

**Curriculum Reform in China: Physical Educators’
Engagements with, Enactments of and Reflections on
the New Physical Education and Health Curriculum**

Jing Yang

Strathclyde Institute of Education

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Strathclyde

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

March 2025

Declaration of Authenticity and Author's Rights

This thesis is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not previously been submitted for any examination that has led to the award of a degree.

The copyright of this thesis belongs to the author under the terms of the United Kingdom Copyrights Act as qualified by the University of Strathclyde Regulation 3.50. Due acknowledgement must always be made of the use of any material either contained in or derived from this thesis.

Signature: 

Date: 25/03/2025

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to you, my dear daughters, Miranda and Vivienne. Through these words, I wish to express my deepest love and gratitude. Thank you for being my source of motivation, strength, and companionship throughout the journey. Your love, smiles, and warm hugs provided me with comfort and encouragement during moments of doubt, frustration and anxiety. You have given me the courage to be your good mother and the determination to strive toward becoming the best version of myself. This thesis is my new “baby” before I turn 40. I dedicate this work to you, my dear daughters, and I hope to make you proud to be your mom.

Acknowledgements

As I reflect on the journey that has led to the completion of this thesis, I am filled with profound gratitude for the individuals who have supported, guided, and inspired me along the way. This acknowledgement is a dedication to all those who have contributed to this chapter of my life, both academically and personally.

First and foremost, I extend my deepest gratitude to my core supervisor, Professor David Kirk. Being your student has been an immense privilege, and I will always take pride in that. Your constant support, patience, and profound expertise have shaped not only this research but also my academic and personal growth. You have been far more than a mentor; you have been a guiding force in my life. Your wisdom, generous and perceptive feedback, and deep insights have shaped this work, and words cannot fully express my admiration and respect for you.

To Dr Dillon Landi, my co-supervisor, I am deeply honoured to have had the opportunity to work with you. Your encouraging, insightful feedback has inspired me to continue to expand my knowledge and deepen my understanding of the field and beyond. Your passion for research and dedication to scholarship have been deeply motivating. This thesis, in many ways, has been shaped by your influence. Thank you for pushing me to question, to refine, and to aspire for more. I would also like to thank Dr Helin Zhao for joining the supervision team when Dillon left the university.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Professor João Paraskeva, the educational theorist I most admire, and my mentor and friend, for his invaluable contributions and the profound intellectual enlightenment he has offered throughout my three years of doctoral research. Your theoretical expertise has prompted me to critically examine the complexities of education and to question the real within reality, question the dreams and utopias about the

world. Your guidance has not only deepened my theoretical perspectives but has also made me enjoy this fascinating research journey. The theories of this work have been influenced by you have forever shaped my thinking.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the physical educators in Shanghai who generously shared their time, experiences and insights, making this study possible. Special thanks to the scholars from Shanghai's universities for their invaluable contributions and support. I am especially grateful to Dr Chao Qiu for your unwavering assistance during data collection; your support, encouragement, and friendship are truly invaluable.

To my dear friends and PhD colleagues, thank you for walking this path with me. Your friendship, encouragement, and shared experiences have made this journey less daunting and infinitely more meaningful. The bonds we have formed and the moments we have shared will remain cherished memories. I am grateful for every conversation, every shared struggle, and every moment of support.

To my family: my parents, your unconditional love, trust, and encouragement have been my foundation. Your wisdom and values have shaped the person I am today, and your unwavering support has been my greatest strength. To my husband, your love, patience, understanding, and companionship have been my anchor throughout this process. And to my daughters, you are my greatest joy and inspiration in my life.

In the end, and not least, I wish to acknowledge the self that carried me through: thank you for your perseverance, courage, and faith in the face of doubt. This journey demanded resilience for holding on to dreams that at times seemed just beyond reach, yet never disappeared. I stand here shaped by every challenge and every moment of uncertainty, strengthened by the unknown. I am proud of the person I have become and deeply grateful for the strength I discovered within.

List of Publications and Presentations

Publication:

Yang, J., Qiu, C., Landi, D., & Kirk, D. (2025) (Online first). Physical education and health curriculum reform in China: Empowering physical educators through professional learning, *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2505029>

Yang, J., Bartle, G., Kirk, D., & Landi, D. (2025) (Online first). Chinese students' experiences of 'high-stakes' assessment: the role of fitness testing. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2025.2449664>

Conference Presentations:

Yang, J., Qiu, C, Landi, D & Kirk, D (2024). How Does New Curriculum Policy (Re)Shape Physical Education and Health: Critical Reflection from Chinese Physical Educators. *The Fifth Global Teacher Education Summit*. 25-28 October, Beijing, China.
https://file.huicekeji.com/Resource/100769989/eposter/D0217_20241030091546.pdf

Yang, J., Qiu, C., Landi , D. & Kirk, D. (2024). New Curriculum Standards Interpretation and Enactment in Physical Education and Health in China: Perspectives from Teacher Educators. *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference and World Educational Research Association Focal Meeting*. 8-12 September, Manchester, England.
https://allintheloop.info/Documents/BERA/BERA2024/doc_view_details/103240

Yang, J., Battle, D., Kirk, D. & Landi, D. (2023). Chinese Young People's Experiences of High-Stakes Fitness Testing in School Physical Education. *European Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. 21st -25th August, Glasgow, Scotland.
<https://eera-ecer.de/ecer-programmes/conference/28/contribution/55866>

Yang, J., Landi, D. & Kirk, D. (2023). Physical Education Teachers and Teacher Educators' Engagements with Curriculum Policies in Scotland. *European Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. 21st -25th August, Glasgow, Scotland.

<https://eera-ecer.de/ecer-programmes/conference/28/contribution/54966>

Abstract

This thesis examines how the compulsory education curriculum reform introduced by the Ministry of Education of China (MoE) in 2022 reshapes physical education and health (PEH). The new PEH curriculum prioritises the development of core competencies, aiming to enable students to cultivate appropriate values, develop essential characters, and foster key abilities through the learning process, including motor abilities, health behaviours, and sports morality. By integrating global educational trends with a framework rooted in Chinese sociocultural values, the curriculum seeks to nurture a generation of well-rounded individuals, emphasising moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labour development.

This thesis takes a critical approach, drawing on key ideas from poststructuralism, curriculum theory and critical policy studies, to explore how physical educators engage with, enact, and reflect on the new curriculum. Data were generated through conversational inquiry, via individual interviews with 18 physical educators, including teacher educators, teacher-researchers, and in-service teachers in Shanghai. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret findings, presented across four chapters. Chapter 5 reveals that physical educators' engagement with the new curriculum was mediated by their professional roles, institutional positioning, and broader ideological forces shaping curriculum policy. Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate that physical educators enact the curriculum dynamically, navigating interpretation, adaptation, negotiation, and, at times, resistance. Chapter 8 identifies traditional norms and socio-cultural contexts as significant barriers, highlighting tensions that impede the realisation of the reform's progressive goals. By critically examining the interplay between policy and practice, this study contributes to the literature on PEH pedagogy and the global discourse on curriculum reform. It offers nuanced insights into the complexities of curriculum change and provides valuable implications for policymakers, educators, and researchers working to transform physical education and health in China and beyond.

Table of Contents

DEDICATION	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS	5
TABLE OF CONTENTS	8
LIST OF TABLES & FIGURES.....	13
ABBREVIATIONS	14
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	15
1.1 What does this thesis do?.....	15
1.2 Historical trajectories of transformation of physical education	16
1.3 Why this study?	21
1.4 Outline of the thesis.....	24
CHAPTER 2: PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HEALTH: PURPOSES, MATTERS AND CURRICULUM	27
2.1 Overview of the chapter	27
2.2 Purposes of physical education	27
2.2.1 The dominance of sport-techniques in physical education	29
2.2.2 Healthism as a discourse in physical education	30
2.2.3 The role of physical activity within contemporary physical education	32
2.3 The subject matters.....	34
2.3.1 Physical education as a marginalised subject	35
2.3.2 The contested academic status of physical education and PETE	37
2.4 Curriculum as selected knowledge	39
2.5 Teacher, teacher educators and curriculum	43
2.5.1 Teachers' interaction with curriculum	44
2.5.2 The professional roles of teacher educators in the curriculum	46
2.6 Teachers' engagement with the curriculum	48

2.7 Curriculum enactment in schools.....	51
2.7.1 Challenges in curriculum enactment for teachers	52
2.7.2 Factors influencing curriculum enactment	54
2.8 National curriculum standards in China	56
2.8.1 Alignment of goals and principles with Xi Jinping’s thoughts	59
2.8.2 Curriculum reforms and teacher responses	62
2.9 Physical education and health curriculum standard in China	64
2.9.1 Fundamental principles of the new PEH curriculum standard	64
2.9.2 Three core competencies as overarching goals	67
2.9.3 Five main contents of the new curriculum	69
2.9.4 Physical education (high-stakes) assessment	72
2.9.5 Pedagogical recommendations	75
2.10 Conclusion.....	77
CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL POSTSTRUCTURALISM AS THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	79
3.1 Engaging critical and poststructuralist perspectives.....	79
3.2 Dancing with Foucault’s concepts	80
3.2.1 Power/knowledge and the subject	81
3.2.2 Governmentality and Technologies of the Self	83
3.3 Deleuze & Guattari’s concepts for this research	85
3.3.1 Assemblage and physical education	86
3.3.2 Deterritorialisation and curriculum	88
3.4 Conclusion.....	91
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY	92
4.1 The journey of research	92
4.2 Critical poststructuralism as the paradigm	93
4.3 Research methods and design	95
4.3.1 Qualitative exploratory design	96
4.3.2 Research site: Shanghai	97
4.3.3 Sampling strategies in institutional contexts	101
4.3.4 Purposeful participant selection	106
4.4 Data generation	113

4.5 Data analysis	115
4.6 Trustworthiness, reflexivity and ethics.....	119
4.7 Conclusion.....	123
 CHAPTER 5: ENGAGING WITH THE CURRICULUM REFORM: EMPOWERING PHYSICAL EDUCATORS THROUGH CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING..	
5.1 Introduction	124
5.2 Navigating the new curriculum: key changes and the path of reform.....	126
5.2.1 The curriculum reform as an ongoing process	126
5.2.2 The new curriculum is very comprehensive	129
5.2.3 The new curriculum is driven by core competencies	131
5.3 Unveiling the complexities of curriculum and textbook development	134
5.3.1 Procedures of curriculum development	134
5.3.2 Key strategies for curriculum implementation at the national level	137
5.3.3 Challenges in creating assessment standards and health education content	143
5.4 Professional learning as the foundation for curriculum reform.....	147
5.4.1 Multiple professional learning activities to support teachers	148
5.4.2 Public school teachers benefit from multiple supports	152
5.4.3 Limited professional learning opportunities for private school teachers	154
5.4.4 Rethinking professional learning for teachers	156
5.4.5 Factors influencing teachers' engagement in curriculum reform	158
5.5 Discussion.....	161
5.6 Conclusion.....	175
 CHAPTER 6: ENABLING CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION: REIMAGINING PHYSICAL EDUCATION, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND HEALTH EDUCATION	
6.1 Introduction	176
6.2 Redefining the roles of physical education and physical activity	177
6.2.1 Repositioning physical education for holistic development	178
6.2.2 The exercise indicator as a key guiding metric	182
6.2.3 The co-constitutive relationship between PE and PA	183
6.3 Unpacking health education in China's new PEH curriculum: navigating policy, practice and challenges	189
6.3.1 The role of health education in the new curriculum	190

6.3.2 Challenges in its transformation	193
6.3.3 The realities of classroom practice	196
6.4 Discussion.....	197
6.5 Conclusion.....	206
 CHAPTER 7: ENACTING NEW PEH CURRICULUM: CLASSROOM PRACTICES, OPEN CLASSES, AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER EDUCATION.....	208
7.1 Introduction	208
7.2 Transforming physical education classroom practices: opportunities and challenges.....	210
7.2.1 The large units as a mainstream approach	210
7.2.2 Integration of the learning-practice-competition concept	213
7.2.3 Interdisciplinary learning: enthusiasm and scepticism	215
7.3 Open class: Do the issues overshadow the essence?	219
7.3.1 Open class as merely a performance...	219
7.3.2 The essence of open class	222
7.4 Reconfiguring physical education teacher education: empowering pre-service teachers through new curriculum reform	224
7.4.1 Aligning teacher preparation with evolving curriculum demands	225
7.4.2 Empowering pre-service teachers to break stereotypes	229
7.5 Discussion.....	233
7.6 Conclusion.....	243
 CHAPTER 8: CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PEH CURRICULUM REFORM: DOMINANCE, ASSESSMENT, PRECARIETY AND HOPE	245
8.1 Introduction	245
8.2 The dominance of traditional approaches in physical education	246
8.2.1 Structured discipline in the physical education classroom	247
8.2.2 The spoon-feeding approach in physical education	250
8.2.3 The sheep-herding approach in physical education	252
8.2.4 What is quality physical education?	254
8.3 Conflicts between high-stakes testing and curriculum principles	256
8.3.1 Physical education testing in the Zhongkao as a double-edged sword	257
8.3.2 Contradictions between curriculum ideals and high-stakes assessments	259

8.4 Physical education teachers in precarious situations: marginalisation and uncertainty	263
8.4.1 Sociocultural and structural barriers in physical education	264
8.4.2 Systemic inequities and institutional biases	265
8.4.3 Safety concerns and accountability in daily practice	270
8.5 Reimagining the future of physical education in China	271
8.5.1 Collaborative efforts to transform school physical education	272
8.5.2 Teachers' dedication to the future of physical education	274
8.6 Discussion.....	276
8.7 Conclusion.....	289
CHAPTER 9: EPILOGUE.....	291
9.1 Why am I here?	291
9.2 Key findings of this thesis.....	292
9.2.1 Research question 1	293
9.2.2 Research question 2	295
9.2.3 Research question 3	297
9.3 Reflection on this research	298
9.3.1 What are key messages and contributions?	299
9.3.2 What challenges did I face?	301
9.3.3 What are the directions for future research?	302
9.4 Final thought: Where am I going?.....	303
REFERENCES.....	306
Appendix A: Examples of interview questions (teacher educators and teacher-researchers)	347
Appendix B: Examples of interview questions (teachers)	348
Appendix C: Ethical approval	349
Appendix D: Consent form (in Chinese).....	350
Appendix E: Example of translation checking.....	351
Appendix F: Samples of versus codes	352
Appendix G: The sample of codebook	353

List of Tables & Figures

Table 2.1	Six core principles of curriculum	Pg. 66
Table 2.2	Assessment Standards.	Pg. 73
Table 4.3	Participant information (teacher educators and teacher-researchers)	Pg. 108
Table 4.4	Participant information (in-service teachers)	Pg. 112
Figure 2.1	The relationship of three core competencies	Pg. 69
Figure 2.2	Curriculum content	Pg. 71
Figure 4.1	China's Map	Pg. 98
Figure 4.2	Geographical districts of Shanghai	Pg. 105
Figure 5.3	Key procedures in curriculum development	Pg. 137
Figure 5.4	Key strategies for curriculum implementation	Pg. 138

Abbreviations

CPC:	Communist Party of China
MoE:	Ministry of Education of China
MVPA:	Moderate-to-Vigorous Physical Activity
PA*:	Physical activity
PE*:	Physical Education
PEA*	Physical Education Activity
PEH*:	Physical Education and Health
PETE:	Physical Education Teacher Education
PISA:	Program for International Student Assessment
PLCs:	Professional Learning Communities
TRGs:	Teacher Research Groups
WHO:	World Health Organisation
YMCA:	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA:	Young Women's Christian Association

***Clarifications:**

PEH is used exclusively in reference to the curriculum.

PE is used solely when quoting participants.

PE and PA are applied specifically in Chapter 6 findings, while PEA is a new term.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 What does this thesis do?

This thesis examines how the compulsory education curriculum reform introduced by the Ministry of Education of China (MoE) in 2022 reshapes physical education and health, using Shanghai as a case. According to the policy document, the objectives of the physical education and health (PEH) curriculum are centred on developing young people's core competencies, specifically motor ability, health behaviour, and sports morality (MoE, 2022). These core competencies come from the subject's responsibility to cultivate a new generation of capable young people who possess well-rounded foundations in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labour education and who are well-prepared to contribute to the socialist cause (MoE, 2022). The new PEH curriculum represents China's efforts to align with global educational trends while establishing a comprehensive framework grounded in Chinese sociocultural values (Yin et al., 2022a).

Given China's deeply entrenched exam-oriented education system and evolving societal expectations (Dello-Iacovo, 2009), the reform offers both opportunities and challenges. Shanghai, as a leading city in China's educational innovation and curriculum reform (Liang et al., 2016), provides a rich and complex context to investigate how the ambitious reform is engaged, enacted, and reflected upon by physical educators. Importantly, physical educators are not merely passive implementers; rather, they act as policy actors who interpret and make sense of policies within distinct institutional and socio-cultural contexts (Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012; Alfrey et al., 2017). As Macdonald (2003) notes, curriculum reform is transformative rather than incremental. Likewise, Priestley and Philippou (2018) advocate for nuanced approaches to curriculum-making, conceptualising it as a multi-layered series of social practices, which include framing policy intentions, facilitating sense-making, and enacting practice. While curriculum policies

are designed to attain specific goals, they are inevitably influenced by the interpretations and adaptations of physical educators, often resulting in unintended and unpredictable outcomes (MacLean et al., 2015). Therefore, the primary aim of the present study is to explore physical educators' engagement with, enactment of, and reflections upon this new curriculum reform. By examining the realities and challenges faced by physical educators, this study provides significant insights into the dynamics of curriculum reform within China's evolving educational landscape.

1.2 Historical trajectories of transformation of physical education

To understand the current PEH curriculum reform, it is essential to contextualise it within the historical evolution of physical education in China, shaped by complex social, political, and cultural forces. China's encounter with Western powers in the 19th century marked a pivotal period of social and political upheaval. Since the Opium War in 1840, the incursions of Western powers have had a profound and lasting impact on China's sociopolitical and cultural landscape (Speak, 1999). Under the dual pressures of internal instability and external aggression, the weakened Qing dynasty was unable to resist foreign demands and was compelled to sign a series of unequal treaties. These agreements not only eroded China's sovereignty but also opened numerous trading ports and permitted the operation of foreign missionaries within its borders (Speak, 1999; Zhang, 2015a). Within this context, Western missionaries introduced Christianity alongside Western education systems, cultural norms, and modern physical education sports primarily through church-affiliated schools, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) (Zhang, 2015a; Yan et al., 2021). During this era, China was derisively labelled the "Sick Man of East Asia" (Liu & Zhang, 2023; Zhang, 2015a), a term that captured both its weakened state and the perceived need for reform. Missionary work, therefore, became a catalyst for social change, with Christian missionaries and

YMCA/YWCA physical directors playing a critical role in reshaping traditional attitudes toward physical education and sport (Zhang, 2015a).

The arrival of Western physical education and sports inevitably met with significant cultural resistance, however, particularly from the deeply rooted tradition of Confucianism (Speak, 1999). Confucian philosophy has long shaped Chinese societal values. Its core principles emphasise moral self-cultivation (Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin), hierarchy relationships, social harmony, and the observance of ritual propriety (Yu, 2008; Zhang, 2015a). Under the Confucian influences, physical labour and competitive physical activities were often viewed as inferior to moral and intellectual pursuits (Yu, 2008). Chinese attitudes towards physical education have been shaped by Confucian and traditional cultural values that prioritise *wen* (文), civility and literary achievement over *wu* (武), martial or physical pursuits, a bias encapsulated in the saying *zhong wen qing wu* (重文轻武) (Zhang, 2015b). Thus, physical education remained marginalised within traditional Chinese education, and Confucian ideals presented significant ideological and conceptual barriers to the acceptance of Western physical education in the early stages of its introduction.

In the early 20th century, the Qing government, influenced by Japan's adoption of Western educational models, introduced China's first modern school system. Japanese-style physical education, grounded in military drills and German gymnastics, was implemented to promote national strength and suppress domestic unrest (Yan et al., 2021; Ding et al., 2014). However, by the 1920s, the newly established Republican government began responding to progressive calls for reform. On 1 November 1922, the Ministry of Education issued the *Decree of the Reformation of the School System*, which drew on American educational ideas (Hong & Hua, 2002). A central figure in this ideological transformation was American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, whose ideas gained considerable influence during his visit to China from 1919 to 1921 (Speak, 1999). Dewey advocated that it

was more important to improve personal and public hygiene and to promote physical education across society, rather than focus on military training (Zhang, 2015b). His philosophy was embraced by many Chinese educators, who advocated for placing physical education on an equal footing with moral and intellectual development (Tsai & Zhou, 2017). They emphasised that education should reflect the needs of social progress and prioritise the cultivation of students' individuality (Speak, 1999). In 1923, the new curriculum was issued and published in the *education journal*. It abolished military gymnastics and renamed the subject from “gymnastics” to “*physical education and sport*” (Hong & Hua, 2002). The revised curriculum included ball games, athletics, gymnastics, physiology, and hygiene. Importantly, it also affirmed that males and females had equal rights to participate in education, including physical education and sport (Hong & Hua, 2002). Thus, this regulation marked a milestone in the development of modern physical education in China.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country adopted Soviet-style socialism and began to emulate Soviet educational theories and practices (Zeng, 2011). The concept and implementation of physical education underwent a profound transformation, shaped predominantly by the Soviet model and Marxist ideology (Liang & Hong, 2012). Influenced by the Soviet Union, physical education in China became highly structured and performance-oriented, with a strong focus on enhancing physical fitness and promoting competitive sports such as track and field, basketball, football, and volleyball (Jin, 2013). In the 1950s, Chairman Mao Zedong proposed the principle of “health first” in school physical education with an influential directive to “develop sports and strengthen the people's physique.” (Meng et al., 2021; Liang & Hong, 2012). This directive became a foundational guideline for physical education and sport during the Maoist era.

