed methods design, such a two-phase process allowed for secondarily collected qualitative data to help explain or elaborate upon the initially collected quantitative data (Creswell, 2005). Initial data were collected from a large group of physical educators through the use of a cross-sectional survey design. The survey instrument, the Atlantic Canada Physical Education Survey (ACPE Survey), was comprised primarily of single response and Likert-type questions; a small number of open-ended questions were also included. Secondary data were collected from a smaller group of physical educators through the use of online focus group interviews. The research was reviewed by three universities' research ethics boards and found to

be in compliance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*.

**Survey design.** An online survey was derived from an established survey developed previously by Mandigo et al. (2004). The ACPE Survey was subject to a rigorous review and pilot process (see Randall, Robinson, & Fletcher, 2014). The survey was meant to enable the researchers to infer the following: (1) who is responsible for teaching physical education in Atlantic Canadian schools, (2) the qualifications and experiences of Atlantic Canadian physical educators, and (3) the nature of Atlantic Canadian physical education programs. Sections of the survey focused on two of *PE2020*'s themes: PETE and curriculum. For example, survey questions included the following:

- Which best describes your undergraduate education (BEd degree, combined degree [e.g., BEd/BPE], after degree [e.g., BEd after a BKin], etc.)?
- Approximately what percentage of your time is spent teaching within the following movement domains/dimensions (Active Living/Fitness/Individual & Dual Activities, Dance, Gymnastics, etc.)?

**Online focus group interviews.** Eight online focus group interviews were conducted after survey data were analyzed; the length of these eight interviews ranged from 62 minutes to 133 minutes. Four separate focus groups participated in two online focus groups each. Examples of the guiding questions for the online focus group interviews include:

- How would you describe the outlook for the future for physical education in your province and/or Canada?
- What changes and/or reforms, if any, do you believe are needed if physical education is to be a positive and important feature of public school programs in the future?

Furthermore, online focus group interview questions that were closely aligned with *PE2020*'s themes included:

- What are essential characteristics of a PETE program? What must PETE students be able to do, know, and value when they graduate? What should be the essential qualifications/education for a physical educator?

- What should be the “core” content or focus within school’s physical education programs? What role/value would, if any, a national physical education program have?

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical procedures such as frequency scores, means, and standard deviations were employed for many of the survey responses (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Responses to open-ended questions consisted primarily of short answers and, where appropriate, similar responses were tallied or the responses were grouped/categorized by common theme. Online focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. Searching for commonalities, original insights, and patterns, physical educators’ responses were read multiple times while elements were coded into “emerging” themes; they were also grouped according to the previously mentioned *PE2020* themes (Creswell, 2013). The emergence of these themes occurred as response elements alluded to significant elements related to the primary research questions and *PE2020*.

## Participants

There are approximately 1,000 teachers responsible for teaching physical education in the four Atlantic provinces (i.e., New Brunswick  $\approx 325^1$ , Newfoundland and Labrador  $\approx 200$ , Nova Scotia  $\approx 425^2$ , Prince Edward Island  $\approx 75$ ). Via their own provincial electronic mailing lists, the presidents of the four provincial physical education teachers’ associations sent an email inviting all physical educators to participate in this research. Attached to the email was an invitation and informed consent letter to participate, as well as a link to the online survey. Approximately three weeks after the initial invitation was sent, a follow-up reminder was sent. Three weeks after the follow-up reminder, one final reminder was sent again.

In total, 206 teachers (102 males; 80 females; the remaining elected not to answer) logged into the survey and agreed to participate, representing approximately one

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1 Excluding New Brunswick’s francophone teachers.

2 Excluding Nova Scotia’s francophone teachers.

fifth of the population of physical educators in Atlantic Canada who belong to their respective provincial associations. Of these, 79 (42% of respondents) were from Nova Scotia, 73 (39%) were from New Brunswick, 20 (11%) were from Newfoundland and Labrador, and 15 (8%) were from Prince Edward Island. Of these 206 participants, 80 agreed to participate in the follow-up focus group interviews. Twelve of these participants were purposely invited to participate in focus group interviews. This purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2005) would best be described as critical sampling (Patton, 1990); participants who might best be able to illustrate the provincial situation were chosen. That is, these 12 participants were all current or past executive members from the four provincial professional physical education teacher associations (New Brunswick = 4, Newfoundland and Labrador = 3, Nova Scotia = 3, Prince Edward Island = 2).

## Results

### ***PE2020 Themes***

***PETE.*** Over 90% of the physical educators reported they had earned at least one undergraduate university degree. Of these, 61% reported having both a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree and an undergraduate degree in physical education, human kinetics, kinesiology, or sport sciences (obtained either consecutively or concurrently). Twenty-seven percent reported having acquired only a BEd, with the remaining 12% indicating they had acquired an “other” degree or diploma. Many of those who indicated “other” completed a single undergraduate physical education-related degree (e.g., physical education, human kinetics, kinesiology, sports science, outdoor education) without completing a BEd, while some also graduated from diploma granting Teachers’ College programs. The physical educators were also invited to comment on the extent to which their PETE programs prepared them in a number of areas related to teaching physical education (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Perceived Preparation from PETE Programs

	<b>Low or very little</b>	<b>Minimal</b>	<b>Medium or adequate</b>	<b>Very good</b>	<b>High or a lot</b>
Program planning	6%	10%	26%	43%	15%
Pupil assessment	13%	23%	39%	20%	4%
Classroom organization (management) and community	5%	22%	35%	26%	12%
Subject content and pedagogy	4%	8%	24%	48%	16%
Developing a professional identity (e.g., becoming “a teacher”)	5%	21%	23%	37%	14%
Developing a vision/approach/philosophy for teaching physical education	6%	16%	22%	41%	14%

Physical educators believed that their PETE programs best prepared them in the areas of subject content and pedagogy (i.e., 64% reported preparation as very good or high) and program planning (i.e., 58% reported preparation as very good or high). Conversely, 36% reported their level of preparation in the area of pupil assessment as minimal or low and 26% reported their level of preparation in the area of developing a professional identity as minimal or low. Many physical educators elected to provide additional information about their PETE programs; common responses were related to the benefits of the field experience and the desired “practical” nature of their programs. Those who reported positive sentiments related to the field experience shared the following sorts of statements: “My best experience from my education program was my internships—two one-week observations, a three-week observation with a couple of lessons taught, and then a four-month internship. This is where I learned most about being a PE teacher” and “6 week teaching practicum during PE was very beneficial.” Some physical educators spoke of their appreciation of the practical nature of their PETE programs (e.g., “They had a great program for teaching sport specific units, eg track and field”; “It was the best in the province at the time. Nova Scotia Teachers College taught students specifically how to become teachers”; and “There was a lot of hands on activities for all teachers”). Others spoke of their dismay with the lack of practicality and application to teaching physical education with one stating outright that her/his program was “not practical at all” and another one recalling, “a lot of time dedicated to reading articles and responding

to them. I feel it needs to be more hands on.” Commenting on how PETE programs have changed over the years, one participant noted:

In the past, the BPE program was excellent. These days the science focus of PE programs do not make great teachers. I had 4 years of how to be a PE teacher. These days university students only get one or two EDUC intro to teaching PE. It is a mess.

Focus group participants were asked about their own PETE programs as well as their perceptions and beliefs about current and ideal ones. The 12 participants shared many different answers to these questions; common themes were less apparent though many focused upon technical aspects of teaching (e.g., classroom management, routines, procedures, cross-curricular planning, etc.). There was a degree of agreement related to field experiences and skill/activity courses. That is, those who spoke about these two topics suggested that field experiences should be lengthy and varied and that skill/activity courses ought to be compulsory. For example, with respect to field experiences, participants shared the following:

Certainly a practicum experience is the real world.... I only really had one practicum and it would have been a six-week practicum at a junior high. I would say that at least half a year being out in the schools, and at different levels would be really important. (Participant 4A)

The opportunity over three years to do three practicum experiences.... It gave you an opportunity to work with different people. Instead of doing a 14-week practicum experience with one teacher I had an opportunity to work with three different teachers.... I learned a lot that way. (Participant 2C)

With respect to the importance of skill/activity courses, participants shared the following: “I would expect that all of the physed teachers coming out would be able to do most of the skills involved.... They should have a wide range of skills that they can do” (Participant 3C); and “I think you should know...the skills should be there. You don’t have to be proficient at everything. If you have the skill and you’re more proficient at it...that there can help with the class” (Participant 2A). Participants from two provinces

also added that they believed the teaching and/or assessment within skill/activity courses ought to be reconsidered:

The people who taught the skills classes were not the best people to teach them. We had coaches teaching that were basically just sharing their drills with us. That's all they were actually doing. They were not actually teaching. They were not trying to help us learn to teach the skills. It was about performing the skill and the drill. Whatever message you are trying to get across to pre-service teachers is more than just how to run a drill for team practice because that is not what teaching physical education is all about. (Participant 3A)

It was myself standing at the foul line and whatever I got out of ten was my score and when I got out into the field that is what I was doing and it made no sense at all. There was no value in it. (Participant 3B)

I found the way they were telling us to teach and the way they were teaching and evaluating us were two different things.... They would evaluate us in a totally different way. The assessment and evaluation there was a total clash between what they were trying to teach us and what they were doing to us themselves. (Participant 2D)

**Curriculum.** Physical education curricular content can be arranged and grouped in a number of manners. In an attempt to begin to understand what content was taught and the amount of time physical educators dedicated to teaching various content, the movement domains that were used in the ACPE Survey were those that are characteristic of curriculums in Atlantic Canada. That is, they included the following: active living/fitness/individual & dual activities; dance; sport experience/games/court & field activities; gymnastics; and outdoor activities/alternative environments/leadership.

**Table 2.** Percentage of Time Physical Educators Spend in Each Movement Domain

	Active Living	Dance	Sport Experiences	Gymnastics	Outdoor Activities
0	3	7	1	18	9
1–10	28	49	3	36	47
11–20	30	27	7	30	26
21–30	27	12	18	12	10
31–40	8	3	25	2	4
41–50	3	2	19	1	2
51–60	1	0	15	0	1
61–70	0	0	8	0	0
71–80	0	0	4	0	1
81–90	1	0	0	0	0
91–100	1	0	2	0	1

\*Values in each column expressed as a percentage.

Eighty-eight percent of the physical educators indicated they spent less than a third of their program time teaching active living skills. Seven percent indicated they never taught dance and 56% indicated they spent no more than 10% of their time teaching dance. Sport/game experience represented the content area that physical educators seemed to be willing to spend the most time teaching, with 74% spending more than a third of their time teaching content related to sport/game experiences. Eighty-four percent of physical educators indicated they spent less than one-fifth of their time teaching gymnastics-related content. Of these respondents, 18% indicated they never taught gymnastics content and 54% indicated they spent no more than 10% of their time teaching gymnastics. Ninety-two percent of the physical educators indicated they spent less than a third of their teaching time on outdoor activities.

Physical educators were also questioned about their level of preparedness, enjoyment, and confidence related to teaching within these five movement domains. Although the physical educators shared that they were generally largely confident and prepared to teach physical education, they had very different perspectives when the different movement domains were compared see (Table 3). For example, physical educators reported that they most enjoyed, were most prepared for, and were more confident teaching sport experiences when compared with the other four movement domains. The movement



domains teachers felt the least prepared to teach, and in which they indicated a lack of confidence and enjoyment teaching, were dance and gymnastics. Not surprisingly, as noted above, these were also the two domains the participants spent the least amount of time teaching.

**Table 3.** Teachers' Enjoyment, Level of Preparedness, and Confidence to Teach Each Movement Domain

Item	Low	Medium	High
Enjoyment of Teaching Active Living	3	12	85
Preparedness to Teach Active Living	3	28	69
Confidence Teaching Active Living	4	11	85
Enjoyment Teaching Dance	22	24	55
Preparedness to Teach Dance	37	30	33
Confidence Teaching Dance	30	30	40
Enjoyment Teaching Sport Experiences	1	5	94
Preparedness to Teach Sport Experience	3	7	91
Confidence Teaching Sport Experiences	2	6	93
Enjoyment Teaching Gymnastics	21	21	58
Preparedness to Teach Gymnastics	31	28	41
Confidence Teaching Gymnastics	25	25	50
Enjoyment Teaching Outdoor Activities	4	14	83
Preparedness to Teach Outdoor Activities	11	30	59
Confidence Teaching Outdoor Activities	8	20	71

\*Values in each column expressed as a percentage.