The Great Leap Forward, launched in 1958, disrupted the education system nationwide. This radical socio-economic campaign aimed to boost industrial and agricultural

production through large-scale collectivisation and labour mobilisation (Li & Yang, 2005). As rural labour was diverted to urban industrial projects, agricultural productivity declined, leading to widespread famine and economic collapse (Liang & Hong, 2012). In doing so, in schools, formal instruction, particularly physical education, was often suspended in favour of labour-intensive activities such as collective farming and construction, under the belief that manual labour could simultaneously serve physical and ideological purposes (Liang & Hong, 2012; Yan et al., 2021). As a result, this approach failed to address students' developmental needs and contributed to widespread malnutrition and a general decline in physical health.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), one of the most turbulent and destructive political movements in modern Chinese history, further destabilised the education system (Zeng, 2011). Launched to reassert Mao's authority within the Communist Party of China (CPC), the campaign aimed to consolidate the dominance of Mao Zedong Thought and restore the perceived ideological purity of the revolutionary era (Liang & Hong, 2012). The movement caused nationwide educational disruptions, depriving an entire generation of access to formal schooling (Jones, 1999). Physical education was particularly affected. It was transformed into militarised training that aligned with the regime's emphasis on physical strength, discipline, and ideological conformity (Tsai & Zhou, 2017). Thus, physical training served primarily ideological and utilitarian purposes, rather than supporting students' health or developmental needs (Liang & Hong, 2012).

After the Reform and Opening-Up in 1978, physical education in China gradually began to recover. In April of the same year, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Sports, and the Ministry of Health jointly issued the *Notification on Physical Education and Health in Schools*, which laid the foundational policy framework for the revitalisation of school-based physical education (Liang & Hong, 2012). Since 1979, the Chinese government has placed increasing emphasis on improving students' physical health. This renewed focus

aimed to encourage sustained physical activity among young people and to address the shortcomings in sports standards that were developed during the Cultural Revolution (Yan et al., 2021). In the 1980s, national guidelines made the first call for aligning physical education with students' psychological and physical development, and for the first time advocated that schools provide students with one hour of physical activity per day, including morning and break-time exercises (Liang & Hong, 2012).

In 1990, the Ministry of Education issued the *Regulations on School Physical Education*, which legally recognised physical education as a mandatory subject throughout 12 years of primary and secondary schools (MoE, 1990). As concerns grew over the decline in students' physical fitness, Mao Zedong's philosophy of "health first" became a fundamental principle, prompting a major shift in curricular reforms (Tsai & Zhou, 2017; Meng et al., 2021). Since then, the Chinese government has consistently valued and supported the well-rounded development of youth through physical education, including the implementation of teaching modules on morality, intelligence, physical, aesthetics and labour (Yan et al., 2021). In 1999, this shift integrated health-related physical education into a unified subject, emphasising both physical and mental health (State Council of the People's Republic of China (State Council), 1999). Since then, national policies have continuously emphasised and paid attention to the role of physical education in promoting students' physical and mental health. For instance, in 2007, the *Suggestions on Strengthening the Physical Fitness of Youth* reinforced students to engage in at least one hour of physical activity per day in schools (State Council, 2007). These reforms reflect the increasing recognition of physical education as a crucial component of student health and its alignment with broader national objectives for physical and social development.

1.3 Why this study?

Globally, physical education has often been marginalised as a non-academic subject, including in China, Greece, and the United States (Johns & Dimmock, 1999; Beddoes, Prusak & Hall, 2014; Richards et al., 2018). Despite contemporary reforms calling for more holistic and student-centred approaches, many physical education curricula still rely heavily on traditional, sport-focused models (Hardman, 2011; Kirk, 2010). Such approaches often prioritise physical performance and discipline, while sidelining inclusive, critical, or creative pedagogies (Casey & Kirk, 2021). As Casey and Kirk argue, these conventional models are “neither inclusive, fair, nor equitable” (2021, p. 8) and tend to reinforce dominant norms and structures.

My own experience as a physical education teacher in Shanghai from 2010 to 2015 made this institutional marginalisation deeply personal. Within the school culture, physical education was treated as less valuable: classes were often disrupted or rescheduled, and physical education teachers were largely excluded from curricular or pedagogical decision-making. I frequently felt like I was operating on the margins, not just physically (with physical education classes held on the field or in gymnasiums away from the main building), but also in social stereotypes and recognition. Physical education teachers were seen as practical, but not intellectual; active, but not academic (Green, 2000). This positioning of physical education, and of myself, reveals how school structures reproduce inequalities and assign value differentially to different subjects and teachers (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1983). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept, I understand this marginalisation not merely as institutional bias, but as part of what they describe as a “stratum”: a layered, hierarchical system of power, knowledge, and discourse that stabilises particular teacher identities (e.g., the ‘academic’ subject teacher) while rendering others subordinate.

These personal experiences intersect with the broader context of curriculum reform in China. During the second major national compulsory education reform in 2011, I witnessed firsthand the disjunction between top-down policy ambitions and the realities of classroom practice. The reform documents proposed holistic development and quality education, but for those of us at the front line, the reform felt abstract and disconnected. I remember feeling confused and passive, did not fully understand the curriculum and was unsure how to meaningfully translate policy goals into classroom practices. Critically, there was little institutional support or opportunity for dialogue. Teachers might be expected to implement the curriculum, but they were rarely invited to participate in shaping or interpreting it.

By the time China launched its third large-scale curriculum reform in 2022, this time emphasising “core competencies” and holistic student development. I had transitioned into the roles of researcher and teacher educator. As I read the new policy documents, I recognised familiar patterns: ambitious goals and comprehensive frameworks, but again, limited attention to how physical educators might make sense of, adapt to, or resist these goals within their own institutional and sociocultural contexts. This raised a crucial question for me: Are today’s physical educators still experiencing the same structural constraints I once did? How do they navigate the tensions between national policy aspirations and the everyday realities of their schools?

These questions, rooted in personal and professional experience but situated within broader theoretical and structural concerns, form the foundation of this thesis. I approach curriculum reform not as a linear, top-down, or purely technical process, but as a complex and contested social practice, shaped by cultural narratives, institutional forces, and relations of power (Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Casey & Kirk, 2021; Paraskeva, 2021). As Foucault (1980) argues, power does not operate solely through hierarchical commands but is exercised through discourse, routine, and everyday practice. Schools, therefore, are not neutral spaces;

they are sites in which certain subjectivities are produced, valued, or regulated (Apple, 1986). In this context, curriculum reform is not simply about introducing new content or standards; it is about the reconfiguration of embodied practices, environments, professional identities, and pedagogical possibilities.

Teachers are active policy actors (Ball et al., 2012), responsible for interpreting, negotiating, adapting, and sometimes resisting the curriculum within dynamic institutional contexts. I believe physical education holds transformative potential and that teachers, as agents of change, can enact meaningful reforms when empowered by ownership rooted in their values and professional identities (Harris & Graham, 2019). As a transformative force, teachers can be seen, according to Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) concept of "desiring-machine", as creative agents who constantly generate, disrupt, and reshape meaning through their interactions with students, institutions, and dominant discourses. Even within rigid structures, they trace what Deleuze & Guattari call "lines of flight": small ruptures, creative acts, and resistances that challenge dominant assemblages and open up new possibilities for becoming. I am deeply committed to the values of physical education and health, and I believe it is essential that the voices of physical educators are heard. While the impact of this research may be subtle, I believe it can contribute to challenging the structural constraints, dominant narratives, and professional boundaries that continue to shape and often limit the field. At its core, this research is grounded in the belief that physical educators are not only practitioners but also potential agents of transformation, creativity, and social change (Giroux, 2018). Grounded in these perspectives, this thesis draws on in-depth interviews with three purposefully selected groups of professionals: physical education teacher educators, teacher-researchers, and in-service teachers. Each professional group occupies a unique, yet interconnected, position within the reform landscape, shaped by China's broader sociocultural and political context. In doing so, this thesis challenges dominant reform

narratives that reduce educational change to binary outcomes of “success” or “failure” based solely on policy compliance (Macdonald, 2003). Instead, it seeks to illuminate the nuanced, situated, and often contested work of physical educators as they navigate the shifting terrain of curriculum policy. This exploration is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do physical educators engage with the new PEH curriculum?
2. How do physical educators enact the PEH curriculum in their day-to-day practices?
3. How do physical educators reflect on their experiences while engaging with and enacting the PEH curriculum reform in the Chinese socio-cultural context?

1.4 Outline of the thesis

This thesis contains eight chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature and curriculum theories that underpin this study. It begins with an analysis of the evolving purpose of physical education, the nature of the curriculum, and the significance of understanding the curriculum in practice. In this chapter, I introduce two key concepts that examine the role of teachers in engaging with and enacting of the curriculum. The chapter concludes with a critical analysis of the new PEH curriculum document and its policy implications.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework of the thesis. It explores how various theoretical perspectives, particularly poststructuralist theories, inform and ground the study. This chapter draws primarily on the philosophies of Michel Foucault (e.g. 1982, 1988, 1991) and the conceptual work of Deleuze & Guattari (1983, 1987).

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach for the qualitative research, grounded in the critical poststructuralist paradigm. It explains the rationale behind the research design, including the selection of targeted sites and institutions/schools in Shanghai, as well as the purposeful choices of participants. The chapter also discusses the epistemological

considerations, data generation and data analysis. The key issues regarding trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapters 5-8 present and discuss the main findings of this thesis. These chapters are structured by three concepts: engagement, enactment and reflection, which serve as conceptual pillars in understanding the curriculum reform process.

Chapter 5 examines how physical educators perceive the new curriculum and their involvement in its development and professional learning activities. It investigates their understanding of policy goals and intentions, highlighting the complex process of curriculum development and the varying degrees of opportunity for teachers to engage in professional learning. Through an analysis of both macro and micro dynamics, this chapter illustrates the opportunities and challenges faced by physical education teachers, identifying key factors that influence their engagement with the curriculum and professional learning processes.

Chapters 6 and 7 address the second research question, illustrating how physical educators enacted the new curriculum concepts in a dynamic and multifaceted manner, navigating a landscape of interpretation, adaptation, negotiation and resistance. Chapter 6 focuses on how physical educators interpret the ambitions of the curriculum, particularly the integration of physical education, physical activity, and health education into a comprehensive framework. Chapter 7 extends these interpretations by examining how specific curriculum concepts are manifested in the realities of teaching practice. It also explores the contradictions between the intended curriculum, such as open classes and the day-to-day teaching practices. Finally, this study reveals significant insights into the role of curriculum reform in shaping Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs at higher education institutions.

Chapter 8 provides a critical reflection on the ongoing curriculum reform within China's unique sociocultural contexts, addressing the third research question. It explores the

tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties faced by physical educators, alongside their aspirations for the future of physical education. This chapter highlights the tensions between the reform's progressive ambitions and deeply entrenched cultural norms, dominant pedagogical approaches, high-stakes assessment regimes, and broader structural inequity. By emphasising the importance of broad social equity, this chapter advocates for systemic reforms that are essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable transformation in physical education.

Finally, Chapter 9 provides a reflective synthesis of the findings in this thesis, addressing the research questions. It discusses the study's contributions and practical implications while also acknowledging its limitations and suggesting potential directions for future research. Additionally, I offer a personal reflection on the research journey, highlighting how this process has shaped my scholarly perspective and opened new possibilities for continued engagement in physical education and health research.

Chapter 2: Physical education and health: purposes, matters and curriculum

2.1 Overview of the chapter

This chapter offers a critical review of existing literature and curriculum theories, with a focus on their contributions to the field of study. It begins by examining the multiple and shifting purposes attributed to physical education, highlighting how broader social changes, ideological shifts, and dominant discourses have historically shaped these. I also address key concerns raised by scholars regarding the subject matter. The chapter then discusses the nature of the curriculum from a sociology of education perspective, drawing on the works such as Young (1972) and Ball et al. (2012). Yet, I argue that it is not sufficient to focus solely on the theoretical construction of the curriculum. Instead, attention must be directed towards understanding how the curriculum is in use. As Pinar et al. (1995) contend, curriculum should be viewed not only as a design or plan but also as a lived experience. In doing so, the chapter explores the roles of teachers and teacher educators in shaping curriculum engagement and enactment, with particular emphasis on how they interpret, adapt, and negotiate curricular intentions within the educational landscapes. The latter sections of the chapter narrow its focus to the new PEH curriculum in China. Through a critical analysis of key policy documents, I examine how recent curriculum reforms are informed by, and contribute to, broader national ideological agendas. These sections provide insight into how the aims, structure, and content of the PEH curriculum are constructed within China's unique sociocultural and political contexts, raising important questions about the interplay between curriculum policy, ideology, and pedagogical practice.

2.2 Purposes of physical education

The act of defining physical education goes somewhat beyond the statement of beliefs, values and aspirations, important though these statements may be. Physical

education is defined by what is said, done and written in its name, as are all other school subjects and university disciplines.

(Kirk, 2010, p.1)

As Kirk states above in *Physical Education Futures*, defining the subject of physical education presents a dilemma. Physical education has been a controversial subject regarding its definition as a school subject. One of these enduring debates revolves around the question posed by Williams (1930), questioning whether physical education is the education of the physical or if it is more accurately characterised as education through the physical. The traditional viewpoint, often described as “education of the physical”, has been the dominant perspective within the field of physical education for a long time. This perspective places a strong emphasis on the physical aspects, including the development of muscular strength and physical prowess. However, such approaches are sometimes experienced by young people in negative ways (Yang et al., 2025). As Landi (2019; 2025) argues, this approach has referred to the subject as “All Physical, No Education”, reflecting a sense of frustration with the emphasis on physical fitness and athletic performance at the expense of broader educational goals (Yang et al., 2025).

In contrast, modern physical education, with its focus on “education through the physical”, is grounded in the recognition of the biological unity between the mind and body (Williams, 1930). This perspective supports the philosophy of monism, wherein the body and mind are considered one and inseparable by Whitehead (2010). The nature and purpose of physical education, considered either philosophically or through its historical and cultural dimensions, have been the subject of much deliberation among scholars (Smith & Parr, 2007; Sprake & Walker, 2015). Yet, the role of physical education in the broader educational system has been continuously shaped by societal views on knowledge and education (Kirk, 1992a; 2010). This perspective highlighted the social construction of physical education itself

and how knowledge is shaped by cultural, political, and social values (Green, 2008). As Whitty (1985) argues, both knowledge and school subjects are not static; they are subject to change and influenced by ongoing social, political, and cultural dynamics. From this perspective, the purposes of physical education are constantly evolving and influenced by society's values and priorities.

2.2.1 The dominance of sport-techniques in physical education

Including sport-techniques in physical education during the 1950s marked a significant transformation in the field. This shift, described by Kirk as “the idea of the idea of physical education,” and referred to as “physical education-as-sport-techniques” (Kirk, 2010, p. 5), replaced the earlier emphasis on gymnastics and redefined the very nature of physical education. As Lawson (1988) concerns, physical education, centred on sports and games, is often perceived as a natural process, with this dominant way of thinking and practising becoming ingrained in a common sense through societal socialisation. Kirk (2010) criticises the decontextualised nature of the practice (“physical education as sport-techniques”), arguing that this approach is problematic as it often lacks authentic experiences. Casey & Kirk (2021) contest that the multi-activity, sport-technique-based models of physical education are “neither inclusive nor even fair”, no matter how well the teachers try to work it (p. 8). Indeed, scholars and professionals have attempted to underscore that physical education transcends a narrow perspective of merely “doing” and should not be simplistically equated with the concept of “sport” (Penney & Chandler, 2000, p. 74). These perspectives, to some extent, can be seen as stereotypical of physical education. In doing so, it reduces the subject to a narrow, one-dimensional view that overlooks the broader educational potential that physical education can offer.

Building on this critique, the discourse surrounding curriculum, whether in general education or physical education, has evolved beyond a purely technical perspective (Kirk,

1988). However, a “technological” viewpoint still dominates, focusing on guiding teaching efforts toward identifying the most efficient solutions for achieving preselected educational objectives (Apple & King, 1977; Bain, 1990). This approach contributes to the persistent issue of merging physical education with general physical activity, oversimplifying its purpose and practice. As Lawson (2018) argues, if school physical education is perceived solely as an activity program aimed at ensuring children engage in specific exercise durations daily and weekly, it simplifies its enactment, requires fewer resources, allows for scheduled exercise sessions, and may even lead to changes in the responsibilities of specialised physical education teachers. Yet, it is crucial to acknowledge that physical education encompasses more than just physical activities, influencing its function and enactment within schools. As Landi (2019) suggests, the education system has moved beyond perceiving curriculum and teaching issues merely as technicalities, no longer solely concerned with “how-to” aspects. Instead, there is a broader vision for physical education: one that seeks to prepare students for meaningful physical activity throughout their lives (McEvoy et al., 2017), extending far beyond traditional focuses.

2.2.2 Healthism as a discourse in physical education

Throughout the decades, as O’Sullivan (2004) mentions, the field of physical education experienced “assigned, accepted, ignored, and rejected” a variety of goals (p. 394). The most popular way physical educators have attempted to demonstrate the value of physical education has been to point to its contribution to other aspects of education (Green, 2008; Hardman, 2011). Yet, the goals of physical education are more related to public health (O’Sullivan, 2004). In many countries, the physical education and/or Health curricula have undergone significant changes. In Australia and New Zealand, for instance, this field is termed the Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Penney, 2010; Dyson et al., 2011), in Scotland and Wales, as the Health and Wellbeing Curriculum (Kirk et al., 2018; Gray et al.,

2024). Kirk (2020) provides a detailed account of the historical relationship between health promotion and physical education. This evolution reflects the intertwining strongly influenced by political forces and public health imperatives, serving as an important medium for delivering crucial biomedical messages aimed at controlling obesity and preventing disease (Johns, 2005; Welk, Eisenmann & Dollman, 2006).

Healthism, as a therapeutic biological ideology, has emerged as a dominant force shaping physical education, driving both individuals and nations to meet moral commitments surrounding health and well-being (Johns, 2005; Horrell, Sproule & Gray, 2012). While Kirk & Colquhoun (1989) acknowledge the notable shift towards prioritising health in school physical education, aligning with a broader societal awareness of health concerns, they also raise concerns expressed by other scholars. In their study, Kirk & Colquhoun (1989) found that while teachers' practices and plans varied, healthism (exercise=fitness=health) was prominently featured. They highlight that the ideological role of healthism is to divert attention from other factors that make the "exercise=fitness=health" triad and its realisation problematic (p. 431). Beyond this, healthism is constrained by the idea that people are in charge of their behaviour and health, presuming they have the power to change their circumstances and make choices (Evans & Davies, 2004).

In light of this, O'Sullivan (2004) warns about the risk of a narrow understanding of health, which could lead to an overemphasis on disease, weight, and obesity rather than promoting overall well-being. Similarly, Evans, Rich & Davies (2004) highlight how health beliefs and perceptions are shaped by cultural and ideological factors, potentially leading to misconceptions. Particularly, this could result in misleading practices in the physical education classroom, with a focus on measurable outcomes like body performance and fitness (Cale & Harris, 2009; Cale, Harris & Chen, 2014; Evans & Rich, 2011; Webb & Quennerstedt, 2010). Simply put, teachers could understand policy documents as solely

focused on enhancing health, fitness, and boosting physical activity levels (Gray, MacLean & Mulholland, 2012; MacLean et al., 2015). Thus, Evans et al. (2004) argue that this narrow focus on fitness, exercise, and diet could resemble the story of the *Emperor's New Clothes* in physical education, where superficial solutions mask deeper issues.

The literature on healthism offers a critical lens through which to understand contemporary physical education practices. It highlights the risks of narrowly defined health agendas and emphasises the need for more holistic, inclusive, and critical approaches to health education. These discussions are central to the framing of my study, as they provide important context for exploring how health discourses manifest in physical education across different educational and cultural settings.