Focus group participants were asked about especially important core, or foundational program, considerations for instruction within both elementary and secondary physical education. All responses related to elementary programming included a clear emphasis upon the teaching and learning of foundational fundamental movement skills. For example, this point was made in the following responses:

The content of the curriculum and the programs should be along the lines of play and developing the fundamental movement skills that it takes to play any kind of sport, whether it is from skipping, playing hopscotch, all the way up to being able to bounce the ball, to be able to participate in other kinds of activity or sport for lifelong enjoyment. (Participant 2B)

I think the core should be based on learning your basic skills that you are going to be able to take across every different type of movement activity, so I guess we call these building skills the fundamental movement skills. (Participant 3B)

Many of these responses also alluded to more affective-type outcomes related to interpersonal skills and attributes. For example, some responses spoke of the importance of teaching social skills related to, for example, respecting others, fair play principles, and sportspersonship.

Responses to the same question about secondary physical education focused more upon exposure to many different movement possibilities, generally as a way of inculcating within students a desire to pursue and participate in lifelong physical activities:

I think that as we get into secondary schools we should really be providing lots... so the core should really be spread out so that there isn't really a core. But the core idea would be that there are different opportunities to participate in physical activity and physical education. (Participant 3C)

I think that at some point in time our core focus has to be on developing active for life. We are going to have those kids who are going to be athletes, we are going to have those kids who are going to be the active bike riders at home, and I think the core content or focus in our secondary physical education programs should be looking at the fact that you don't have to play hockey to be an athlete. All kinds of different stuff to be active. (Participant 1A)

Focus group participants were also asked about the observation that both dance and gymnastics were underrepresented within many Atlantic Canadian physical education programs. With respect to both dance and gymnastics, all participants observed that many of their peers lacked confidence and/or competence to teach these movement activities.

Moreover, some also shared that this was their observation, despite many professional development opportunities (generally at one-hour or one-day sessions) being available to physical educators within their provinces.

It is also worth noting that all participants recognized that many physical educators are hesitant to teach gymnastics for fear of litigation in the case of injury (in fact, all but one participant used the word “liability” in their responses): “Right now there is a safety concern in teaching gymnastics where we are always so concerned and conscientious about not putting any child in danger or putting ourselves at risk” (Participant 1 B); “The liability thing seems to be the big thing with gymnastics. People I guess worry about it” (Participant 2C); “I think some teachers definitely look at the liability concerns with teaching students gymnastics” (Participant 2D); and, “Teachers just don’t want to go there. The liability issue with gymnastics that people fear when teaching it” (Participant 4B).

### **Perceived State of Physical Education**

Focus group responses to questions related to the perceived state and status of physical education predominately attended to the “external” pressures and shortcomings that ought to be addressed. That is, physical educators were quick to identify common issues that require immediate attention—but these issues were, generally, not really related to shortcomings in how physical education is currently taught. For example, responses focused upon others’ (i.e., from those outside of the field) perceptions and beliefs about the relative status of the subject. Many spoke about decreases in instructional time and in the number of consultants as evidence of a general devaluing of physical education by others. With respect to instructional time, comments focused upon limited instructional time and the absence of compulsory physical education at the secondary level. For example, one participant explained, “The [physical education instructional] time, it’s even less at intermediate. At the high school there is no requirement. There is no mandatory physical education at this point” (Participant 4B). Others had similar comments:

I would currently describe it in our province is that there is not enough of it. I think that a few years ago the government promised to up it to 120 minutes per week for every student and we’re still not there so I don’t think it is where it needs

to be. We're ahead of some other provinces but I don't think we are where it needs to be. (Participant 1B)

I think the difference between, like I know in my board alone, the very minimum anyone can get physed is 90 minutes per cycle whereas in other boards it is a lot less. I guess there are some boards it is as low as 45 minutes in a week. There needs to be some consistency that way. (Participant 3A)

Many participants presented the cutting of physical education consultants as evidence of a degrading of the state of physical education, or as one participant suggested, "kind of taking a step back" (Participant 3C). Indeed, focus group participants from three Atlantic provinces shared that the cutting of these sorts of positions was occurring or had recently occurred. Some of these were school district positions and some were at the government/ministry level:

Right now the status has been decreased. With our last provincial budget we lost our consultant at the Department of Education and now physical education is clumped in with health and home economics and there is a couple of other things there. And now there is one person with the Department of Education who is responsible for all those things. (Participant 2A)