2.2.3 The role of physical activity within contemporary physical education

The aims and content of physical education curricula have evolved significantly in recent decades, reflecting global shifts in educational, social, and public health priorities. While national approaches to physical education vary, there is a growing consensus around its role in promoting the holistic development of young people (McEvoy et al., 2017; Lynch, 2019). Hardman (2011) outlines three widely accepted objectives of physical education internationally: (1) the development of motor and sport-specific skills; (2) the promotion of health-related fitness and active lifestyles; and (3) the cultivation of personal, social, and moral growth. These goals reflect a multidimensional understanding of physical education that transcends mere physical competence. In alignment with these aims, Beni et al. (2017) highlight five key themes that contribute to meaningful experiences in physical education: social interaction, fun, challenge, motor competence, and personally relevant learning. These themes underscore how physical education can function not only as a physical domain but also as an engaging and socially enriching educational space. More recent scholarship further emphasises physical education's capacity to support students' re-engagement with learning,

foster social and emotional development and promote values-based and socio-moral learning (Green, 2020; Sandford et al., 2024; Hooper et al., 2020; Teraoka et al., 2020). Within this broader educational framework, physical education is increasingly recognised as a vital contributor to student holistic health and well-being (Kirk, 2020).

Central to these discussions is the relationship between physical education and physical activity, which are often interconnected but represent different concepts. Physical activity refers to any form of bodily movement that enhances physical health and fitness (Phoenix & Bell, 2019; Bairner, 2014), while physical education is understood as a structured, curriculum-based subject with defined pedagogical aims centred on learning and personal development (Nyberg & Larsson, 2014). Despite this conceptual distinction, physical education is widely acknowledged as a key setting for encouraging participation in physical activity and promoting healthy and active lifestyles (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009; McEvoy et al., 2017; Sandford, Quarmby & Hooper, 2024). The dual function of physical education as both a space for learning and a platform for increasing physical activity is particularly evident in contemporary policy and curriculum reform. For example, Stirrup et al. (2024) observe that reforms in the English and Welsh physical education curricula have led to a re-legitimisation of the subject, whereby health and physical activity are increasingly embedded within pedagogical practices and institutional expectations. Maher et al. (2024) similarly argue that physical education plays a role in supporting young people's engagement in sport and physical activity outside of school. However, Stirrup et al. (2024) critically highlight a significant limitation in England's national physical education curriculum, where the concept of health is narrowly framed, focusing predominantly on physical health achieved through activity, thereby marginalising broader health dimensions such as mental and social well-being.

Moreover, although promoting regular physical activity is often regarded as one of the goals of physical education, research suggests that for many inactive students, particularly in the United States, it represents their only opportunity to meet the recommended levels of physical activity (Meyer et al., 2011). Similarly, Hills et al. (2015) argue that actual physical activity levels during physical education lessons are often relatively low. In response, Hills and his colleagues call for stronger governmental leadership, including mandatory daily physical education and the creation of more opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day.

This critical discussion is not new. As early as two decades ago, Penney and Chandler (2000) emphasised the importance of a forward-looking, reflective debate on the future of physical education and the evolving role of physical activity within it. While acknowledging the core importance of physical activity, they argued for a re-conceptualisation of its function within physical education in response to changing societal needs. In this study, I therefore examine how these global aims and debates surrounding physical education and physical activity are interpreted, adapted, and implemented within the specific socio-cultural context of China. By exploring how educational and health goals are shaped by local values, policies, and institutional structures, the research aims to critically assess how physical education functions as a space for both learning and health promotion in the Chinese context.

2.3 The subject matters

The role of physical education in the educational system has long been a subject of ongoing debate. These debates often reflect deep-rooted assumptions about what constitutes valuable or legitimate knowledge, shaping how physical education and, by extension, physical education teacher education (PETE), is perceived and prioritised. Such discourses not only influence the curricular and institutional standing of physical education but also

carry significant professional consequences for physical education teachers, shaping their roles, identities, and legitimacy within schools.

2.3.1 Physical education as a marginalised subject

Extensive research consistently illustrates the marginalised status of physical education across various countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, China, New Zealand, and beyond (Johns & Dimmock, 1999; Kougioumtzis, Patriksson & Stråhlman, 2011; Beddoes, Prusak & Hall, 2014; Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015; Richards et al., 2018). This trend persists in educational discourse, with scholars (e.g. Houlihan & Green, 2006; Penney, 2008; Lawson, 2018) emphasising the limited attention physical education receives within discussions about educational policies and curriculum. Johns & Dimmock's (1999) comprehensive analysis of physical education in Hong Kong's curriculum revealed the dynamic, complex factors behind its marginalisation, emphasising the subjects' compromise within a state-controlled system amidst societal pressures. Their work highlighted the ongoing tension between governmental curriculum goals and daily practice in schools, emphasising the need to consider deeply embedded societal values in Chinese culture when explaining the significance attributed to curriculum subjects beyond school-level decision-making. In the early work, Kirk & Tinning (1990) explored the historical marginalisation of physical education and examined its present challenges and evolving role in education, highlighting the significant influence of norms, values, and societal status in shaping its position within the socio-cultural contexts.

A critical dimension of physical education's undervalued concerns the professional status of its teachers. Studies report that physical education teachers frequently occupy peripheral roles in schools due to the subject's lower perceived academic value (Richards et al., 2017; 2018; Sakallı & Şenel, 2025). Lawson (2018) attributes this to a lack of strong accountability frameworks and institutional support, leading to the perception of physical

education as a non-core discipline. Although physical education teachers often engage with families, communities, and broader school initiatives, they continue to face marginalisation within the educational hierarchy. Richards et al. (2018) conducted interviews with 30 in-service physical education teachers in the Midwestern United States and found that these teachers felt undervalued and marginalised, largely due to their interactions within the school environment. The teachers perceived their subject as expendable, valued only for the services it provided to stakeholders such as parents, students, colleagues, and administrators. Based on this, Gaudreault et al. (2018) suggested that focusing on professional learning to enhance teachers' expertise in this domain could elevate the status of physical education in schools and enhance perceptions of the importance of physical educators.

Hardman's (2008, 2011) work provides a comprehensive global perspective on the status of physical education and its teachers, identifying persistent indicators of marginalisation across various regions. One of the key issues he identifies extends beyond professional recognition to include disparities in curriculum time allocation and the frequent cancellation of physical education lessons. While policy documents may outline physical education requirements, schools often vary significantly in how time is actually allocated. As he points out, physical education lessons are also more likely to be cancelled than those in other subjects, due to factors such as adverse weather, limited facilities, staff shortages, budget cuts, and prioritisation of other subjects. In doing so, these disruptions further compound the precarious position of physical education teachers (Kirk, 2020) and restrict students' equitable access to legitimate learning opportunities in the subject (Penney, 2013). These ongoing challenges reinforce the marginalised status of physical education, further hindering the subject's potential within the educational system.

2.3.2 The contested academic status of physical education and PETE

Over the past decades, the physical education community has aimed to break from the limiting constraints imposed by the conventional academic perception, which has left the subject navigating between recreational aspects and academic legitimacy (Green, 2008). Unlike the traditional focus of core subjects in schools aimed at preparing students for careers, the fundamental role of physical education lessons lies in nurturing and guiding all children through a learning process that fosters an appreciation for movement, health promotion, exercise, and active play (Lawson, 2018). Nonetheless, advocates of physical education often justify its educational significance by emphasising its alleged contributions to other intellectual dimensions like moral, health, and aesthetic education (Green, 2008).

Subjects emphasising theoretical knowledge and cognitive growth, like mathematics, English, and science, have typically fallen under the classification of academic subjects. In contrast, physical education, primarily centred on physical activity (Welk et al., 2006), has commonly been perceived as a non-academic pursuit. Firstly, this classification as non-academic diminishes the perceived educational value attached to the notion of natural ability (Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015). Secondly, Green (2008) suggests that if physical education does not prioritise the acquisition and mastery of theoretical knowledge, it tends to be inherently labelled as non-academic, consequently falling outside the conventional educational realm. From this perspective, I contend that physical education's marginalisation within the broader educational system stems largely from this entrenched non-academic label, one that fails to acknowledge its pedagogical complexity and potential other contributions.

The classification of physical education as a non-academic subject also has significant implications for its status within school systems. Richards et al. (2018) shed light on this issue, revealing that while students value physical education and recognise its contribution to fostering a positive school environment and promoting health, it often does not receive the

same recognition as other academic subjects. As a result, physical education is often categorised as a non-academic pursuit, relegating it to the margins of educational importance. Johns & Dimmock (1999) contend that the concept of “valuable knowledge” is heavily influenced by ingrained societal values, favouring academic subjects perceived as pathways to enhance careers in professional, public service, and service-driven sectors. Their study highlights instances where parents, guided by these prevailing values, prioritise the perceived prestige of academic pursuits, sometimes restricting their children’s involvement in school sports for fear that the time dedicated to athletics might hinder more crucial academic accomplishments. Additionally, as Welk et al. (2006) state, the lack of documented programs in physical education, combined with mounting pressures for enhanced academic performance, presents challenges for decision-makers to position physical education strongly within the school hierarchy.

These tensions extend into PETE, where marginality takes on an additional institutional and epistemological dimension. Kirk (2014) observes that there is a tendency among some physical educators to take advantage of our so-called marginal position in education, kinesiology, and the academy to escape university expectations of academic work. This raises fundamental concerns about the identity and purpose of PETE programs (Gong, Young & MacPhail, 2023), particularly in how they prepare future teachers and address broader social justice imperatives within education (Ovens et al., 2018). While much attention has focused on pedagogical strategies within individual courses, Ovens and his colleague argue that lasting change requires advocacy at the macro level, through policy, curriculum standards, and institutional structures. Flintoff and Dowling (2019) similarly highlight the persistent neglect of issues such as gender, race, and class in many PETE programs, exposing a disconnect between rhetorical commitments to equity and the realities of curriculum design. Further exacerbating this issue, Standal and Moe (2013) demonstrate

that many pre-service teachers are not equipped with the critical reflection to interrogate dominant norms within physical education, thereby reproducing rather than challenging inequitable discourses.

As the literature demonstrates, the marginalisation of both physical education and PETE cannot be separated from broader sociocultural and institutional structures. At its core, this issue reflects dominant ideologies about what constitutes legitimate academic knowledge and what is considered worthy of educational investment. Addressing this marginalisation requires more than curricular reform at the classroom level. It calls for a systemic re-evaluation of the frameworks, ideologies, and power relations that shape the status and direction of physical education within schools and teacher preparation programs. In this context, it is essential to understand the nature of the curriculum, as it plays a key role in shaping both the content, structure and the approach to education.

2.4 Curriculum as selected knowledge

The concept of “curriculum” has been a contentious topic (Brennan, 2011), given its complex nature that involves issues such as ideology, epistemology, economics, and history (Beyer & Apple, 1998). This has made it difficult to define since it carries different interpretations across various educational contexts (Marsh, 2009; Penney, 2006). As Kirk (1988) notes, when students embark on studying the curriculum, one of the initial challenges they encounter is understanding the meaning of the term “curriculum”. This challenge is not limited to students; researchers also face the task of establishing a clear understanding of the curriculum to guide their work (Penney, 2006). Nevertheless, the most commonly accepted and problematic notion is that the curriculum refers to the content, knowledge or skills transmitted through specific school subjects (Kirk, 1988). This view is confirmed by the use of curriculum guides, syllabuses, programs, and packages that prominently feature the body of knowledge to be taught to students.

Curriculum is not simply a set of teaching materials but a product of the reinforcement of social power and culture in a dynamic society, described as a political, ideological, cultural, and economic project.

(Paraskeva, 2021, p. 2)

Paraskeva's definition of curriculum is crucial here, as it emphasises that curriculum goes beyond mere content and the selection of teaching materials. In other words, it involves the complex interplay of politics, ideology, culture, and economics in shaping what is taught, how it is taught, and to whom it is taught (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). This perspective makes the curriculum a multifaceted, dynamic, and ever-evolving entity within the educational landscape (Apple & Weis, 1986; Goodson, 2005). Furthermore, the curriculum has been a topic of interest for sociological educators for quite some time, as it is viewed as a constantly evolving and contested social construction (Goodson, 2005; Penney, 2006). Any policies regarding the curriculum reflect particular values and purposes, leading to differing opinions among teachers, parents, politicians, students, and school authorities (Brennan, 2011). In the realm of debates regarding the worth and political dimensions of the curriculum, the sociology of education in the UK underwent a paradigm shift during the 1970s. A landmark piece of contribution was Young's (1972) *Knowledge and Control*, which considered a new direction for the sociology of education, as the book's subtitle suggests (Whitty, 1985). In his book, Young discusses what aspects should be encompassed within the field of sociology of education, with a particular emphasis on the central issues of control, knowledge organisation, and how they relate to each other. As he mentions:

What is involved in treating knowledge (transmitted in education) as neither absolute, nor arbitrary, but as 'available sets of meanings, which in any context do not merely 'emerge' but are collectively given (p. 3).

Within the domain of curriculum, fundamental questions concerning the value of knowledge, its selection and structuring for educational purposes, and the most effective teaching methods in the classroom take centre stage, shaping the essence of the curriculum (Deng, 2020). According to Looney (2001), the ideological roots of the curriculum are selected and presented by the social culture and arise as a product of that selection. It can be regarded as a component of a selective tradition, transmitting the essential knowledge and skills, but always through a specific selection from the wealth of available information, and it carries inherent attitudes, both towards learning and social relations (Williams, 1977). In this sense, the curriculum functions as a powerful tool used by those in authority, such as the central government and educational bureaucracies, to control knowledge and shape educational experiences (Goodson, 1990).

To further unpack the complexity of curriculum, it is helpful to consider its various forms as they are enacted in schools. Eisner (1979) identifies three dimensions of curriculum: explicit, hidden, and null. The explicit curriculum refers to the formal, planned content intentionally designed and outlined in educational frameworks, encompassing subjects (like languages and physical education) and skills that teachers intend to teach and students are expected to learn (Eisner, 1979; Flinders, Noddings & Thornton, 1986). This curriculum is typically documented in textbooks, syllabi, and official curriculum documents, providing a structured guide for teachers and learners alike. For instance, the national curriculum serves as a framework aiming to tailor the curriculum to student needs by incorporating theoretical foundations, content examples, teaching principles, textbooks, and assessment guidance (Marsh, 2009). Despite presenting an ideal educational vision, the national curriculum's inception, according to Lingard (2021), embodies a form of economic sovereignty forfeiture and a resurgence of cultural autonomy in the globalisation context. He highlights that this weakening of economic autonomy has led to the economisation of school education policy,

refocusing its purpose on generating sufficient high-quality human capital to maintain national economic competitiveness.

In contrast, the hidden curriculum pertains to the implicit manner in which knowledge and conduct are shaped, beyond the regular study materials and formally structured classes (McLaren, 2015). The term for the concept of a hidden curriculum first appeared in Jackson's (1968) *Life in the Classrooms*. Jackson is concerned that most educators have traditionally been more concerned with obtaining students to master the curriculum and thus achieve satisfactory grades, yet not consciously capturing the phenomena of classroom life that are familiar to teachers and students. Hence, in schools, in addition to the official curriculum of formal teaching and learning, there is also the knowledge, attitudes, values, and other elements that students inevitably and unconsciously absorb as they engage in formal school activities; this is known as the hidden curriculum (Kirk, 1988; 1992b; Gordon, 1982).

Radical theorists such as Giroux and Penna (1979) argue that these hidden messages serve to reproduce dominant ideologies and sustain existing social hierarchies. Although the components that constitute the hidden curriculum remain largely tacit, their existence is implicit and often taken for granted (Martin, 1976; Alsubaie, 2015). In the context of PETE, for instance, the hidden curriculum plays a similarly powerful role. Ovens et al. (2018) demonstrate how students' understandings of sociocultural and equity issues are shaped not only by formal content but also by the implicit messages and institutional dynamics they encounter. The development of professional values, equity-oriented dispositions, and critical perspectives often emerges through these unexamined aspects of teacher education. Hence, the reproduction of dominant ideologies within physical education is deeply connected to both formal curricular structures and the less visible, yet equally powerful, hidden curriculum.

Building upon the understanding of the explicit and hidden curricula, the null curriculum introduces another layer of complexity to the educational landscape, presenting a multi-faceted concept (Flinders et al., 1986). Eisner (1979) highlights two fundamental aspects of the null curriculum, encompassing both the intellectual processes that schools/teachers prioritise or overlook and the inclusion or exclusion of specific content or subject areas in educational curricula. Flinders et al. (1986) propose that affect, encompassing values, attitudes, and emotions, could serve as the third dimension of the null curriculum. The null curriculum reflects what is left out of formal instruction, intentionally or unintentionally, shaping what students do not learn. This exclusion can have significant implications, particularly in areas like physical education, where the omission of certain topics or approaches can influence students' understanding of the subject.

By examining the explicit, hidden, and null curricula, it becomes clear that the challenges surrounding the physical education curriculum are not only confined to the formal, prescribed content. These challenges emerge as a dynamic intersection between what is taught, what is implicitly conveyed, and what is omitted, revealing the multifaceted nature of curriculum within the educational context.

2.5 Teacher, teacher educators and curriculum

The formation of curriculum policy is a complex and ongoing process, such as policy, design, embodiment in material form, implementation and evaluation (Ball & Bowe, 1992; Carl, 2009; Pinar, 2000). Ultimately, the curriculum materialises in written form, and teachers are at the frontline of curriculum reform (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008), playing a crucial role in interpreting official or policy documents within their classrooms (Wallace & Priestley, 2017). Policy texts remain open-ended, with meanings that are neither fixed nor clear, situated within a policy cycle encompassing diverse domains and sites where various interests are at stake (Ball & Bowe, 1992). In essence, the curriculum experiences continuous

deconstruction and reconstruction throughout its development and implementation stages, involving the ongoing construction, transformation, and dissemination of texts within and between educational settings, which perpetuates the dynamic social construction of the curriculum (Penney, 2006). In this sense, the curriculum is not just a set of guidelines but rather a fluid entity that is shaped and reshaped through the interactions between policy, teachers, and the classroom environment.

2.5.1 Teachers' interaction with curriculum

Kirk (1990) emphasises the multifaceted nature of curriculum interpretation and argues that viewing the curriculum merely as a “package-as-text”, as well as relying on pre-packaged curricula, undermines the dynamic and interpretive role of teaching. Similarly, Apple (1981) critiques the approach of policymakers who attempt to create “teacher-proof” curricula. These pre-packaged curricula are designed with standardised, specific pedagogies and technological forms, providing teachers with detailed instructions without the need for further explanations of objectives or content. This approach is part of a broader effort to standardise teaching methods and ensure uniformity across educational practices (Parker & Leat, 2021). However, the growing recognition that a truly teacher-proof curriculum is unattainable challenges this notion (Priestley et al., 2015). Teachers consistently adapt the curriculum, often diverging from policy intentions, leading to diverse enactments of the curriculum in practice (Cuban, 1998; Supovitz, 2008). Conversely, teachers who feel constrained by rigid output regulation often express a sense of limitation in their ability to teach effectively (Leat et al., 2013).

Kirk (1990) further contends that an overreliance on pre-packaged curricula diminishes the nuanced, interpretive nature of teaching and restricts teachers' capacity to address the diverse needs of students. In the postmodern curriculum reform, therefore, Kirk (1990) is reconceptualising the role of the teacher, emphasising teacher inquiry-oriented, and

no longer viewing them as neutral transmitters. In contrast, in top-down curriculum policy practices, teachers are often seen as curriculum implementers, responsible for delivering the curriculum. Scholars (e.g. James et al., 2008; Kimpston, 1985) argue that when policymakers are prioritised as the primary decision-makers, teachers are relegated to passive roles. This diminishes their ability to critically engage with and reflect on educational policies.

Pinar (2000) further argues that the practice of the curriculum is a mediated and symbolic social experience. Despite the authoritative nature of the curriculum, teachers may have varying interpretations and are often constrained in their use or understanding of curricular materials (Ben-Peretz, 1990). This issue can lead to misalignment between curriculum guides and teachers' preferences. Ben-Peretz (1990) captures the complexity of the relationship between teachers and the curriculum, stating:

Curriculum and teaching have long been treated as oppositions, akin to hot and cold, war and peace, or sadness and joy. Curriculum dealt with the carefully planned organisation of the subject matter in the form of written materials, units of instruction and other stable products of deliberation, design, writing and editing. Teachers, on the other hand, were interactive, swift, episodic and spontaneous. Though often planned, it was typically adaptive and reactive. (p. vii).

This tension between authoritative curriculum texts and teachers' lived realities highlights a central contradiction: while curricula are designed to guide instructional practice, the interactive and relational nature of teaching often resists rigid standardisation. The selection of teaching content, the features of instructional materials, and the methods teachers employ all shape the pedagogical encounter, mediating the relationships between teachers, students, and knowledge. Ben-Peretz also warns that the authoritative rigidity of curriculum documents may prevent teachers from drawing fully upon the richness of available materials in ways that are most responsive to their students' needs. Understanding this complex

interplay requires attention to how power, agency, and interpretation function within curriculum enactment. Accordingly, this thesis aligns with critical curriculum theorists (Apple, 1981; Ben-Peretz, 1990) in arguing for a nuanced understanding of teacher-curriculum interaction. It emphasises the contradictory dynamics embedded in educational systems and seeks to explore how teachers negotiate curricular meaning within broader sociopolitical frameworks.

2.5.2 The professional roles of teacher educators in the curriculum

In characterising the role of teacher educators, they are often described as “second-order practitioners”, implying that educators serve teachers of teachers (Murray 2002; Murray & Male, 2005). In the contemporary curriculum landscape, in general, teacher educators serve multiple roles within curriculum practice (Harris-Hart, 2009; Qiu, 2015; Grimmer & Chinnery, 2009). Teacher education, on the one hand, is acknowledged as a continuum of teacher learning, encompassing multi-layered interconnected approaches to the development of teachers (Livingston, 2014), serving as mentors, partners, and leaders in professional learning (Zhu, 2010). Teacher educators, on the other hand, are increasingly viewed as the curriculum developer, actor and maker (Bouckaert & Kools, 2018; Grimmer & Chinnery, 2009; Hoydalsvik, 2017). I would argue that in the evolving landscape, teacher educators play a significant role not only in facilitating the ongoing learning of teachers but also in shaping and influencing the curriculum itself.

Cochran-Smith & Demers (2008) metaphorically characterise teacher education as a bridge to curriculum practice in K-12 schools, emphasising its crucial role in mediating curriculum enactment and resolving controversies within educational settings. They highlight teacher education as a crucial link between theoretical concepts and practical application, facilitating the translation of the curricula’s ideals into tangible classroom realities. I acknowledge the role of the teacher educator as a bridge in the curriculum; however, I also

recognise that this metaphor does not fully encapsulate the breadth and complexity of their responsibilities. As Harris-Hart (2009) points out, while the bridge metaphor illustrates the concept of connection, it presents a static image that may limit our understanding. He raises thought-provoking questions about whether there exist multiple curricula bridges spanning time and space to facilitate this connection and how this metaphor aligns with the dynamic process of curriculum development. Grimmett & Chinnery (2009), therefore, argue that teachers and teacher educators need to maintain bridging and buffering from the policy context to assess external demands and qualify responses in a manner that promotes their specific curriculum objectives.

Previous studies, teacher educators influence both the physical education change and the reproduction of physical education work practices and knowledge (Lambert & Penney, 2019). Specifically, Lambert & Penney (2019) note that physical education teacher educators play a pivotal role in enhancing understanding and fostering innovation in the curriculum for in-service and prospective teachers. Especially in the enactment of the new curriculum, teacher educators require adept navigation of multiple policy positions, serving as narrators, translators, receivers, and occasionally entrepreneurs (Ball et al., 2011a; 2011b; Lambert & Penney, 2019). Moreover, Aldous, Evans & Penney (2022) explored the realm of curriculum reform in Wales, shedding light on the dynamics of physical education teacher educators' engagement with policy negotiation positions. Their findings reveal that although teacher educators are highly valued as sources of professional guidance within the community, indicating a pivotal and successful role in assisting teachers with creatively enacting the new curriculum, their ability to fully carry out this role seems uncertain. As they mentioned, for instance, there is a squeezed time and space for creative and innovative exploration of what teacher education can offer.

Despite the acknowledgement of the crucial role played by physical education teacher educators in curriculum enactment, the uncertainty surrounding their capacity to fully realise this role highlights systemic challenges that need to be addressed to optimise their effectiveness in assisting teachers with enacting the new curriculum. As Kirk (2014) points out, PETE programs remain entangled in marginalised discourses encompassing concerns about accountability, regulation, and perceptions of their non-academic nature. Similarly, there is limited articulation of the curriculum practices within the practices work in university and school settings (Aldous, Evans & Penney, 2022). From this perspective, teacher educators can face restrictions in their roles (Qiu, 2015). In this thesis, I critically examine the role of teacher educators in the physical education curriculum development, exploring their involvement in navigating policy expectations, shaping teacher education, and influencing future curriculum reforms.

2.6 Teachers' engagement with the curriculum

To understand curriculum does not mean that many of us do not want to change the curriculum, both theoretically and institutionally. In fact, surveying the literature of the field makes it clear: we want change.

(Pinar, 2000, p. 6)

This shift in curriculum studies, as echoed in Pinar's (2000) commentary, emphasises a broader scope encompassing inter-subject relationships, intra-subject dynamics, and the incorporation of the curriculum into the larger global context, moving beyond exclusive focus on developmental aspects towards a deeper understanding. Paraskeva (2021) further argues that to understand curriculum policies and practices, it is crucial to take into account the fact that the social is not locked in a static conception of society but emerges from the mobile associations among "things". This perspective emphasises a reconsideration of how curriculum policies and practices are perceived, emphasising the fluid nature of societal

elements and their intricate interplay within educational contexts. For instance, teachers' positioning concerning policy varies across career stages, accumulated experience, responsibilities, aspirations, and competencies in schools (Ball et al., 2011a).

Recent attention from researchers and policymakers has emphasised the crucial role of teacher engagement both in their work and with curriculum policies (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Klassen et al., 2012). As Day et al. (2007) point out, the significance of teachers' contributions to curriculum reforms highlights the critical and central role that their teaching plays in shaping student learning outcomes. Moreover, Ball et al. (2011a; 2011b) highlight the dual roles of teachers as both practitioners and policy actors. While active teacher participation has been shown to enhance the contextual relevance of the curriculum and positively influence student achievement (Hindman & Stronge, 2009; Bakker & Bal, 2010), teacher engagement in policy development also serves as a strategic lever for fostering sustainable school improvement and challenging entrenched structures within educational systems (OECD, 2005).

Despite these potential benefits, Penney & Evans (2005) argue that teachers are frequently cast in a passive position regarding policy, typically following the directives of policymakers and perceived as the ultimate link in the decision-making process. In a broader educational context, Priestley & Minty (2013) observed that Scottish teachers embrace the core principles of the national curriculum but often interact with the document at a surface level, holding diverse interpretations of its objectives or misconceiving its purpose. Although acknowledging that Scottish schools have progress to make in attaining curriculum goals, Priestley & Minty (2013) highlight the persistent challenge of lacking clarity and explicit articulation of policy, including the involvement of teachers in the Scottish curriculum development (Priestley et al., 2015).

My perspective aligns with Penney & Alfrey's (2022) argument that comprehending curriculum policy as a transformative endeavour is essential for tackling issues of social justice and equity within the domain of physical education and health practice. They contend that due to the dynamic nature of curriculum policy, its formation is shaped by the active engagement of teachers, teacher educators, and researchers across various contexts. Building upon this notion, scholars such as Gray et al. (2023) and Lambert & Penney (2019) emphasise the importance of involvement for physical education teachers and teacher educators in shaping both practices and policy. They go on to suggest that teachers should be involved in the debates about curriculum during the policy development process, so they have a voice both within and outside of the practice setting. Furthermore, Gray et al. (2023) underscore the empowering effect of such engagement, allowing teachers to exercise agency and challenge prevailing discourses, such as the healthism discourse. To facilitate this engagement, Gray et al. (2024) examined physical education teachers from the four UK home nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales), providing workshops for them to reflect on and critically engage with their respective curricula. Their findings indicate that such initiatives position teachers at the core of the change process, and with sufficient support over time, teachers progressively critically assess their past experiences and beliefs, fostering deeper involvement in curriculum reform. This perspective underscores the importance of professional dialogue in cultivating critical thinking and meaningful participation in curriculum reform.

Critically, teacher engagement with curriculum is not a neutral process but a professional and political act with significant implications (Ball et al., 2012; Penney, 2013). Kirk & MacDonald (2001) argue that reducing teachers to mere policy implementers undermines their professional expertise and limits their ability to navigate the complexities of curriculum reform. Instead, meaningful engagement requires professional learning

opportunities that extend beyond top-down directives and support teachers in critically interrogating and shaping curriculum policies (Armour, 2010; Armour, Makopoulou & Chambers, 2012; MacLean, 2018; Day et al., 2007).

This thesis examines teachers' engagement with the curriculum from two key aspects. First, I explore how teachers interact with the new curriculum, providing insights into their perceptions and understanding. Secondly, my primary focus is on how teacher educators and in-service teachers engage in curriculum development and professional learning within the context of China's ongoing curriculum reform. Through these two strands, I critically examine how physical educators can meaningfully participate in curriculum reform while identifying structural and institutional barriers that may constrain their engagement. In doing so, this study contributes to the broader discussion of the role of physical educators as active agents of curriculum policy making rather than passive recipients of externally imposed reforms.

2.7 Curriculum enactment in schools

We want to 'make' policy into a process, as diversely and repeatedly contested and/or subject to different 'interpretations' as it is enacted (rather than implemented) in original and creative ways within institutions and classrooms, but in ways that are limited by the possibilities of discourse.

(Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, p. 3)

Ball, Maguire & Braun (2012) introduced the concept of "enactment" to go beyond implementation in an attempt to challenge the idea that policy formulation and implementation follow a linear process. Enactment of policy is, as they emphasise, an ongoing, dynamic and complex process. However, it is important to emphasise that the intentions of policymakers may or may not be realised through enactment, as curriculum policy is refined by the interpretation and re-interpretation of policy actors.

Curriculum-making is viewed as an ongoing, likewise evolving practice shaped by enactment (Lingard, 2021). Marsh (2009) notes that the enacted curriculum revolves around professional decisions regarding the curriculum's enactment and evaluation, requiring teachers to make informed judgments about suitable pedagogical approaches. In this context, understanding how written curriculum materials are translated into practice necessitates examining how teachers interpret and negotiate the curriculum (Remillard, 2005). This perspective reinforces the idea that teachers are not merely transmitters of content but active participants in shaping the curriculum. Within the field of physical education, MacLean et al. (2015) point out that the development of curriculum may not lie in rigid adherence to policies but rather in the creative enactment when putting physical education policies into practice. Teachers are considered significant co-actors in policy because of their role both in the development and enactment of documents (Penney, 2013; Alfrey et al., 2022; Lambert & Penney, 2019). Teachers, therefore, may reflect on the possibilities of screening policies about knowledge and learning in their planning and classroom activities (Ball et al., 2011a; 2011b).

2.7.1 Challenges in curriculum enactment for teachers

In reality, as highlighted by Ball (2015), teachers face the ongoing challenge of expressing subjectivity and asserting authority even in seemingly liberated teaching settings, significantly shaping their teaching approaches. The evidence in previous studies explores the challenges faced by physical education teachers in interpreting and adopting the curriculum. For instance, in the context of the Australian health and physical education curriculum, Alfrey & O'Connor (2020) found that teachers had to finely negotiate a tension in terms of teaching philosophies and practices when enacting curriculum policies. In so doing, it led teachers to navigate between traditional and critical pedagogies to negotiate their perspectives on policy requirements. Similarly, Alfrey, O'Connor & Jeanes (2017) studied three physical

education teachers across two low socio-economic status schools in Melbourne, focusing on their collaborative efforts in curriculum creation and enactment. Their research revealed that although these teachers collaborated on developing and enacting *Take Action*, the challenges and outcomes varied significantly among them. They emphasised two pivotal contextual factors: the accessibility of structural support for both teachers and students and the duration allotted for executing the unit, which influenced shifts in the teachers' ideologies. Their research findings supported the notion that curriculum and policy often deviate from the intentions of their creators.

The lack of support for physical education teachers during policy enactment is a critical issue highlighted in recent research. For example, Petrie & Lisahunter (2011) identified a notable absence of professional development opportunities for teachers for curriculum practice in New Zealand. Similarly, the previous study of Atencio et al. (2012) critically discussed the complexities surrounding professional learning and issues within the Scottish physical education context. Scholars underscored the challenges teachers face in engaging professional learning agendas and addressing professional issues. It can be argued that these challenges illustrate how the enactment of curriculum policy is not a straightforward translation of intent into practice but rather a contested and fragmented process shaped by power relations, discourse, and contextual constraints. Further, Thorburn et al. (2011) also argued that there is a lack of allocated time for physical education teachers to meet the full requirements of physical education curriculum policies.

Given the above literature, there are many dilemmas that teachers face whilst enacting physical education curriculum policies. Yet, Harris (2005) pointed out that physical education teachers generally lack knowledge and understanding of the relationship between health and physical education. When we consider all these contributing factors, it is important to explore

how physical education teachers enact curriculum policy within specific contexts, especially with the government's ambitious goals surrounding young people's health and well-being.

2.7.2 Factors influencing curriculum enactment

Curriculum enactment is not a uniform or linear process; rather, it is shaped by a range of contextual factors that influence how policies are interpreted and applied in practice. Braun et al. (2011) identify four key dimensions that shape curriculum enactment: situated contexts (e.g., school demographics and settings), professional cultures (e.g., values, teacher commitments and experiences, and 'policy management' in schools), material contexts (e.g., resources and facilities), and external contexts (e.g., degree and quality of local authority support) (p. 588). These dimensions collectively determine the extent to which teachers can successfully navigate and enact the curriculum, highlighting the complexities involved in translating policy into practice.

A growing body of research underscores the critical role of teachers as agents of curriculum change, responsible for interpreting, adapting, and reshaping classroom practices to align with evolving educational goals (Simmons & Maclean, 2018). However, their ability to enact meaningful curriculum is contingent on the level of support, autonomy, and resources available to them. Alfrey & O'Connor (2024) argue that physical education teachers operate within a historically rooted and multilayered system where established norms and institutional constraints influence their pedagogical decisions. As a result, teachers often find themselves negotiating between policy expectations and classroom realities, raising important questions about the structural conditions that enable or constrain transformative teaching practices.

One significant factor affecting curriculum enactment is the influence of teachers' philosophies and beliefs, which shape their pedagogical approaches and perceptions of physical education (Armour, 1997; Placek et al., 1995; McEvoy et al., 2017). Green (2002)

suggests that physical education teachers' philosophies typically incorporate a pragmatic blend of professional values, such as athletic performance, student enjoyment, and broader educational ideologies. Yet, Green's (2000) study of 35 secondary school physical education teachers in England revealed that these deeply ingrained beliefs can sometimes act as barriers to pedagogical innovation, limiting teachers' willingness to depart from traditional approaches. Similarly, O'Sullivan, Calderón & Moody (2019) highlight the evolution of teachers' values over time, emphasising that professional experiences, training, and engagement in physical activity contribute to shifts in their curriculum enactment practices. They stress the importance of reflection and awareness among pre-service teachers to ensure they critically engage with curriculum reforms rather than passively reproducing existing models.

Beyond individual philosophies, institutional and structural factors play a decisive role in shaping curriculum enactment. Alfrey & O'Connor (2024) highlight that school leadership and a clear institutional vision are central to driving meaningful curriculum reform. Their research suggests that teachers perceive administrative support, funding, and resource allocation as enablers of curriculum change. Without adequate support, such as substitute teacher funding, professional development opportunities, and time for collaborative planning, teachers often struggle to enact new pedagogical approaches. Son & Kim (2016) further emphasise that school climate, leadership quality, and time constraints significantly impact teachers' ability to engage with curriculum reforms in a sustained manner.

The challenges surrounding curriculum enactment suggest that the process is not merely about policy implementation but rather a dynamic negotiation between teachers' beliefs, institutional settings, and broader socio-cultural influences. This study builds upon these insights by examining how China's distinct socio-cultural and policy landscape shapes teachers' engagement with curriculum reform. Understanding these contextual complexities is

crucial for developing strategies that support teachers in navigating curriculum challenges, ensuring that reforms lead to meaningful pedagogical change rather than superficial policy compliance.

2.8 National curriculum standards in China

Education is never neutral; it is inherently a political act that can reinforce existing social norms and values or challenge them, fostering critical thinking and social transformation (Freire, 2000). Paulo Freire emphasises education's potential as a tool for liberation and social change, cautioning that traditional models of education often perpetuate oppression. In contrast, democratic education, as Dewey (1916) notes, is grounded in dialogue, participation, and a commitment to social justice, catalysing meaningful societal reform. The Ministry of Education of China (2018) articulated the purposes of education as follows:

Education provides talent for economic and social development, serves major national strategies, and continuously strengthens the foundation of economic and social development.

The government body says that education plays an essential role in supplying talent for economic and social progress, supporting key national initiatives, and reinforcing the foundations of societal development. This perspective shows that education is not only a means of imparting knowledge but also a powerful instrument for shaping the future of individuals and society.

According to Richmond (1975), education encompasses a range of functions, largely shaped by state-controlled bureaucracies, which have gradually taken over responsibilities that were once managed by individuals or informal, voluntary organisations. Education, in other words, does not exist in isolation; it is deeply intertwined with social, political, and economic forces, both shaping and being shaped by them (Hansen, 2008). This complex

interplay means that education can either maintain the status quo or act as a catalyst for change, making it a central pillar in the ongoing transformation of society. Biesta (2009; 2015) identifies three interconnected functions of education: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Simply put, the primary function of qualification in education, whether it occurs within traditional schools or alternative educational settings, involves providing individuals with fundamental knowledge, essential skills, and critical perspectives required to engage in purposeful actions. This may encompass specialised training geared towards entering the workforce. The socialisation function in education, however, refers to the various ways in which one becomes a participant in a particular social, value, cultural and political environment through the educational experience. As Williams (1977) points out, formal institutions such as schools are key determinants of social processes in which individuals are enveloped within the norms and values of society. Whereas socialisation may be viewed as some kind of universal social process, Williams counterargues that it is necessarily tied to particular meanings and values in practices at the root of cultural hegemony. Meanwhile, Biesta describes that subjectification fosters independent thinking and personal agency, encouraging individuals to question dominant structures and develop a sense of responsibility as active citizens. Importantly, Biesta (2009, 2015) notes that these functions are not isolated but interconnected, with each influencing and shaping the others. These educational functions, however, particularly socialisation and subjectification, play a crucial role in shaping citizens within China's national framework, aligning closely with the government's vision for youth development. Reflecting this perspective, Xi Jinping (2017) emphasised the crucial role of young people in driving national progress, stating:

A nation will prosper only when its young people thrive; a country will be full of hope and have a great tomorrow only when its younger generations have ideals, ability, and

a strong sense of responsibility. The Chinese Dream is a dream about history, the present, and the future.

This vision highlights the connection between youth development, national prosperity, and the broader ideological aspirations of the Communist Party of China (CPC). From Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, CPC leadership has consistently prioritised education as a tool for shaping socialist citizens and adapting policies to meet evolving social and economic needs (Lu, 2021). Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the national curriculum embodies the aspirations of the country's principles for (re)construction, reflects Chinese ideology, culture, and national values, and emphasises the commitment to developing socialist citizens (Law, 2017). Acting as a repository of selective knowledge, the national curriculum is framed by the political agenda of the CPC for driving social transition that responds to dynamic changes in both the global and national economic contexts, while also prioritizing the cultivation of social cohesion within China's complex cultural and social structure (Chen, 2023; Liu & Li, 2023; Yin et al., 2014).

The production of the New National Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in 2022, which builds upon and refines the previous versions released in 2001 and 2011, underscores the Chinese government's commitment to advancing educational concepts and providing quality and equitable education for all citizens. The Compulsory Education Curriculum outlines the goals, content, and basic requirements of education, embodies the national will in the field of education, and plays a key role in fostering virtue (*立德树人 Li De Shu Ren*) through education (MoE, 2022). Compulsory education serves as a cornerstone for socialisation; it plays a vital role in shaping individuals into active participants in a socialist society (Law, 2017). By offering free education from primary (years 1-6) through junior secondary (years 7-9), the nine-year compulsory education policy ensures that students across the nation have the opportunity to acquire essential knowledge and skills. This

commitment is evidenced by the high enrolment rates, with over 99 per cent of school-age children currently benefiting from universal nine-year basic education (China Education Centre, 2021). In addition, the Ministry of Education continually revises and updates the national curriculum to address evolving educational needs and anticipate future demands.

2.8.1 Alignment of goals and principles with Xi Jinping's thoughts

Curriculum, as a public form of policy, is not a neutral compilation of knowledge; rather, it takes shape within the textbooks and classrooms of a nation, reflecting the interests and perspectives of dominant groups and potentially echoing their vision of legitimate knowledge (Apple, 1993). Likewise, within school subjects, physical education embodies the ongoing struggle among individuals to shape their preferred rendition of the subject (Green, 2008; Kirk, 1992a). These dynamics highlight the broader socio-political forces at play in curriculum development and the way knowledge is legitimised within educational systems.