From a school district stance, the support has been very limited. We did have a department head, that was cut...for some cost cutting measures I guess you would say. But there has been absolutely no real support for any of our new curriculum. (Participant 4B)

Despite these two external negative aspects (limited instructional time and cut leadership positions), participants were largely satisfied with the happenings within their and their peers' physical education programs. They, by and large, perceived contemporary physical education in an almost entirely positive manner (i.e., other than these other external observations), sometimes providing a contrast between today's progressive practices and teachers and the "old school" practices and teachers of the past. Those working in provinces with specialists celebrated this as evidence of successful practice, sharing for

example, “One thing we can say we have done well is with specialists. I would say 95% of our physical education teachers are specialists at all levels” (Participant 4A), and:

It is pretty good but not perfect. The big thing we have, as everyone knows, is specialists. I know that this is what most of this is about. But we have a large number of specialists, not completely full and maybe that is something we have to work to. That side of it is good. (Participant 3C)

Those working in provinces where specialist teachers were not the norm, lamented the absence:

I really feel the need for physed specialists is as great if not greater at the elementary level than it is at higher levels. I would really want to support the need for specialists at all levels, not at just the secondary level. (Participant 2B)

### **Possibilities for Change and/or Reform**

Perhaps the most important observation (within focus group conversations) to note is that none of the participants recognized the need for significant reform as was suggested by those previously discussed (e.g., Ayers & Housner, 2008; Lawson, 2009; Locke, 1992; Penny & Chandler, 2000; Siedentop & O’Sullivan, 1992). That is, the alarmist language of these researchers and pedagogues—suggesting significant reform efforts were needed in order to “save” or “rescue” physical education—was simply absent. Indeed, when presented with such arguments, many participants explained that they were unaware that such positions existed. Those few who were aware of such criticisms suggested they were perhaps more applicable to others, for example to those within other countries. Consider the following two responses:

I haven’t heard that strong language used like this in this kind of discussion.... Just based on my own experience.... I have to disagree with those comments.... I see students learning everyday and the huge majority of our students love physed. (Participant 1C)

I am curious to whose research these claims are and where it is that message is necessarily coming from? Not here I am sure. I think that throughout [our

province] we are pretty happy with the way things are and we think things have moved forward so maybe that research isn't coming from [here]. (Participant 3A)

When participants were prompted to provide any reform efforts that might improve the quality of school physical education programs, they always returned to identifying policy practices largely unrelated to physical educators' actual delivery of physical education programs. That is, they spoke again of the need for more specialists, more instructional time, more "outside" support of physical education (e.g., from parents, school administration, and ministries of education), and more resources for physical education. For example, the importance of outside support, more specifically parental support, was seen as important to one participant who stated, "I really think that we need to put a good spin to parents...we need to make physical education as important as numeracy and literacy" (Participant 1C). Others stated:

For me the biggest things that need to be changed is the money and resources and it seems like it always comes back to the same thing...the amount of time that physed teachers are given within their schedules.... The access to the PD, professional development. (Participant 2A)

A lot of our time, we are mandated for 50 minutes of math and 90 minutes of literacy per day but when it comes to other subject areas, including physical education, it is just recommendations and I think we really need to look at policies and procedures around that as to what, you know, where are we putting the importance in education? (Participant 3B)

## **Discussion**

Our research with Atlantic Canadian physical educators has allowed us to better understand current regional practices and beliefs related to two *PE2020* categories as well as physical educators' perceived state and future of physical education itself.

***PE2020***

Investigating physical educators' perspectives and experiences related to PETE programs is not an easy task. All come from different institutions and completed their program of study at different periods in time, over the past few decades. Simply put, no two programs are the same. Still, our participants, when considered together, explained that essential characteristics of PETE programs include lengthy and varied field experiences as well as skill/activity courses in a number of curriculum-relevant pursuits. The call for more "in-the-field" training is not unusual or unique. Indeed, many other graduates, in a number of disciplines, have similarly remarked about the great(est) value to be found in the field experience. Nonetheless, that this is a common remark by others should not diminish it. Physical educators recognize that this is an important component of teacher training; this too ought to be considered.

The other strong opinion expressed, that skill/activity courses ought to be required, is clearly related to the discipline itself (this is a unique feature of physical education). The demise of activity-specific courses and the subsequent effect on public school physical education have been written about for decades. It is not surprising to us that such courses have become limited or altogether absent in some PETE programs, both abroad and within Canada (Melnychuk, Robinson, Lu, Chorney, & Randall, 2011; Tinning, 2002, 2004). As Siedentop (1989, 2002) noted in his keynote address at a national physical education convention, physical education programs have become overshadowed and, in some institutions, outright usurped by kinesiology or other "sport science-friendly" disciplines. A result of the "scientification" of physical education has been that skill/activity courses have become devalued and/or replaced with science-based courses (e.g., exercise physiology, motor learning, and motor development). The effect of the devaluing and replacement of skill/courses is that,

we have arrived at a point in our history where we can now prepare teachers who are pedagogically more skillful than ever, but who, in many cases, are so unprepared in the content area that they would be described as "ignorant" if the content area were a purely cognitive knowledge field. (Siedentop, 2002, p. 363)

In the gymnasiums across the country, this has meant that there are “generations of physical education teachers who are ill-equipped to teach anything beyond a beginning unit of activity” (Siedentop, 2002, p. 372).

That these physical educators see such value in these participatory-related courses is again unsurprising, though this is something deserving of serious attention by PETE programs and institutions. As physical education programs moved from a participatory discipline to a more “academic” discipline, trying to achieve the respect that other science-based disciplines seemed to enjoy, researchers in the field pointed out the differences in various fields of study and warned about the effect this movement would have on physical education. Locke’s words (1977, as stated in Siedentop, 2002) are equally applicable today as they were in 1977:

Those 30 hours of math are academic, are abstract, and are a difficult test of intellect, but transcripts reveal that the focus is not on study about math. Those hours do not consist of the history of math, the sociology of math, or the neurophysiology of math. Most of the 30 hours are spent in doing of the math, in the acquisition of progressively higher levels of command over the performance of operations. Mastery of the logic of derivation, facility in calculation, skill in the analysis of problems, and the ability to fit solutions correctly—all demand direct, participatory involvement in the stuff of the subject. For the physical educator, then, the correct analog for the situation in math would not be to insist our students take more courses about sport and exercise. The correct analog would be to extend and intensify their study of sport and exercise by insisting that they practice sport and exercise—by doing it! We should insist that our students acquire a range of movement skills far more extensive than they would be called upon to teach in the public school. (p. 370)

Physical educators saw little-to-no issue with the curriculum content of their provinces’ physical education programs. Considering this observation, one might then reasonably wonder, “If physical educators are satisfied with the curriculum, then why don’t they teach it?” That is, it should clearly cause some dissonance when physical educators proclaim the curriculum is sound and then consciously decide to limit or ignore dance and/or gymnastics instruction altogether. Despite this seeming contradiction, attention must be given to physical educators’ explanations related to limited dance



and gymnastics instruction. If, as the participants suggested, physical educators lack confidence or competence to teach these movement disciplines (and, again, survey data supported this notion as well), then perhaps PETE programs are failing in this regard. Though focus group participants suggested that professional development opportunities are available for those who need it, such suggestions are made with little understanding of what is needed to shape and/or change teachers' practice. The literature is clear on this point: one-hour or one-day sessions are simply not effective in changing teacher behaviour. The additional point regarding liability and gymnastics instruction is somewhat, but not entirely, surprising. When most people hear the word "gymnastics" they think of Olympic gymnastics and envision floor routines and skilled gymnasts rotating around the uneven bars, jumping on beams, or completing flips and twists over horses. Such images and expectations are far removed from the curriculum expectations in Atlantic Canada (and we suspect, the rest of Canada). As Lu, Francis, and Lodewyk (2014) point out, "the two most appropriate forms [of gymnastics] for school PE are rhythmic gymnastics and educational gymnastics" (p. 215). There is little risk in many rhythmic gymnastic lessons, where the goal in these units of study is to create a dance sequence "in which a ball, rope, hoop, ribbon, or club is manipulated in time to music" (Lu, Francis, & Lodewyk, 2014, p. 215). With educational gymnastics, the student engages with elements of body, space, effort, and relationships while exploring locomotions, statics, rotations, springs, landings, and swings—both on the floor and on small apparatuses. The physical educator can control the type of equipment used (e.g., low benches and boxes) and the tasks students are required to complete so their fear of an accident occurring should be no greater than if they were playing an invasion game. However, the fear of a student injuring his or her neck when attempting a roll around a vertical axis (i.e., a somersault) is real (although the option in educational gymnastics would be to complete a log roll instead). The fear of injury, whether perceived or real, has resulted in "litigation paranoia" where physical educators consider "risk management" and practice "risk avoidance" in an effort to decrease the chance of an impending lawsuit (Young, 2014).