The Curriculum Guideline highlights Xi Jinping's significant remarks on cultivating individuals with "ideals, abilities, and a sense of responsibility" as the overarching goal for cultivating the new generation (MoE, 2022). This vision aims to prepare young people to make new contributions to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Meanwhile, the Curriculum Guidelines emphasise five basic principles for curriculum enactment. Among these five, for example, the emphasis is placed on cultivating the core competencies (Suyang) of Chinese students. Since 2001, China's curriculum has undergone three changes, evolving educational goals from focusing on "double fundamentals" (Shuangji) (fundamental knowledge and skills) to quality education (Suzhi) (well-rounded development with moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic education) (see Dello-Iacovo, 2009), and now moving to core competencies. Core competencies (Suyang) are regarded as version 3.0, building upon the foundations of the previous reforms. Suyang, defined in China as the core competencies, correct values, and essential character traits that people demonstrate when using their

knowledge and skills to deal with complex circumstances (Wang, 2019), was initially introduced in the 2017 version of the National Curriculum Program and Standards for High School Education. The revised curriculum based on the concept of core competencies is China's commitment to educating individuals to prepare them for future life and work, following global trends in education.

Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era, the revision is committed to fully implementing the Communist Party of China's education policy, following the rules of education and teaching, performing education's fundamental mission of fostering virtue, and enhancing students' well-rounded development.

(MoE, 2022, p.1)

In line with the Curriculum Guideline, Xi Jinping Thought has been mandated for inclusion in school and university curricula since 2021, with the Ministry of Education producing a set of textbooks to be used nationwide at the primary, secondary, and university levels. The Ministry of Education claims that this initiative is significant in helping teenagers establish Marxist beliefs and strengthen confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics (MoE, 2021). Through these efforts, China seeks to ensure that education continues to play a central role in shaping individuals to follow the principles and values of the CPC. It can be argued that this reflects the CPC's broader strategy to solidify political ideology by embedding it into individuals' consciousness through educational channels.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership of the CPC since 2012, there has been a significant emphasis on culturalist rhetoric as a pivotal aspect of the regime's strategy for both ideological manipulation and bolstering political legitimacy (Chen, 2023). Xi Jinping has introduced the concept of "cultural confidence," which is characterised as a more

comprehensive and profound form of self-assurance encompassing all facets of national culture, ranging from traditional to socialist and revolutionary (Xi, 2016). This deliberate integration of cultural elements into the educational framework reflects the nature of politics under China's authoritarian regime, where ideologies are systematically incorporated into citizenship education.

When examining China's national curriculum, it becomes clear that cultural politics play a crucial role in shaping the objectives and content of the physical education curriculum. This is unsurprising, as societies with varying socio-cultural norms naturally reflect these differences in their educational frameworks. As a dynamic force, culture provides individuals with the means and meanings to engage and interact within society (Stenhouse, 1971).

A key study by Chen (2023) sheds light on this process, particularly within the realm of citizenship education. Chen's research explores how political culturalization within China's authoritarian framework is reinforced through curricula and textbooks, essentialising Chinese national identity through both cultural and racial narratives. Chen's findings suggest that China's ideological focus has shifted from socialism toward a form of cultural or even racial nationalism, further embedding political loyalty within the education system. Chen's critical analysis provides valuable context for my research, highlighting the central role of the curriculum in ideological formation. By framing education as a mechanism for nation-building and political indoctrination, the CPC ensures that its governing principles and ideological values are deeply embedded in the consciousness of future generations. This perspective is particularly relevant when examining how curriculum policies, including physical education, serve as an extension of broader state priorities, shaping not only students' knowledge and skills but also their identities and ideological affiliations.

2.8.2 Curriculum reforms and teacher responses

Curriculum development is not initiated on a blank sheet of paper but is heavily influenced by socio-cultural and historical factors (Penney, 2006). In light of this, diverse expectations and missions were placed on physical education during China's significant societal transformation (Tsai & Zhou, 2017). In the national curriculum-making process, the State Council authority establishes the general direction of institutional curriculum reform while engaging a range of parties, including experts, teacher educators, school principals, and teachers, to create consensus on its intended curriculum (Law, 2014; Xu & Wong, 2011). Following this top-down approach, local and provincial education departments are mandated to ensure the implementation of the national curriculum within their respective jurisdictions, be it a province, autonomous region, or municipality directly under the central government (Meng et al., 2021; Zhang & Liu, 2014). Furthermore, recognising the diverse economic, cultural, and political contexts across different regions in China, the government strives to ensure equitable access to educational resources. To achieve this, instructional materials for teachers and textbooks for students are provided for different subjects based on curriculum standards.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education introduced a school-based curriculum management system known as the “three-level” approach, aligning with global policies advocating for school decentralisation, autonomy, and student-centred teaching (MoE, 2001; Tan & Chua, 2015; Zhao & Qiu, 2012). This framework empowers teachers to foster creativity in their teaching methods and grants them the autonomy to design school-based curricula tailored to the specific needs of their institutions. Consequently, the “three-level” approach encourages teachers to interpret policies actively and provides flexibility in their pedagogical approaches (Meng et al., 2021).

Despite these aspirations, previous studies have consistently highlighted the challenges Chinese teachers face in adapting to curriculum reforms intended to promote quality-oriented and student-centred education (Guo, 2013; Law, 2014; Zhang & Liu, 2014; Yin et al., 2014). For instance, Yan (2015) examined teachers' enactment of the English curriculum, uncovering interconnected contextual constraints. As Yan aptly noted, "We can't change much unless the exams change," emphasising the entrenched influence of the examination-oriented culture on curriculum practices. It demonstrated that teachers were simply continuing to carry on their practice as before (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). In addition, Yin's (2013) three-year qualitative study in Guangzhou City explored how Chinese teachers responded to curriculum reform, highlighting themes of teachers' obedience, facework, and collaboration. These responses, hence, influenced by China's deeply rooted Confucian culture, shed light on the minimal opposition to the national curriculum reform.

Likewise, only a few researchers in physical education have contributed to the understanding of practical problems teachers face in the enactment of curriculum changes between 2011 and 2022. Meng et al. (2021) found that physical education teachers perceived that the student-centred concept posed a challenge to their authority in the classroom, leading to disruptions in classroom organisation. Despite expressing a willingness to align with the objectives of the new curriculum (Jin, 2013), teachers encounter significant practical limitations. Both studies (Meng et al., 2021; Jin, 2013) demonstrated that these challenges include a lack of external support, particularly in the form of expert guidance on the new curriculum, as well as confusion regarding its objectives and uncertainty about addressing students' issues.

A more recent study, Zhu et al. (2022), conducted a questionnaire and cycle observations involving 56 teachers from 10 elementary schools in Shanghai. Their findings revealed that elementary students did not meet the curriculum-recommended 50% MVPA

class time. Interestingly, male teachers and those with above six years of teaching experience allocated significantly more MVPA time compared to female teachers and those with 1–5 years of experience in physical education classrooms. Yet, Zhu et al.’s study did not identify the underlying reasons for this disparity in MVPA time allocation among teachers of different demographics.

Despite the curriculum reforms in China emphasising flexibility and a student-centred approach, teachers continue to face a range of systemic, cultural, and professional obstacles that hinder their ability to enact the latest reform. Notably, there is a significant gap in research concerning how teachers are enacting the new PEH curriculum. This gap represents an area that requires further exploration to better understand how teachers navigate the complex landscape of curriculum reform in China’s evolving educational system.

2.9 Physical education and health curriculum standard in China

The curriculum standard serves as comprehensive directives for the creation of textbooks, learning materials, and instructional methods, as well as for the assessment of teaching and learning processes (Wang, 2019). There are 16 curriculum standards to guide each subject area, including Mathematics, Literacy, English and Science. Physical Education and Health is regarded as a foundational and mandatory subject among the 16 subjects in school, with primary and secondary schools typically offering 3-4 lessons of physical education and health per week. In the 2022 curriculum, there has been a modification in the allocation of classroom time for physical education and health, now requiring approximately 10-11 per cent of the total class time. In terms of class time allocations, physical education and health is in third position, following Chinese Literacy and Mathematics.

2.9.1 Fundamental principles of the new PEH curriculum standard

Compulsory education of the new PEH curriculum standard emphasises, above all, six fundamental principles that centre on the principle of Mao Zedong’s “health first” (see Table

2.1). “Health First” ideology is interpreted in five dimensions by the new PEH curriculum: Health and safety awareness, good quality lifestyle, physical and mental health, physical fitness and well-rounded development (MoE, 2022). Among these six, three principles place special emphasis on teaching methods and instructional content design, where the concept of “integration of learning, practice, and competition” forms one of the core pedagogical approaches. This approach aims to combine in-school and out-of-school activities to enhance students’ motor skills, physical fitness, and sports-specific skills while fostering a lasting interest in physical activity and promoting the habit of regular exercise. In addition, the assessment principle emphasises the importance of the evaluation process, with a focus on assessment for learning rather than just solely on performance outcomes. The principle also emphasises the importance of adapting to individual student differences and needs, ensuring that physical education takes an inclusive and student-centred approach. Thus, this framework reflects a shift into more holistic and dynamic sets of understandings of physical education and health where pedagogical innovation is conjoined with concern for student lifelong learning, health and wellbeing.

Core Principles of Physical Education and Health Curriculum	
1. Adhering to the ideology of “health first”	Guided by the core competencies of Chinese students, integrating physical education with health education, guiding students to develop awareness of health and safety, adopt a good quality lifestyle, promoting the physical and mental health of students, physical fitness, and well-rounded development...
2. Implementing the requirements of “learning, practice, and competition regularly.”	Based on students’ learning needs and interests, caters to all students by implementing the requirements of “learning, practice, and competition regularly.” It emphasizes an “integrated approach to learning, practicing, and competing”. The curriculum combines in-class and out-of-class activities, guiding students to master basic motor skills, physical fitness, and specialized sports skills. It provides ample time for students to practice thoroughly, consolidating and applying the sports knowledge and skills they have learned, and participating in various forms of exhibitions or competitions. This approach aims to stimulate students’ interest in sports, allow them to experience the charm of sports, understand the significance of physical education, and develop a spirit of diligent learning and practice. Gradually, students will develop the habit of “one hour of exercise at school and one hour of exercise outside school.”
3. Enhancing overall curriculum content design	Based on the regularities of students’ development of motor skills and physical and psychological development, design the curriculum content as a whole, reflecting the principles of ensuring fundamentals, emphasizing diversity, focusing on integration, and emphasizing the concept of movement...
4. Emphasis reform in teaching methods	According to the practicality of physical education learning and the utility of health education, the emphasis shifts from “knowledge and skills-based” to “student-centred development”...
5. Emphasis on integrated assessment for learning	Emphasis on the motivational and feedback functions of assessment for learning, focus on constructing an evaluation function with multi-dimensional evaluation content, diverse evaluation methods, and diverse evaluation subjects...
6. Focus on individual student differences	On the basis of providing motivation and guidance to all students, pay attention to individualized teaching based on different physical conditions, sporting foundations, and interests of students. Create equal learning opportunities for students to promote a positive learning experience for each student.

Table 2.1: Six core principles of curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2022)

2.9.2 Three core competencies as overarching goals

The curriculum standard offers directives for physical education and health instruction, including curriculum goals, subject matter, and the assessment framework for learning (Zhou et al., 2022). The curriculum is structured around core competencies and defines their objectives in alignment with the purposeful nature of physical and health education, guided by fundamental principles. As curricula are constructed through the use of competency models, there is more emphasis on what learners already know and the skills they already possess (Stirrup et al., 2024). According to the curriculum document (MoE, 2022), the primary aim of core competencies is to equip students to “cultivate appropriate values, develop essential characters, and foster key abilities through the learning process, including motor ability, health behaviours, and sports morality” (p. 5). Nonetheless, upon closer examination of the three central terms, “values,” “character,” and “ability”, it becomes apparent that the emphasis is predominantly on motor ability and sports morality, while the concept of healthy behaviours is either underdeveloped or insufficiently highlighted. This focus on specific values, moral dimensions, and sporting skills reflects the curriculum’s broader ideological values and cultural objectives (Deng, Fitzpatrick & Powell, 2025). Although the development of healthy behaviours is a crucial component of core competencies, its representation remains overlooked or weak within the official document.

Three core competencies are rooted in Whitehead’s concept of physical literacy, emphasising interaction with the environment (Yin et al., 2022a). According to Whitehead (2010), physical literacy entails possessing the “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding necessary” to sustain physical activity throughout life (p. 5). Whitehead further explains that individuals who attain physical literacy exhibit a positive attitude towards their bodies, feel confident in their physical abilities, and actively participate in daily physical activities, deriving meaningful and beneficial experiences from

them. Chinese scholars have given an interpretation of physical literacy (体育素养) in China's context, defining physical literacy as a comprehensive ability that integrates various elements that are beneficial to an individual's active lifestyle and lifelong health (Chen et al., 2017; 2020). Building on the core concept of physical literacy while considering China's educational framework, three dimensions of core competencies were identified. Specifically, motor ability is reflected in physical fitness, sports cognition, and the application of skills and tactics; Healthy behaviour encompasses awareness and habits of physical activity, mastery and application of health knowledge, and emotional regulation for environmental adaptation; Sports morality is demonstrated through values such as fair play, respect, and teamwork (Yin et al., 2022). These three dimensions collectively illustrate a relationship of interconnection, mutual influence, mutual promotion, and common development (MoE, 2022) (see Figure 2.1). Compared to "physical literacy", Yin et al. (2022a) further point out that the "core competencies" exhibit distinct Chinese characteristics, as they originate from Chinese student development. Thus, these core competencies come from physical education and health's responsibility to 'cultivate a new generation of capable young people who have a good and well-rounded grounding in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic education, and who are well-prepared to join the socialist cause' (MoE, 2022, p. 2). Therefore, the discourse surrounding the cultivation of such well-rounded individuals has long been a central goal and guiding principle of China's education system (Deng et al., 2025).

Interconnection of Motor Ability, Healthy Behavior & Sports Morality

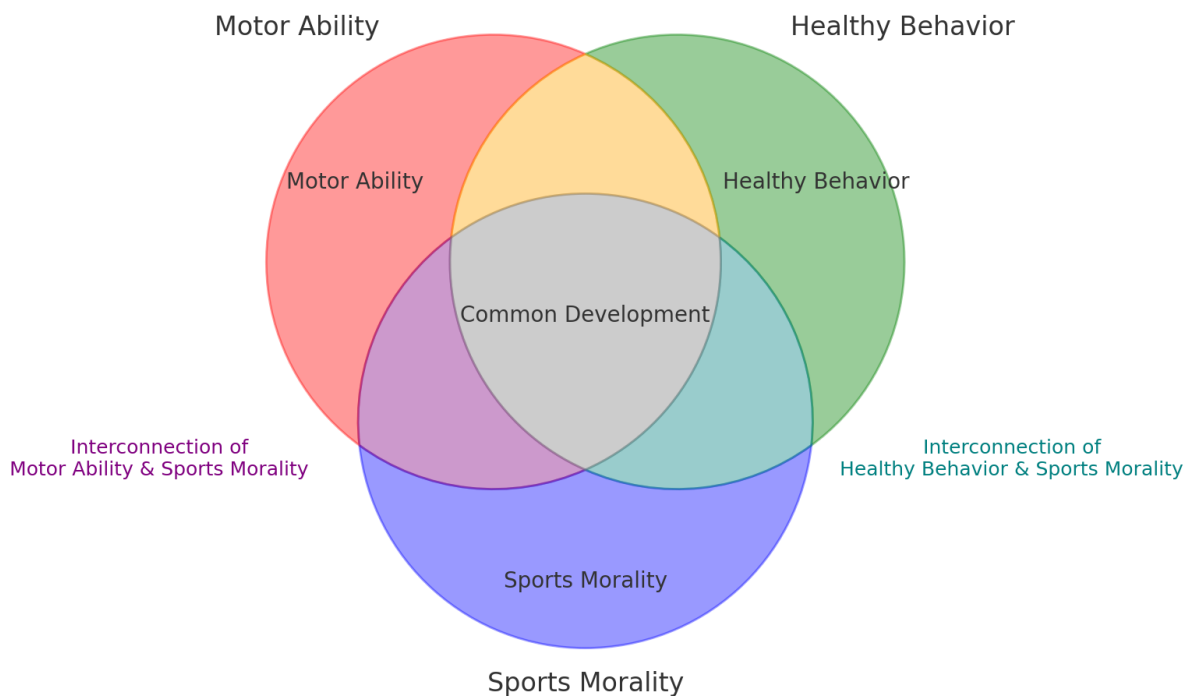


Figure 2.1: The relationship of three core competencies

2.9.3 Five main contents of the new curriculum

Based on the concept of core competencies, curriculum goals and five contents were developed: Basic motor skills, physical capacities, health education, sport-specific skills and interdisciplinary learning (see Figure 2.2). Each main content covers specific content, for instance, physical capacities including balance ability, muscle strength, flexibility and so on. It is noteworthy that the inclusion of interdisciplinary learning and health education represents new additions to the curriculum standards for the first time. Interdisciplinary learning aims to achieve the integration of physical education with moral education, intellectual education, aesthetic education, labour education, and national defence education, which entails interdisciplinary learning themes (MoE, 2022). As Wu (2023) notes, the integration of interdisciplinary learning not only signifies the shift of physical education and health from singular knowledge to a more profound integration of comprehensive knowledge

but also serves as the sole path for its educational reform to progress towards high-quality development.

Furthermore, health education as new content reflects China's alignment with both national health strategies and global health priorities. In 2016, CPC and State Council (2016) introduced the Healthy China 2030 Planning Outline, which reoriented national policy from a predominantly economic focus to a balanced, health-centred model that integrates economic growth with ecological and social development (Dong et al. 2020; Tan, Zhang & Shao 2019). The policy framework underscores the importance of enhancing public health literacy, promoting healthier lifestyles, improving healthcare access, and fostering sustainable environments. Importantly, the reform is in line with China's commitments under the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (WHO, n.d.), further illustrating its integration into global health governance.

Central to the Healthy China Initiative (2019–2030), which includes 15 major initiatives targeting actions such as health education and mental health promotion (Dong et al., 2020), the initiative recognises the need for cross-sectoral collaboration to improve health outcomes, with education playing a pivotal role (Jiang & Jiang, 2021). It mandates the integration of health education into school curricula at all levels, positioning health literacy as a foundational competency among students. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, the health education content encompasses six broad aspects, including Health Behaviours and Lifestyles, Growth, Development, and Adolescent Health, Mental Health, Disease Prevention and Emergency Response, Public Health Incident Response, Safety, Emergency Response, and Risk Avoidance. The integration of health literacy has been argued to help close the gap between societal expectations of school-based health education and the capacity of schools to deliver meaningful curricula (McCuaig et al., 2012). While the new curriculum strives to establish a comprehensive approach to health education, the feasibility of the enactment of the content in

practice remains uncertain. Specifically, how the content is taught, what teaching methods are employed, and whether physical education teachers possess the necessary expertise to deliver them require further exploration in this study.

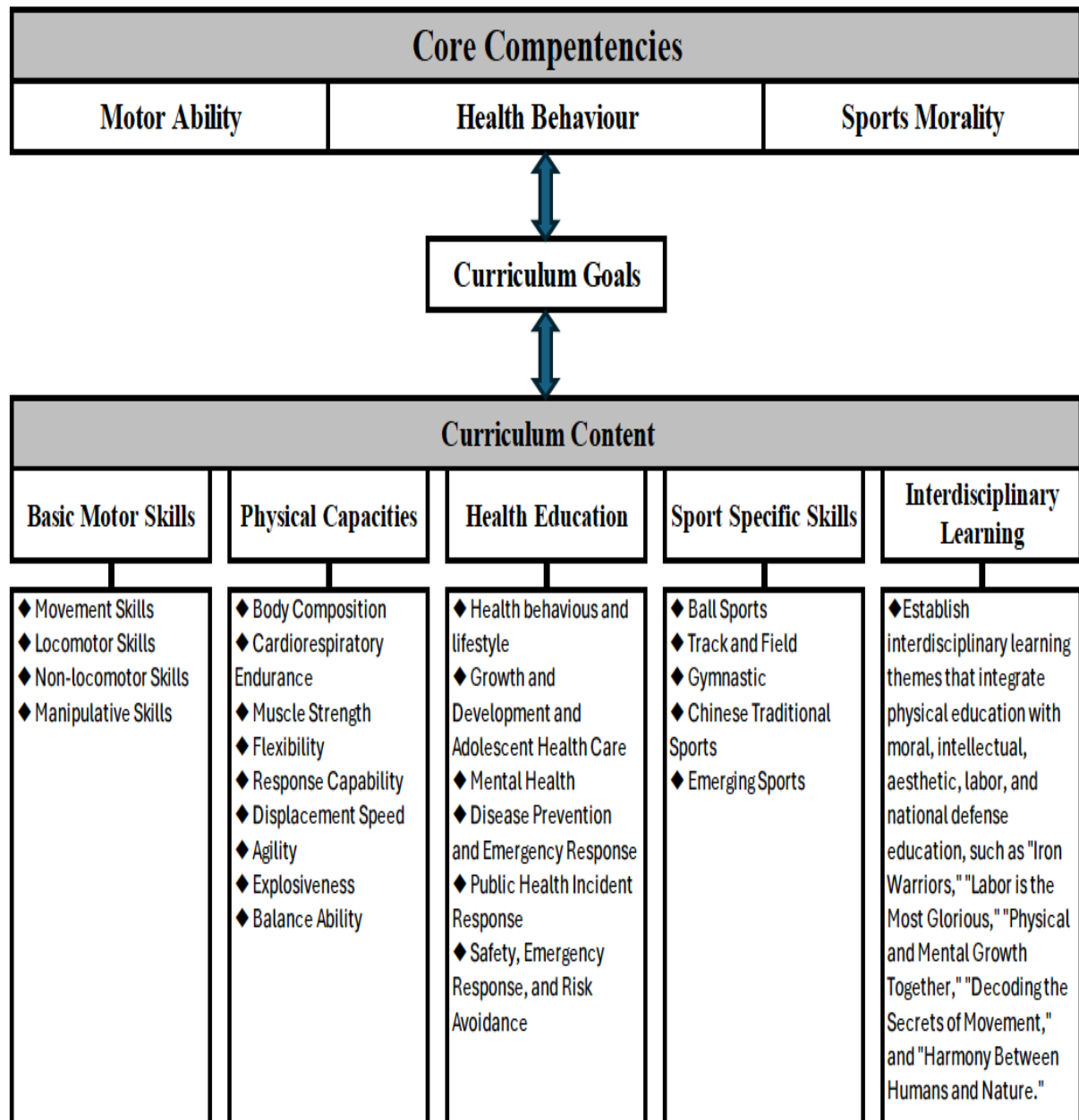


Figure 2.2: Curriculum content (Ministry of Education of China, 2022)

2.9.4 Physical education (high-stakes) assessment

The new curriculum aims to promote an assessment for learning approach, prioritising the development of students' core competencies. To achieve this, it establishes four levels of assessment standards across key domains: motor skills, physical fitness, health education, and sport-specific skills. Notably, motor skills are assessed only at Level 1, whereas other domains extend across multiple levels (see Table 2.2, Level 2 as an example). The assessment framework is designed to evaluate students' progress in physical education by emphasising skill acquisition, physical fitness, and health awareness. However, as illustrated in Table 2.2, the three key assessment items predominantly focus on National Physical Fitness Standards, which may lead both teachers and students to overemphasise measurable physical outcomes at the expense of other essential dimensions of physical education (Yang et al., 2025). This narrow focus risks neglecting cognitive and affective engagement, which are critical for fostering holistic student development (Landi et al., 2021). Additionally, the heavy reliance on quantitative indicators, such as practice frequency and physical fitness, raises concerns about whether the assessment framework adequately captures meaningful participation and personal engagement. Standardised assessments, while ensuring consistency, may inadvertently reinforce stereotypical notions of student ability and performance. Previous research has highlighted that over-reliance on physical fitness tests can obscure the qualitative aspects of student learning experiences (Yang et al., 2025).

Assessment standards	
Motor skills Level 1	Student can describe the practice methods and names of movements for locomotor, non-locomotor, and manipulative skills. Student is able to participate in basic motor skill exercises and games, with some improvement in basic motor skills, reaching the qualified level of the corresponding grade in the <i>National Student Physical Health Standard (2014 Revision)</i>. Student enjoys participating in various activities or games, can adapt to changes in the teaching environment, and actively communicates and interacts with peers. Student is able to engage in extracurricular basic motor skill practice 3 times a week.
	Student can participate in various physical activities, games, and competitions; with some improvement in physical fitness, achieving the qualified level for the corresponding grade as per the <i>National Student Physical Health Standard (2014 Revision)</i>. Student demonstrates a positive attitude during physical fitness exercises, strives to overcome difficulties and persists in learning and practicing, showing stable emotions and cooperating with peers. Student is Able to engage in extracurricular physical fitness practice 3 times a week (at least 0.5 hours each time).
Physical fitness Level 2	Student can give examples of the benefits of participating in sports, actively engages in various physical activities, pays attention to changes in height and weight, and can articulate safety knowledge in sports activities. Student can explain dietary hygiene and food safety knowledge, eat reasonably and safely, knows the dangers of smoking and resists second hand smoke, can explain the role of sleep and develop healthy sleep habits; understands the causes of myopia, knows methods to prevent myopia and correct vision, and prevents myopia through outdoor activities; understands the physical and mental changes during adolescence and the impact of lifestyle habits on health. Student actively communicates and interacts with peers, demonstrating cooperative behaviour.
Health education Level 2	Student can perform basic movements and simple combinations of the learned ball sports and apply them in competitive games; participate in intra-class competitive games and teaching matches with simplified rules; can articulate terminology related to ball games. Student can participate in physical fitness exercises under the guidance of a teacher, achieving the qualified level for the corresponding grade as per the "National Student Physical Health Standard (2014 Revision) Student is able to watch at least 8 matches of the learned ball sports either live or through various media each semester. Student enjoys participating in activities of the learned ball sports with peers, adapts to new cooperative environments, shows mutual care and assistance, and demonstrates stable emotions. Student can explain some safety knowledge related to the learned ball sports and take precautions against potential hazards during sports. Student can participate in games and practice sessions of the learned ball sports as required, persisting in challenging personal physical limits while ensuring safety. Student is able to engage in extracurricular physical exercise using the learned ball sports skills 3 times a week (at least 0.5 hours each time).
Sport specific skills (Ball games) Level 2	

Table 2.2: Assessment Standards (Ministry of Education, 2022)

Given that physical fitness assessments often serve as high-stakes evaluations, it is not surprising that the criteria remain largely quantitative outcomes. Notably, for the first time, the curriculum includes assessment standards for health education, marking a significant shift. Despite this inclusion, how health literacy will be taught and assessed remains unknown; this question is explored in this study.

In addition, after completing nine years of compulsory education, students are required to take the high school entrance examination (*Zhongkao*), the results of which are used to determine their admission to senior high schools, vocational, and technical high schools (Chen & Brown, 2013). Each province, municipality and autonomous region has developed its version of the *Zhongkao* based on its educational situation. Since 2008, physical education has been officially included nationwide in the *Zhongkao*. Becoming a required examined subject highlights its importance as a strategy to raise the status of physical education and to fulfil the objectives of the curriculum (Yang et al., 2025). Physical education has interacted with a long tradition of examination-oriented education (Meng et al., 2021). Physical education serves as a high-stakes assessment, primarily relying on fitness tests in China's regions, such as Shanghai.

Nevertheless, there are ongoing debates regarding the impact of fitness testing on teaching, learning, and students' motivation (Alfrey & Gard, 2014; Jaakkola et al., 2013; Alfrey & Landi, 2022). In particular, fitness testing has been shown to contribute to negative health outcomes (Keating et al., 2020), reduce enjoyment (Alfrey & Gard, 2014), and limit the broader purposes of physical education (Alfrey & Landi, 2022; Yang et al., 2025). High-stakes assessment can also lead to the phenomenon of "teaching to the test," in which teachers feel pressured to maximise students' performance to achieve higher scores in physical education (Keating & Silverman, 2009; Meng et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2025). Yin et al. (2022b) state that traditional assessment, focusing on fitness and sports skills, lacks

intrinsic educational value, and the functions of motivation, feedback, and promotion generated through assessment are often ignored. The new curriculum standard addresses this issue by prioritising core competencies and integrating curriculum content, thereby emphasising a holistic assessment for student learning (MoE, 2022). I would argue that, given China's deeply rooted examination-oriented education context and the historical emphasis on physical fitness and motor skills, there remain doubts about how the new assessment approach will function, perhaps making it a challenging endeavour.

2.9.5 Pedagogical recommendations

The new PEH curriculum provides specific pedagogical recommendations for teachers. In enacting the curriculum, teachers should emphasize three key aspects in their instructional design (MoE, 2022): on the one hand, they need to establish a clear understanding of the educational values of physical education; on the other hand, they require to structure teaching content in alignment with students' physical and psychological development and adopting a large-unit teaching approach for sport-specific skills. It is worth noting that the large-units teaching approach is a new concept introduced in the curriculum, referring to a more structured and integrated teaching method that delivers instruction on a specific technique of sport over 18 or more class periods (MoE, 2022). This approach represents a progressive shift, as Casey & Kirk (2021) criticise the limitations of short units, which typically last only four to six class periods, as well as the frequent transitions between activities in traditional multi-activity-based programs, which hinder students from progressing beyond basic abilities. In contrast, the large units approach allows for deeper learning engagement, enhanced skill development, and more meaningful connections to lesson content. Yet, how teachers design and adopt a large-unit approach remains an area that requires further exploration in this study.

Furthermore, the curriculum document underlines the importance of teachers improving teaching approaches, aligning with previous curriculum reforms that prioritise student-centred learning (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Simultaneously, the document explicitly calls for the abandonment of traditional teaching methods, such as the sheep herding teaching model. The “sheep herding” method refers to teachers providing students more free play time but lacking clear teaching objectives and content. In this approach, students typically engage in warm-up activities, such as jogging a few laps, followed by independent physical activities without structured guidance (Zhang, 2022). Therefore, this approach is often considered a passive teaching model in which teachers gradually lose their motivation to improve their teaching practices (Li, 2014).

More importantly, the curriculum document emphasises for the first time the use of scientific exercise load indicators in classroom teaching. To achieve these goals, the curriculum specifies several key requirements. First, each lesson must include both group and individual exercises, with intensities of no less than 75% and 50%, respectively. Second, teachers are expected to ensure that students engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), with heart rates maintained within the range of 140–160 beats per minute. Third, the curriculum mandates the incorporation of at least 10 minutes of diverse physical fitness training, promoting a student’s physical fitness. These indicators are designed, as the official document notes, to transform traditionally less active, “non-sweaty” physical education classrooms. This emphasis mirrors discourses in Swedish physical education, where there is a focus on “being active” and “working up a sweat” (Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2008). As Öhman & Quennerstedt (2008) observed, this approach positions physical education as a discourse that aims to encourage individuals to become active participants and foster good character while simultaneously serving as a space for achieving political goals and cultivating responsible citizens. Similarly, many Chinese scholars (Fan & Cao, 2017; He et al., 2023)

have emphasised the role of physical activities in school physical education, acknowledging their contribution to promoting students' physical and mental health, as well as fostering social skills. Yet, while these objectives align with broader educational aspirations, it remains important to critically examine how these goals are enacted within the context of China's curriculum. More critically, I would be concerned whether these indicators can genuinely promote progressive teaching practices or reinforce a traditional, physical fitness-dominated approach to physical education.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a critical review of the literature and curriculum theories. I identified several promising avenues of research related to physical education and health in global educational settings. While it is well-established that the purposes of physical education are multiple, fluid, and historically contingent, shaped by broader ideological, political, and sociocultural forces, there remains a notable lack of empirical research examining how these theoretical intentions are translated into practice by physical educators on the ground.

To achieve this, the chapter has drawn attention to the need for a more nuanced understanding of curriculum engagement and enactment. Existing literature suggests that these processes are not linear or predictable, nor can they be reduced to binary notions of compliance or resistance. Instead, as MacDonald (2003) argues from a postmodern perspective, curriculum operates as an open and evolving system marked by ongoing negotiation, contestation, and contextual adaptation. Within this view, the work of educators is not passive implementation but active interpretation, shaped by their lived experiences, institutional settings, local school cultures, and individual agency. More importantly, this complexity is magnified in contexts such as China, where curriculum reform is deeply embedded within broader national ideological and political agendas. As explored in sections 2.8 and 2.9, while the new PEH curriculum introduces progressive goals, the assumption that such reforms are straightforwardly realised in practice is

both empirically and theoretically problematic. The tensions between policy intent and pedagogical reality remain underexplored, particularly in relation to how physical educators interpret, adapt, negotiate, or resist new curricular frameworks in real-world contexts.

In light of these issues, this study adopts a critical and poststructuralist theoretical lens capable of engaging with the inherent complexities, contradictions, and power dynamics of curriculum reform. Traditional policy analyses, which often rest on linear and technocratic assumptions, fail to capture the lived realities of curriculum as experienced and enacted by educators. Therefore, the following chapter introduces poststructuralist theory as the critical lens guiding this research.

Chapter 3: Critical poststructuralism as the theoretical framework

3.1 Engaging critical and poststructuralist perspectives

To investigate how the new curriculum reframes physical education and health, I found it useful to draw on the theoretical perspectives of critical poststructuralism. In terms of post, according to Wright (2006), while the post form arose as a result of a previous perspective or theory, it has not replaced that perspective; rather, it stands in critical relation to it. As Best & Kellner (1991) point out, however, there is no unified poststructuralism theory, or even a coherent set of positions. As discussed in Chapter 2, this study is also informed by the sociology of education, particularly through the work of Stephen Ball and colleagues (2012) on policy engagement and enactment, as well as by critical curriculum theorists such as Michael Young (1972) and João Paraskeva (2021). These theoretical lenses enable a multi-layered analysis of how curriculum policy both reflects and shapes educational practices and ideological discourse in the field.

The study further engages with critical pedagogical insights, especially the works of Paulo Freire (2000). Freire's conceptualisation of education as a "practice of freedom" aligns with this study's commitment to challenging structures of domination and enabling transformative educational practices. His critique of the banking education, where students are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge, offers a powerful framework for analysing hierarchical and top-down approaches to teaching and learning. Freire argues that such approaches reproduce oppression by silencing learners and limiting their capacity for reflection, dialogue, and critical action. While critical pedagogy foregrounds empowerment and agency, poststructuralist theorists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari offer more nuanced understandings of how power operates not only repressively but also productively, through discourse, institutions, and the formation of subjectivity. I adopted poststructuralism because it also has the purpose of opening spaces for alternative ways of

‘knowing’ and ‘being’ that provide new possibilities for practice in physical education and related fields.

Indeed, critical and poststructuralist approaches have historically been marginalised within mainstream physical education research, particularly in international contexts such as the US, the UK, and China. As Wright (2006) explained:

Their marginality is not simply to do with their relative newness in the field but also because, like critical theory, these perspectives, by their very nature, trouble taken-for-granted ways of thinking about and doing physical education, and traditional approaches to research in physical education (p. 9).

While critical poststructuralist perspectives have gained significant traction in Western academic contexts in recent years, they remain underdeveloped in the Chinese educational context. This thesis seeks to contribute to bridging this gap by applying critical poststructuralist analysis to curriculum reform in physical education and health in China. In doing so, I aim to challenge dominant narratives and offer new interpretive possibilities for how physical education and health might be understood and practised. In this chapter, therefore, I outline key theoretical concepts from the work of Foucault (1982, 1988, 1991) and Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), whose insights are instrumental in analysing how policy discourses construct subjectivities, regulate behaviour, and reshape the possibilities within physical education and health.

3.2 Dancing with Foucault’s concepts

Foucault’s work is widely adopted in various institutional settings, including hospitals, prisons, and schools, due to its profound insights into power dynamics, knowledge production, and social control mechanisms. For instance, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) points out that the historical shape of the soul, body, and subject within the several disciplinary matrices of power that function within institutions. His conceptual apparatus

offers crucial tools for examining how physical education and health, as both a curricular and cultural site, are implicated in broader power/knowledge regimes. In this thesis, I engage with two interrelated Foucauldian concepts: (1) *Power/Knowledge* and the *Subject*; (2) *Governmentality* and *Technologies of the Self*. These concepts help illuminate how physical educators are not only agents within curriculum reform but also *subjects* shaped by discursive and institutional forces.

3.2.1 Power/knowledge and the subject

My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects.

(Foucault, 1982, p. 777)

Foucault's work was underpinned by a desire to understand how individuals have developed knowledge about humans throughout history, and how that knowledge has impacted the experience of being "human" (Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007). Foucault (1982) identified three modes of objectification that transform individuals into subjects: scientific classification, dividing practices, and subjectivation. The first two modes focus on how individuals are categorised and governed by institutional mechanisms beyond their direct control. Scientific classification organises individuals within specific categories based on disciplines such as linguistics or economics, while dividing practices separate individuals into distinct groups, such as the mad and sane, the sick and healthy, or the criminal and law-abiding. In contrast, subjectivation involves the internalisation of social norms, where individuals regulate themselves in alignment with dominant discourses. This process represents how individuals internalise power structures and contribute to their subjugation by self-disciplining their behaviour (Best & Kellner, 1991). The term "subject" holds dual meanings: subject to someone else by control and dependence and tied to his/her own identity

by a conscience or self-knowledge (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). He claims both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. Importantly, Foucault rejects the mode of modernity that associates consciousness, self-reflection, and freedom, proposing instead that self-knowledge takes the form of moral consciousness, a strategy and effect of power by which individuals internalise social control (Best & Kellner, 1991).

Understanding curriculum as a mechanism of power/knowledge underscores its role in shaping physical education discourses. Foucault's (1980) assertion that "power produces knowledge" is particularly relevant in examining how physical education policies and curricula construct specific truths about fitness, the body, health, and well-being. In physical education, for example, institutional discourses shape concepts of fitness, health, and the body, influencing how teachers and students experience education (e.g. Macdonald & Kirk, 1996; Wright, 1996, 2006; Molton, 2014; Gray et al., 2023). Schools, as disciplinary sites, deploy power through their architecture, organisation, and curriculum, which collectively regulate behaviour and define what knowledge is valued or excluded (Apple, 1986; Ball, 2013; Wright, 2006). Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is particularly useful for understanding schools' function to discipline bodies, normalise behaviour, and regulate conduct through subtle yet pervasive techniques of surveillance and control (Foucault, 1977). Within these relations of power, teachers must navigate complex roles in which their professional agency and autonomy are frequently constrained by institutional demands. Physical educators, as discussed in the previous chapter, have historically been marginalised within dominant educational discourses, complicating their position within the school hierarchy. From this perspective, curriculum is not just a text for delivering content but a mechanism through which power/knowledge relations are enacted and embodied.

This thesis investigates how physical educators in China become subjects through curriculum practices, how they are shaped by, respond to, and sometimes resist the power

embedded in educational structures. Although power is pervasive within education systems, resistance remains possible (Foucault, 1982). Foucault's writings highlight the coexistence of domination and resistance (Poster, 2019). As a researcher, I acknowledge the challenges and forms of resistance experienced by physical educators amid ongoing curricular debates. Yet, my aim is not to dismantle educational systems but to explore physical educators' perspectives within dominant discourses. I argue that dominant discourses and technologies of domination can be contested, leading to creative possibilities. Thus, physical educators' subjectivities can be understood as sites of tension, simultaneously constrained and enabling, rather than as simplistic binaries of agency versus subjugation.

3.2.2 Governmentality and Technologies of the Self

Foucault's concept of governmentality extends the analysis of power beyond institutional domination to include the subtle ways in which individuals govern themselves in alignment with broader social objectives (Foucault, 1988; 1991). Power, from this perspective, is not a fixed hierarchy but a fluid, strategic mode of action exercised through influencing others' actions indirectly: "an action upon an action" (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). Foucault's concept of governmentality helps us understand the different activities that shape or influence behaviours (Gordon, 1991, p. 2). In educational contexts, particularly within curriculum reform, this framework is especially instructive. Teachers do not merely comply with imposed standards but actively internalise institutional norms and discourses, thereby participating in their own governance (Lemke, 2002; Perryman et al., 2017). This form of self-regulation exemplifies how power operates through the production of subjectivities aligned with institutional rationalities. As Foucault (1991) articulates, governmentality encompasses the "conduct of conduct" strategies that guide how individuals shape their own actions within the expectations of social systems. Teachers, in this regard, are not only

shaped by external forces but also by their own decisions to conform, adapt, or navigate the rules and expectations that structure their professional roles.

In physical education research, genealogical analyses employing governmentality focus on how curricula and pedagogical practices function as technologies of social control and population management (Kirk & Twigg, 1994; Kirk, 1996; Tsai & Zhou, 2017). Early forms of school physical education, shaped by military drills and aerobics, exemplify “heavy, ponderous” material forms of disciplinary power that regulate bodies and normalise behaviours (Kirk, 1996). These historical insights reveal how educational practices have long been entangled with state functions of law, norms, and governance. Such analyses underscore that physical education has never been a neutral field; rather, it has always been embedded in governmental rationalities and state concerns over population management, productivity, and normativity.

Complementing governmentality, Foucault’s concept of *technologies of the self* focuses on how individuals actively engage in transforming themselves through reflexive practices aimed at achieving certain ethical or social ideals (Foucault, 1988). As he notes:

Technologies of the self, which I permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and semis, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

(Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

This articulation of self-directed transformation suggests that individuals are not merely passive recipients of power. Thus, while these practices remain situated within existing power relations, they also reveal the potential for self-formation that is not entirely determined by dominant structures. More importantly, the idea of transformation within these technologies has been interpreted (Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007) as a space where

resistance can emerge not through outright opposition, but through the reconfiguration of how one relates to dominant discourses. In the context of physical education, physical educators may adopt, negotiate, or subtly contest the norms embedded in curriculum and policy through reflective practices that aim at personal and professional transformation.