### **The State and Future of Physical Education**

Given the cautions offered by Barker (2010), Locke (1992), and Kirk (2010), we should not have been surprised that our participants were unable or unwilling to find fault with

physical education. As Barker explained, physical educators are part of the system. Implicated in the state of the field, they are the ones (re)producing redundant, obsolete, and outdated practices. Still, we were somewhat surprised. We supposed that the provincial leaders of physical education might “side” with these researchers and pedagogues and share similar sentiments. If they did not see these practices in themselves, we supposed they might see them in many of their peers. But they did not. Their only concession was that small numbers of “old school” physical educators were “out there” but that they were the exception. Perhaps these leaders did not want to see reform as necessary. The word “reform” in itself can bring notions of gross difference to that of the present. Reform often requires not only a change in content and/or pedagogy but, more importantly, a change in teachers’ ideologies. Research has demonstrated that physical education teachers are extremely resistant to change; they find the idea and process threatening and stressful (Randall, 2012; Sparkes, 1991). For example, Lynch (2014) found, despite attempts to reform education in Australia, “it does appear that only surface curriculum change, including teachers’ discourses and ideologies in HPE, has been previously achieved” (p. 513).

And so, this suggests one of two possible scenarios. The first is, as others (e.g., Barker, 2010; Locke, 1992) have imagined: physical educators are unable to take on this role. It is possible that physical educators are simply unable to be critical of a system in which they are complicit (re)producers of practice. Still, it is also possible that these physical educators are correct. Perhaps their perceptions are right. Perhaps in Atlantic Canada, physical education isn’t broken and in need of repair.

Nonetheless, we believe these physical educators were entirely correct when they suggested external pressures and happenings were having a negative impact upon the state and status of physical education. That Atlantic Canadian physical educators cite inadequate instructional time, decreasing presence of physical education consultants, limited resources for physical education, and a lack of administrative support or respect is noteworthy. Moreover, though the participants did not suggest reforms are needed in the way physical education is taught, their suggested reforms related to these other topics must be heeded. And in this respect, they are not alone. Advocates for quality physical education have also been making these claims and request for years—and too often seemingly upon deaf ears.

## Concluding Remarks

When we set out on this voyage, we were wondering whether Atlantic Canadian physical educators, when asked to ponder upon the state and future of physical education, envisioned smooth sailing or stormy seas. Did they see the state and future of physical education as being at risk or were they satisfied with it as it is and would be? We have learned that, by and large, these physical educators are essentially satisfied, optimistic, and hopeful. They do not see physical education, as it is currently being taught and learned within their and their peers' classrooms, as something in need of repair. On this point, we ourselves are less certain. That is, though these physical educators have not affirmed the futures positions offered by others, this does not mean that reform is unnecessary. Though that is certainly possible, we will continue to attend to "futures" pedagogues' and researchers' positions as we consider these possibilities in the future. In addition, we urge researchers in other parts of the country to investigate if physical educators in other regions—perhaps in Central or Western Canada, or in more urban or rural areas—would find similar results. A large percentage of teachers in Atlantic Canada are from Atlantic Canada. They were educated and are now teaching in the communities in which they grew up. Perhaps this has limited their perceptions of the possibilities for physical education as they currently do what has always been done, with only slight variations and modifications.

Still, these educational leaders have reminded us again that the state and future of physical education—irrespective of any internal issues it may or may not have—is still at risk. Their accounts of limitations related to PETE and curriculum are informative. They point to external changes or reforms that might enable physical educators to do their jobs better. Their identifications of physical education's greatest hurdles (i.e., related to instructional time, consultants, limited resources, and administrative support) serve as reminders to us.

Given that these familiar observations remain, perhaps now is not the time to reflect critically upon our own practice. That is, with physical education's very existence at risk, perhaps our efforts might be better served questioning and addressing these external limitations, rather than questioning and addressing our own.

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