Deleuze (1988) comments on *technologies of self*, arguing that subjectivity is not forged through a break from power, but by strategically using existing power relations to alter or interrupt subjectivation processes. This understanding moves beyond simplistic models of resistance to suggest that power and resistance are co-constitutive. As Foucault (1979) argues, discipline is not merely repressive but productive; it “makes” individuals by “it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (p.170). Institutions, in this light, become key sites where individuals are observed, categorised, and shaped through discursive and material practices (Best & Kellner, 1991). These processes operate not through brute force, but through the subtle normalisation of behaviour, routines, and knowledge.

Within the context of curriculum reform in China, physical educators navigate a particularly complex and dynamic professional landscape. While they are often constrained by dominant curriculum discourses shaped by state objectives, national policy mandates, and performative accountability measures, they also inhabit spaces of negotiation, adaptation, and potential transformation. These educators do not simply implement policy directives; rather, their professional subjectivities are constituted through a continuous interplay between institutional expectations, embodied pedagogical practices, and reflexive processes of self-formation.

3.3 Deleuze & Guattari’s concepts for this research

While Foucault’s concepts assist in identifying the power relations and discursive formations that shape the field of physical education and curriculum reform, Deleuze and

Guattari's (1983, 1987) concepts offer a critical lens that moves beyond critique to consider possibilities for transformation. Their work provides a dynamic lens through which to consider how physical educators and pedagogical practices might subvert dominant norms and generate new possibilities. In this study, I specifically draw on the concepts of assemblage and deterritorialisation to extend sociological analysis and enrich the interpretive arguments developed throughout the thesis.

3.3.1 Assemblage and physical education

Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987) rejected dualistic thinking and linear models of analysis, proposing instead the concept of assemblage as a way to transcend rigid binaries and hierarchical structures. Rooted in the French verb *agencer*, meaning to arrange or fit together, the notion of assemblage refers both to the process of combining diverse components and to the resulting constellation of interconnected elements (DeLanda, 2016). Assemblages are not stable or fixed; rather, they are dynamic formations composed of heterogeneous elements such as bodies, institutions, discourses, practices, and policies that come together temporarily to form functional and often contingent configurations (Nail, 2017). As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain, “an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders...” (p.23). Rather than being reducible to a single logic or causal structure, assemblages are marked by multiplicity, variation, and ongoing transformation. From a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, the productivity of assemblages is animated by desire, not as a personal or psychological yearning, but as a generative force that drives the formation of new connections and relational arrangements (Best & Kellner, 1991). In this way, assemblages are sites of becoming (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011), continually shifting and opening up new lines of flight, potential pathways through which new practices, identities, and formations can emerge. These concepts significantly extend the analytical utility of assemblage by drawing

attention to the affective intensities and creative disruptions that can arise in spaces of institutional constraint and transformation. As Deleuze and Guattari note, “assemblages are in constant variation, are themselves constantly subject to transformations” (1987, p. 82), rendering them particularly suitable for analysing socio-educational contexts characterised by flux, negotiation, and struggle.

Physical education can be productively understood as an assemblage, constituted through intersecting forces of institutional norms, discursive regimes, and embodied practices. Some scholars drawing on poststructuralist perspectives have highlighted how physical education is implicated in the reproduction of normative identities and exclusionary logics. For example, scholars demonstrate how physical education tends to privilege athletic, white, body and gender (e.g. Wright, 1996; Azzarito et al., 2006). For instance, Azzarito (2009) characterises physical education as a panoptic space that privileges the “pretty, active and ideally white” body, contributing to the marginalisation of students who do not conform to these corporeal ideals. More recently, Zhang (2023) illustrates how accountability systems originally external to physical education are gradually integrated into its assemblage. Teachers, perceiving these systems as legitimate and fair, begin to align their practices with performance metrics typically applied to core academic subjects, thus expanding the neoliberal logic of accountability into the physical education domain. These studies reveal that while physical education assemblages are shaped by powerful institutional and discursive forces, they also remain open to contestation and reconfiguration. Norms are not immutable; rather, they are enacted, negotiated, and potentially subverted within local assemblages of practice.

Within the context of this research, the concept of assemblage offers a valuable analytical lens for examining how PEH curriculum reform is produced through the interplay of diverse forces. These include pedagogical content, institutional structures, social

expectations, professional identities, and the embodied practices of educators. Kirk (2010) underscores that stakeholders in school physical education increasingly operate within rapidly changing institutional and societal landscapes. The assemblage concept enables an understanding of how these multiple dimensions are relationally configured, contested, and potentially transformed within the shifting field of physical education and health.

3.3.2 *Deterritorialisation and curriculum*

Assemblages are not static entities; they are traversed by movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, processes that modulate their composition and transform their boundaries (Best, 2018). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) develop deterritorialisation as a central analytic for understanding how systems become disrupted, displaced, and opened to new possibilities. It names the movement by which a body, identity, or institution dislodges from its habitual or codified state, what they refer to as a territory, thus enabling the emergence of alternative configurations. As they note: “Deterritorialisation is always relative, always connected...always attached to reterritorialisation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10). Importantly, deterritorialisation is not merely a rupture or negation; it is a generative force that creates openings for reorganisation, reimagination, and transformation. Territories, in this context, are not confined to physical space; they are also symbolic, institutional, and affective orders in which power is sedimented and identity regulated. As Holland (2013) notes, deterritorialisation is a productive disruption of dominant structures, enabling what Deleuze and Guattari call “lines of flight”, emergent pathways through which new subjectivities, practices, and meanings can come into being. These movements are closely tied to becoming, a concept through which Deleuze and Guattari challenge linear development and fixed identities. Becoming involves a continual transformation, an orientation toward the possible, rather than the predetermined. As they explain: “Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialisation of one term

and the reterritorialisation of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialisation ever further” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10). In this sense, becoming and deterritorialisation are inseparable; one cannot become without simultaneously exiting what already is.

Yet, deterritorialisation is not inherently emancipatory. Deterritorialised bodies are always (at risk of) falling back under the influence of organisation, falling from the continual present, actualised through continuous becomings, into an elsewhere of transcendent identity structures (Woodward & Jones III, 2005). Deleuze & Guattari (1987) note, every deterritorialising movement carries with it the risk of reterritorialisation, the re-imposition of order, coherence, or regulation, often under the guise of progress, reform, or innovation. As such, deterritorialisation must be critically engaged not only as a force of disruption but also as a site of ambivalence and tension. It may foster creativity, resistance, or transformation, but it can equally be co-opted, domesticated, or redirected into new regimes of control.

This dynamic is particularly salient in the context of curriculum reform. More currently, some curriculum theorists’ efforts to deterritorialise the curriculum increasingly draw on post-critical and decolonial theories, which critique the epistemological foundations of modern curriculum as grounded in Eurocentric, hierarchical, and exclusionary logics (e.g. Andreotti, 2011; Paraskeva, 2016; Du Preez, Simmonds & le Grange, 2022; Zhao, 2020). As Paraskeva (2016, 2025) argues, dominant curricular forms, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, remain trapped within what he calls a “curriculum reason”, a deeply colonial logic of knowledge that divides, excludes, and regulates. For Paraskeva, transcending this condition demands a radical deterritorialisation of curriculum thought. This involves a “delinking” from Western Eurocentric epistemological matrices, and a commitment to what he describes as *non-abyssal*, *non-derivative* ways of knowing. As he asserts:

Critical and post-critical theories and pedagogies—the way we have been thinking and doing need to end; they need to deterritorialize. These theories and pedagogies must radically delink from their own oppressive epistemological Western Eurocentric matrix without renegading it and commit to a non-derivative cohabitus of multiple differences and diverse epistemological traditions within and beyond the Eurocentric matrix, thus disestablishing the abyssal thinking and being... (Paraskeva, 2015, p. 10).

From this perspective, deterritorialisation is not merely a theoretical gesture but a political and epistemological imperative. It calls for a curriculum that is itinerant, pluralistic, and committed to epistemic justice, one that can accommodate difference without subsuming it, and foster becomings without reterritorializing them into pre-existing norms.

Within the field of physical education and health, however, applications of deterritorialisation remain relatively underexplored. Although Landi (2018; 2019) has drawn extensively on Deleuze and Guattari's work in theorising gender, sexuality, and embodiment in physical education, he does not explicitly adopt the concept of deterritorialisation. More recently, however, Vieira, Bonetto, and Borges (2024) have engaged with the concept of deterritorialisation within the context of physical education. They propose that the physical education curriculum can be deterritorialized by adopting a geophilosophical sensibility, one that attends to the immanent, affective, and relational flows that shape everyday school life. Through this orientation, the curriculum becomes a dynamic site of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, enacted through pedagogical practices that affirm local, minoritised, and culturally grounded identities. Such an approach, they argue, fosters a more pluralistic, multicultural, and contextually situated educational landscape, disrupting dominant narratives and opening space for alternative curricular possibilities. In this thesis, deterritorialisation is proposed as a new way of thinking about PEH curriculum reform in China. This conceptual engagement is not confined to a single institutional setting, such as schools or institutions, but

rather traverses multiple assemblages, including policy discourse, teacher education, embodied practice, and socio-cultural norms. By foregrounding deterritorialisation, the study seeks to unsettle dominant curricular logics and explore alternative configurations that might enable new becomings within and beyond educational landscapes.

3.4 Conclusion

A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds...

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3)

This statement by Deleuze and Guattari highlights a core theoretical foundation of this chapter: a rejection of fixed, stable categories of knowledge and subjectivity in favour of a relational, dynamic understanding of educational practice. In this chapter, I explained the foundational concepts of critical poststructuralism that inform the theoretical perspectives relevant to this thesis. These underlying concepts fundamentally depend on the understanding that all things in this world are relational and interconnected. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1982, 1988, 1991) and Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), I frame PEH curriculum reform as a complex assemblage of forces that shape not only pedagogical practices but also physical educator subjectivities and possibilities for transformation. Central to these theoretical insights is a move away from hierarchical thinking toward a view of the world as relational, non-linear, and constituted through difference. This orientation challenges traditional assumptions in physical education and health policy, particularly in contexts like China, where top-down curricular models dominate. As such, the methodological implications of this theoretical position demand approaches that are attuned to complexity, multiplicity, and the productive nature of power. In the following chapter, I propose a critical poststructuralist methodology designed to investigate how physical educators engage with and enact PEH curriculum reform within situated contexts.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 The journey of research

I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: What is this reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?

(Foucault, 1984, p. 249)

This investigation into the nature and implications of reason serves as a foundational pillar for the critical inquiry undertaken in this thesis. Foucault's ideas provide a crucial theoretical framework that shapes the methodological perspective of this research. As Lyotard (1984) notes, "the postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (p. xxv). Poststructuralism, therefore, does not merely offer a theoretical foundation or a descriptive account of phenomena; rather, it provides a narrative about *what* and *how* I interpret these phenomena, as well as *why* I believe they occur in specific ways.

Initially, this research was designed to focus on physical education teachers within the Scottish educational context. As a researcher originally from China, I decided to step out of my comfort zone and explore how curriculum policies frame physical education classrooms in Scotland. During the first year of my PhD, I was deeply immersed in learning the Scottish education system, with a particular emphasis on the *Curriculum for Excellence*, *Physical Education Benchmarks*, and the related literature. Through engagement with these curricular frameworks, alongside scholarship from Scotland and other Anglophone countries, I developed a comprehensive understanding of Scottish physical education while simultaneously broadening my perspective on contemporary issues in the field.

Nevertheless, I encountered significant practical challenges. Recruiting participants and gaining access to local schools for data collection in Scotland proved to be difficult, severely hindering the progress of my project. Over the eight months, only a few physical education teachers participated in my study. Faced with these challenges, my supervisors (David and Dillon) and I decided that it was crucial to find alternative ways to conduct the research. We decided to use Shanghai as a target site while maintaining the same research topic and framework. This decision came at an opportune moment, as China was undergoing the new curriculum reform. Despite shifting the geographic focus of my research, I gained deep insights into physical education within different socio-cultural contexts.

In Shanghai, the research scope expanded to encompass three key groups of physical educators: teacher educators, teacher-researchers, and in-service teachers. This expansion introduced diverse perspectives from both academic and professional standpoints, enriching the study by extending its focus beyond school-based physical education to broader areas such as national curriculum and textbook development, teacher education, and health education. As a result, the research incorporated a wider range of theoretical frameworks, including the sociology of education, critical theory, and poststructuralist theory. This multidimensional approach not only deepened the scope of the investigation but also facilitated a more comprehensive exploration of the complexities inherent in educational practices and policies, particularly within Shanghai's unique sociocultural context.

4.2 Critical poststructuralism as the paradigm

The emergence of poststructuralism marked a significant departure from traditional approaches in the social sciences, which had long adhered to empirical research designs (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Structuralism, aligned with the positivist paradigm, prescribed a systematic and linear process for researchers to address predetermined questions using established methodologies (Howell, 2016). In the modern world, reality was seen as

predictable, research was viewed as scientific, and universal norms for truth and morality were assumed to exist. In contrast, poststructuralism rejects the notion of a single, fixed truth, recognising instead the existence of multiple truths. It challenges traditional generalisations, hierarchies, and binary oppositions such as good/bad, right/wrong, and male/female (Merriam, 2002). As Best and Kellner (1991) argue, poststructuralism, as a key component of postmodern theory, enhances analysis by embracing the multiplicity of cultural and social discourses.

As deconstruction, poststructuralism is a new way of thinking with the metaphysical history, desires and radical thoughts (Williams, 2014). A pioneer in poststructuralism, Derrida (1978) advocated for a strategy of critical deconstruction aimed at dismantling cohesive structures to reveal what has been obscured. Therefore, poststructuralism emphasises the disassembly of unified perspectives to illuminate the workings of dominant ideologies (Leavy, 2017). By rejecting the structuralist belief in neutral, objective, and universal truths, poststructuralist theories critique these notions, marking a paradigm shift that highlights breaks in knowledge, culture, and society while aligning with new, radical discourses (Best & Kellner, 1991). They made important claims about poststructuralism:

The poststructuralists, by contrast, criticised the claims of structuralists that the mind had an innate, universal structure and that myth and other symbolic forms strove to resolve the invariable contradictions between nature and culture. They favoured instead a thoroughly historical view which sees different forms of consciousness, identities, signification, and so on as historically produced and therefore varying in different historical periods (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 4).

In essence, poststructuralism emphasises fluidity, fragmentation, and indeterminacy, challenging the established boundaries of knowledge. This perspective rejects the idea of singular cause-and-effect relationships, instead viewing the world as shaped by complex

interactions (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Landi, 2024). Both poststructuralism and critical theory emphasise the intermediation of subject and object, thought and being, thereby rejecting reductive idealist or materialist philosophies (Best & Kellner, 1991). This interconnectedness underscores the fluidity and complexity of social realities, highlighting the need for a critical and reflexive approach to understanding power, knowledge, and identity. By embracing these principles, critical poststructuralism provides a powerful framework for analysing the dynamic and contested nature of educational practices and policies, particularly within diverse sociocultural contexts such as Shanghai. Therefore, this paradigm not only deepens the scope of research but also facilitates a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the complexities inherent in contemporary educational systems.

4.3 Research methods and design

This thesis takes a critical approach, drawing on key ideas from poststructuralism and curriculum theory and critical policy studies. It is positioned at the intersection of critical and poststructuralist perspectives, epistemological positions that challenge fixed truths and emphasise the role of power, discourse, and social positioning in knowledge production (Clarke & Braun, 2013). From this standpoint, I reject the notion of an observable, independent reality, recognising instead that human experiences are shaped by macro, meso, and micro-level influences. Methodologically, this position aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of rhizomatic thinking, which disrupts hierarchical and linear models of research and knowledge production. In contrast to the "arborified" model, where knowledge branches predictably from a central trunk, the rhizome emphasises multiplicity, fluidity, and decentralised connection: "unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature" (p. 21). This concept provides a powerful means of rethinking research design, allowing

inquiry to move across shifting contexts and connections rather than along predetermined paths.

Accordingly, this thesis does not confine itself to a single site or institutional setting. Instead, it follows lines of connection across multiple spaces, actors, and moments, reflecting the relational and processual nature of curriculum reform and enactment. In so doing, it aims to generate a more nuanced understanding of how China's new curriculum policies are both shaped by and actively shaping the local educational landscape. By combining critical and poststructuralist perspectives, this approach interrogates dominant knowledge formations in physical education while also seeking new possibilities for research practice. It challenges assumptions of coherence, neutrality, and linearity, and instead embraces inquiry that is fluid, responsive, and critically attuned to the complexities of educational change. This methodological choice addresses gaps in both the empirical literature and the theoretical framing of curriculum reform in China, offering an alternative lens for understanding how power, discourse, and possibility operate within educational contexts.

Building on this methodological orientation, the study draws theoretical inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conception of the rhizome as "a map and not a tracing...open and connectable in all of its dimensions" (p. 3). As a map rather than a tracing, this methodology embraces exploration, openness, and movement qualities essential for investigating the layered realities of curriculum reform in the Chinese context. This stance foregrounds entangled perspectives, contested meanings, and the lived complexities of educational change, resisting reductionist or dualistic framings.

4.3.1 Qualitative exploratory design

Within these epistemological and methodological considerations, the study employs a qualitative exploratory design. The qualitative research to explore and interpret the meanings and experiential dimensions of human life and the social world (Fossey et al., 2002). Unlike

positivist, quantitative research, which perceives reality as fixed, singular, objective, and measurable, qualitative research recognises that reality is dynamic and shaped by social interactions (Merriam, 2002). Given the limited existing literature on China's new PEH curriculum reform, this study's exploratory approach was crucial (Creswell, 2014). More specifically, the study adopts conversational inquiry (Leavy, 2017), a method well-suited to investigating lived experience within social and cultural contexts. Conversational inquiry recognises both the personal conditions of participants, such as their feelings, hopes, desires, and moral dispositions and the broader social conditions shaping their lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As human beings who think, feel, and act within social contexts, we are always engaged in ongoing interactions with others (Brinkmann, 2020); conversational inquiry is designed to capture this relational complexity.

Conversational inquiry enables the production of reflective, situated accounts of experience and meaning, while resisting linear or reductionist approaches. Its emphasis on storytelling aligns with the rhizomatic concept, generating a dynamic, interconnected map of experiences that reflects the layered realities of curriculum reform. In doing so, it produces knowledge that is both critically attuned to policy enactment and accessible to physical educators (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). By employing conversational inquiry, this study gathered in-depth insights from physical educators, thereby developing a comprehensive understanding grounded in their perspectives. The following sections detail the geography of the research site, describe the settings and participants, and explain the rationale for their selection.

4.3.2 Research site: Shanghai

As the largest city and economic hub of China, Shanghai plays a crucial role in the nation's efforts toward economic modernisation and social transformation (Deng & Zhao, 2014; Liang et al., 2016). Located in East China at the southern mouth of the Yangtze River,

with the Huangpu River meandering through its landscape, Shanghai is not only a geographical but also a cultural and economic beacon. By 2022, the city boasted a population of 24.7589 million, making it the third-largest city globally (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2022). As one of China's four direct-controlled municipalities, Shanghai holds administrative status equivalent to a province and is organised into 16 county-level districts. Unlike many other major cities with a centralised core, Shanghai's urban centre is distributed across multiple districts. District areas such as Huangpu, Xuhui, Changning, Putuo, Jing'an, Hongkou, and Yangpu form the city's heart, reflecting its dynamic and multifaceted nature (see figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: China's Map

Shanghai is an ideal choice for this study due to its distinctive attributes and leading role in China's educational landscape. Several key reasons make it a compelling case for examining educational reforms and practices, including its economic significance, governance structure, educational achievements, and role as a pioneer in national curriculum

reforms. While Shanghai is often positioned at the forefront of national education reform efforts, it is important to acknowledge that it does not fully represent the diversity and complexity of China's broader educational system. Rather than framing Shanghai as a representative microcosm of the nation, this study recognises it as a distinctive and influential context, one that provides valuable insights into how educational policies are interpreted, enacted, and experienced in a policy-rich urban setting.

Firstly, Shanghai's prominence as China's largest city and a major economic hub, along with its significant role in economic modernisation and social transformation (Sit, 1995; Deng & Zhao, 2014), provides a rich and complex context for exploring the impacts of educational policies. Its status as a leading city in economic development also means that it is at the forefront of educational innovation, making it an ideal location for studying the effects of educational reforms.

Secondly, the management of education affairs in Shanghai is overseen by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, which operates under the auspices of the Chinese Ministry of Education. This centralised structure ensures the consistent implementation of educational policies and reforms across the city. During the post-Mao era, however, Shanghai experienced a significant shift in educational governance as the central government decentralised the control of education (Deng & Zhao, 2014). The management was distributed among 16 local education bureaus, granting them autonomy in decision-making. Additionally, Shanghai embraced the marketisation of education services, involving civil society and private entities in the management of educational institutions, further diversifying the landscape of education governance (Ngok, 2007). This decentralisation allowed for greater flexibility and responsiveness in addressing local educational needs while maintaining alignment with national reforms.

Thirdly, Shanghai is renowned for having one of the most advanced basic education systems in China, having been a pioneer in implementing the nine-year compulsory education system (Tan, 2012). This system mandates that all school-aged children in Shanghai complete six years of primary education followed by three years of junior secondary education. The compulsory nature of this education underscores the city's commitment to providing foundational education to all students. Upon completion of the nine years of basic education, students in Shanghai are assessed through the Zhongkao, which determines their placement into different tracks of secondary education (Liang et al., 2016). This placement is crucial as it influences whether students will proceed to senior secondary education or enter technical and vocational training programs. Students aiming for senior secondary education typically focus on preparing for the national college entrance examination (*Gaokao*). The rigorous preparation for the Gaokao highlights the intense academic environment in Shanghai and the significant role of standardised testing in shaping students' educational trajectories.

In addition to its strong basic education system, Shanghai has gained international recognition, consistently achieving top rankings in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), with students excelling in Mathematics, Reading, and Science (Liang et al., 2016). The outstanding performance of Shanghai students on PISA has inspired curriculum developments and educational strategies in countries like the USA, England, and Australia (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Lingard, 2016). Beyond basic education, Shanghai is also a major centre for higher education in China. This includes eight universities affiliated with the Ministry of Education and nine other double first-class universities, accounting for approximately 15 per cent of China's total double first-class universities (Li, 2017). This concentration of high-quality institutions further underscores Shanghai's significance in the Chinese education landscape and its suitability as a case study for this research.

Finally, Shanghai has been a pioneer in comprehensive education and curriculum reforms in China, serving as a pilot city and influencing national educational practices (Liang et al., 2016; Qian & Walker, 2013; Deng & Zhao, 2014). During the new curriculum reform, Shanghai continued to lead the way (MoE, 2021), playing a crucial role in developing and implementing new curriculum practices on a national scale.

4.3.3 Sampling strategies in institutional contexts

In line with the methodological orientation outlined above, this section details the sampling strategies employed across institutional contexts. The selection of institutions and participants was a complex and context-sensitive process designed to capture the diversity of educational settings and professional experiences. Institutions were primarily selected through purposeful consideration, such as type (public or private) and level of engagement with curriculum reform initiatives. In some cases, institutions were identified first, and participants were then recruited from within them. In other instances, individual participants were identified first through professional networks, and their affiliated institutions were subsequently included to situate their experiences within institutional contexts. This dual and recursive process, combining purposeful and snowball sampling strategies, enabled the study to represent both institutional dynamics and individual perspectives, aligning with the rhizomatic and relational approach of the research design. The following sections provide detailed explanations of the selection processes for universities, teacher education institutions, and school settings.

4.3.3.1 Selection of target universities for teacher education

Shanghai is home to prestigious universities and institutions that offer teacher education programs, along with well-known scholars who have made significant contributions to the fields of physical education and health. For this study, three target universities were first selected based on their prominence in teacher education, research

output, and influence in the field. Teacher educators were subsequently recruited from these universities to participate in the study. The following descriptions are based on publicly available institutional websites, with certain details generalised to protect the anonymity of research settings and participants.

University A is recognised as a comprehensive, state-administered research institution with a strong national reputation, recognised under China's "Double First-Class" initiative. It comprises a broad range of academic units, including a college specialising in physical education and health. This college occupies a leading position nationally in curriculum development, research, and professional training in the field of physical education. It contributes to the preparation of teachers, sports scientists, and coaches, supports sports training and competitive athletics, and plays an influential role in shaping educational policy and practice in the sector.

University B is acknowledged as a key local institution renowned for its comprehensive education offerings and strong emphasis on teacher training, particularly in the liberal arts. It plays a crucial role in shaping the local educational landscape by producing graduates who excel in diverse educational settings, particularly within Shanghai's schools. The Institute of Physical Education, a department within University B, is responsible for cultivating highly qualified physical education teachers and social sports professionals. It supports school-based and national fitness initiatives, advances research in sports science, and serves as a major centre for physical education, teacher training, and policy consultation related to sports development in the region.

University C is recognised as a specialist sports university jointly supported by national and municipal authorities. It is included in both national and local strategic higher education development plans. The institution is known for integrating talent cultivation, research, and social service in the field of sports and physical education. Its school of

physical education is dedicated to training professionals for both school and community contexts, with an emphasis on multidisciplinary expertise and the advancement of sports education practices.

4.3.3.2 Selection of target institutions for in-service teacher education

In the realm of in-service teacher education, the Ministry of Education (2018) has consistently emphasised the enhancement of teacher quality and professional development. Shanghai exemplifies this commitment through a diverse array of institutions offering professional learning opportunities. These include normal universities, teacher education colleges, comprehensive universities, and specialised teacher training institutes, alongside entities at national, provincial, and district levels (Qiu, 2015; Zhang, Ding & Xu, 2016). Each district within Shanghai hosts a dedicated teacher training institution, mandated to organise ongoing professional development for local schools and teachers.

Within this broader landscape, the selection process for in-service teacher education institutions in this study began with the identification of two teacher-researchers. Following their recruitment, their affiliated institutions, referred to here as Teacher Education Institution A and Teacher Education Institution B, were included as research sites. The descriptions below are based on publicly institutional official websites, with certain details generalised to ensure anonymity of the research settings and participants.

Teacher Education Institution A is described as a provincially administered institution that plays a central role in supporting the lifelong learning and professional development of educators across multiple educational stages, including preschool, basic, higher, and vocational education. It functions as a key resource not only for the municipality but also for the wider region, extending its influence nationwide through teacher training programmes, curriculum innovation, and educational research.

Teacher Education Institution B is recognised as a district-level institution that provides training and professional development tailored to local educational needs. It focuses on enhancing teaching quality in primary and secondary schools, supporting curriculum reform, and promoting innovative pedagogical practices. Its initiatives have advanced the quality and balanced development of regional education, improved school management, and positively impacted the broader education system across the city.

4.3.3.3 Chosen school settings

Among Shanghai's 16 administrative districts, the four schools included in this study were located in Putuo and Jiading districts. Putuo District, situated in central Shanghai, borders Baoshan to the north, Jing'an to the east, Changning to the southwest, and Jiading to the west. Jiading District, in the northwest of Shanghai, is characterised by a suburban environment and residential areas (see Figure 4.2 for geographical context).

The selection of schools was based on both practical considerations and professional networks. First, schools were identified to ensure involvement of both public and private schools. Once a school was selected, participants were recruited through professional connections within that school. For example, in Jiading District, I first identified a public school (Qiu Zhi School). After establishing contact with a physical education teacher there, I was introduced to a colleague within the same school. The participants subsequently recommended me to the teachers at another school in the same district, further broadening the scope of the study and enabling the inclusion of diverse educational contexts and experiences. Pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity, and the following descriptions are based on publicly available information from school websites.



Figure 4.2: Geographical Districts of Shanghai

Ying Cai School stands out as the only independent school. Located in Putuo District, Shanghai, Ying Cai Private School is a co-educational school that integrates both junior and high school levels. The school is noted for strong academic outcomes and high student progression within its district.

De Yuan School is recognised as a state-funded nine-year school in Putuo District, Shanghai, consisting of primary and junior high school. It operates across multiple campuses and serves a substantial student body, reflecting typical characteristics of large, government-supported schools in Shanghai.

Shu Ren School is recognised as a state-funded co-educational junior secondary school in Jiading district. Shu Ren has been a pilot school for national curriculum reforms, participating in all three stages of the national curriculum reforms. In 2022, Shu Ren was selected as one of the pilot schools for the new curriculum by the Ministry of Education. This involvement underscores its commitment to innovative teaching practices and educational advancements aimed at enhancing student learning outcomes and educational quality.

Qiu Zhi School is recognised as a recently established nine-year school developed through a partnership between the Jiading district government and a university. It offers a continuous pathway from primary through junior secondary levels, integrating research-informed pedagogical practices and reflecting a model of government–university partnership in education.

Collectively, these four schools offer a comprehensive view of educational diversity within Shanghai. The selection of these varied schools allows for a broader understanding of how different types of schools, independent, state-funded, and government–university partnerships, contribute to the implementation of the new curriculum reform.

4.3.4 Purposeful participant selection

This section focuses on the recruitment of individual participants and the rationale for selecting distinct professional groups. Participants were also recruited through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling strategies. Initially, participants were purposefully identified through professional networks and institutional affiliations to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases directly relevant to physical education, health, and curriculum reform implementation (Fossey et al., 2002; Patton, 2015). This approach prioritised relevance, allowing the study to capture nuanced insights that might not emerge through random sampling. Snowball sampling was particularly useful in reaching individuals whose contributions were not publicly visible but who were recognised by peers as key actors in

curriculum reform. As a result, the study captured nuanced perspectives from key actors in curriculum reform.

Three professional groups were chosen due to their direct involvement in educational practice, making them highly knowledgeable about the field of physical education and health. Each group contributes a unique perspective crucial to the study's objectives. Teacher educators were included due to their dual involvement in curriculum and textbook development and in the training of both pre-service and in-service teachers, positioning them at the interface between policy and practice. Physical education teachers were recruited as they are responsible for enacting the new curriculum in classrooms, making their perspectives essential to understanding practical challenges and opportunities. Teacher-researchers, affiliated with local education departments, were recruited for their responsibilities in supporting in-service teacher development, conducting classroom observations, and contributing to curriculum evaluation. Their expertise offers system-level insights into professional development and curriculum implementation. The following sections provide detailed information about the participants.

4.3.4.1 Selected physical education teacher educators and teacher-researchers

There were eight teacher educators, primarily from three universities: universities A, B and C, with two teacher-researchers¹ from teacher education institutions A and B (Participant's information see Table 4.3). Notably, all participants were anonymous.

¹ Teacher-researchers, or Jiaoyanyuan, are recruited from outstanding school subject teachers who are institutionally located out of school and work in local (county or district in cities) bureaus of education under the direct leadership of local educational administrators. Their task is to direct and help school teachers in teaching and implementing new curriculum and experimenting with new methods, monitor educational quality by observing and sitting in on the classes in the subject that they are experts in, and be responsible for setting examination papers for their local areas and nation-wide as well. This system of teaching research was learned in Russia in the 1950s and has remained until now across the country (Ding, 2023, p. 344).

Information about the teacher educators and teacher-researchers selected in Shanghai's universities/institutions

	University/institution	Participant	Gender	Professional Title	Age
A	University A	Tao Hua	Male	Professor	1980s
B	University A	Xiao Zhou	Male	Professor	1960s
C	University A	Ping Wei	Male	Professor	1980s
D	University A	Hao Miao	Male	Professor	1980s
E	University A	Bo Hu	Male	Associate Professor	1980s
F	University B	Dong Cao	Male	Lecturer	1990s
G	University C	Sheng Yan	Male	Professor	1970s
H	University C	Zhan Bai	Male	Lecturer	1990s
A	*Teacher Education Institution A	Lan Li	Female	Lead of teacher-researcher	1970s
B	* Teacher Education Institution B	Ming Gao	Male	Lead of teacher-researcher	1970s

All participants are pseudonyms: * Two teacher-researchers from the city and the district institutions.

Table 4.3: Participant information (teacher educators and teacher-researchers)

As Table 4.3 shows, there were ten participants from two professional groups: teacher educators and teacher-researchers. This group consisted of nine men and one woman, all born between the 1960s and 1990s. The diversity in their ages and professional roles contributed to a range of perspectives, enriching the insights gathered for the research. In China, age is not

typically considered a sensitive topic, and it is common for individuals to share age information in their Curriculum Vitae and profiles on the official website. During conversations with participants, many naturally introduced their age, often using generational terms like “I am from the ‘80s generation” to indicate their birth decade. Based on these references, I recorded their approximate birth years.

Within their respective universities, the eight teacher educators held various academic positions, reflecting their varied levels of experience and expertise. Among them, five were professors, one was an associate professor, and two were lecturers. This variety in academic rank added depth to the study, as participants brought varied perspectives shaped by their roles and responsibilities in higher education. Each participant had made significant contributions to the field of school physical education and health, with research interests spanning multiple areas, including *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *Physical Education and Teacher Education*, *Curriculum Policy and Practice*, *Health Education*, *Sociology of Sport*, *Physical Fitness*, *Inclusive Physical Education and Sport & Exercise Sciences*. This breadth of expertise further enhanced the study’s exploration of the educational landscape.

It is noteworthy that both participants served as leading teacher-researchers in municipal and district education institutions, respectively. Before transitioning to their current roles, Lan Li and Ming Guo accumulated extensive practical experience in physical education, Lan Li as a primary school physical education teacher and Ming Guo as a secondary school physical education teacher. They both had brought 30 years of front-line teaching experience to their respective positions, focusing on in-service teacher professional training, classroom observation and evaluation, and curriculum design. The rich teaching and leadership backgrounds provide valuable teaching and practical insights and enhance their contributions to institutional education and professional development.

The two professional groups of teacher educators and teacher researchers were particularly significant to my research because most of them were involved in the revision of the 2022 national PEH curriculum standard and student textbooks.

Specifically, teacher educators from University A played a pivotal role in the development of the 2022 curriculum standards and the editing of student textbooks. Tao Hua and Hao Miao served as key members of the curriculum editorial committee responsible for revising the physical education and health curriculum. Their significant contributions to this national-level initiative underscore their expertise and influence in shaping the future direction of physical education in China. Their work in curriculum development further reflects their leadership in the field and their commitment to advancing educational standards. In addition, Xiao Zhou served as the lead editor for the health education content in the student textbooks, working alongside colleagues Ping Wei and Bo Hu from the University A. Together, they ensured the accuracy and relevance of the health education material included in the textbooks. Sheng Yan from the University C, also made notable contributions, serving as a member of the Shanghai Research Centre for Student Physical Fitness and Health and as the main editor of the health education content for Year 7-9 student textbooks.

Furthermore, this professional group includes two young-generation teacher educators, Dong Cao and Zhan Bai, who completed their PhDs within the last three years. Both are actively engaged in physical education research in schools, professional training for in-service teachers and PETE programs, representing the next generation of leaders in the field. It is also worth noting that two teacher-researchers, Ming Guo and Lan Li, were involved in designing specific content in the student textbooks and developing instructional materials for teachers, respectively. Their contributions further enhanced the educational resources and reflected their commitment to improving teaching practices and curriculum design.

4.3.4.2 Selected physical education teachers

In China, physical education is typically taught by specialist physical education teachers in both primary and secondary schools. These teachers generally hold either a bachelor's or master's degree in physical education, ensuring a high level of expertise in their field (Zhu et al., 2022). For this research, eight physical education teachers (three females and five males) were selected from four schools located in two districts: Putuo and Jiading. Each school contributed two teachers to the study, creating a balanced representation across the chosen districts and schools.

The diverse range of experience and professional titles among the selected teachers offers a comprehensive view of the current state of school physical education in Shanghai. The professional title system in China is a fundamental aspect of teacher force management, designed to enhance professional development opportunities and elevate the social status of educators (Li et al., 2021). This system is crucial for structuring teachers' career progression and is linked to their remuneration. In both primary and junior secondary schools, the title system comprises five levels: third level, second level, first level, senior, and professional senior (OECD, 2016). It means that teachers' salaries are influenced by these titles, with higher titles corresponding to higher pay and greater professional recognition.

Among the selected participants in this study, the distribution of professional titles varied. Four teachers (Peng Liu, Ying Lu, Hong Yu and Yue Qian) held a first-level professional title, which denotes a significant level of experience and competence in their field. One teacher (Bin Zhao) held a second-level title, indicating a developing career with potential for advancement. The remaining three teachers held senior titles, reflecting extensive experience and high standing within the professional community. The years of teaching experience among these participants ranged from 7 to 32 years, demonstrating a wide range of expertise and perspectives on physical education. Notably, the three senior title

positions: Song Chen, Hui Wang, and Feng Xu, each possess over 20 years of teaching experience.

Among the participants, the two female teachers from Shu Ren School, Yu Hong and Lu Ying, stood out as backbone teachers. Yu Hong was the sole participant involved in textbook editing, while Lu Ying contributed to the recording of national quality lessons. This distribution of professional titles and experiences provided a broad spectrum of insights into this research (Participant's information, see Table 4.4)

Information about the school and teacher selected in Shanghai					
	Participant	Gender	Years of Experience	Professional Title	School
A	Peng Liu	Male	18	First-level	Ying Cai Private School
B	Bin Zhao	Male	13	Second-level	Ying Cai Private School
C	Song Chen	Male	28	Senior	De Yuan School
D	Hui Wang	Male	24	Senior	De Yuan School
E	Ying Lu	Female	11	First-level	Shu Ren School
F	Hong Yu	Female	11	First-level	Shu Ren School
G	Feng Xu	Male	32	Senior	Qiu Zhi School
H	Yue Qian	Female	7	First-level	Qiu Zhi School

All participants and schools are pseudonym

Table 4.4: Participant information (in-service physical education teachers)

4.4 Data generation

In this study, individual semi-structured interviews were employed to gain in-depth insights into the perspectives, experiences, and thoughts of physical educators. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of data collection because they provide a balance between flexibility and structure, allowing participants the space to express their views in their own words while maintaining focus on the key research questions (Adams, 2015; Fossey et al., 2002). This approach, according to Kallio et al. (2016), permits the interviewer to explore emergent themes through follow-up questions, ensuring that participants' voices are fully captured while allowing for a structured exploration of key issues related to the research.

I recognise that high-quality interviews are built upon meaningful dialogue, where knowledge is co-constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee (Patton, 2002). This dynamic interaction is essential for uncovering the complexities of participants' lived experiences. To ensure that the interviews would yield rich and insightful data, I took several preparatory steps. I began by familiarising myself with the research topic and reviewing relevant literature to inform the interview process. I also coordinated with the participants to arrange interview schedules and locations, ensuring convenience for them.

The interview questions were initially drafted and subsequently reviewed by my core supervisor, David. Based on his feedback, I made minor adjustments to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions to the study's objectives. Recognising the importance of pilot studies for identifying and addressing potential barriers, such as resistance (Maxwell, 2012), I conducted pilot interviews with a former colleague and an experienced teacher educator. These pilot interviews helped identify specific areas of focus for teachers and teacher educators, revealing distinct concerns and perspectives. While physical education teachers were primarily concerned with practical teaching issues, teacher educators focused more on

curriculum development and broader reform perspectives. Based on these observations, I revised the interview questions to better capture the experiences and perspectives of both groups, ensuring alignment with the study's aims. Additionally, I adjusted the wording of the interview questions to better align with the context of Chinese conversation. This adaptation was crucial in fostering open and meaningful dialogues between the participants and me, enabling a deeper exploration of their perspectives and experiences within the Chinese educational context. In essence, this approach emphasises the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in qualitative research, ensuring that data truly reflect the lived experiences of participants within their social and cultural contexts.

In December 2023, I conducted a total of 18 semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews, each lasting between 40 to 60 minutes, and recorded them with audio recordings. The semi-structured format allowed for the collection of comprehensive data within a limited timeframe while also enabling me to retain and recall interview content for further exploration in subsequent sessions. Follow-up questions were utilised to explore participants' responses, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the data collected. In doing so, these actions facilitated a better understanding of the participants' perspectives and enriched the data generation.

The participants represented three professional groups: teachers, teacher educators, and teacher-researchers. During the interviews, I was conscious of how my own background and professional identity shaped the research encounter. With teachers, I disclosed that I was also a physical education teacher, which helped build rapport and created a sense of shared experience. However, I also remained aware that this commonality could influence the ways teachers responded to me, perhaps emphasising certain perspectives they thought I would value. To mitigate this, I employed follow-up questions, such as "Why do you think...?", to ensure participants had space to express their own views without being guided by my

background or expectations. When interviewing teacher educators and teacher-researchers, I positioned myself primarily as a doctoral researcher. In these contexts, I adopted a learning stance, drawing on their expertise, including their knowledge of curriculum development procedures. This approach encouraged participants to share their insights and experiences openly, while enabling me to critically reflect on my own role and its influence throughout the data-generation process.

Since all participants spoke Mandarin, and I am a native speaker, this common language significantly facilitated communication, minimising the risk of misunderstandings. All interview transcripts in Shanghai were generated in Chinese, preserving the authenticity of participants' responses in their native language. In the next section, I detail the data analysis process and address any translation issues encountered to ensure the reliability of the data.

4.5 Data analysis

The qualitative techniques employed for data analysis, indeed, proved crucial in capturing the participants' articulated realities and accurately producing their viewpoints. Upon generating transcriptions, multiple data analysis methods were utilised, drawing primarily on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) thematic analysis. The process followed a rigorous, multi-phase approach, comprising familiarisation with the data; first- and second-cycle coding; codebook development and theme mapping, and interpretation of findings.

The data analysis process began with listening to recordings and reading through transcripts, a meticulous task aimed at ironing out any textual inaccuracies. It was my initiation into the familiar process with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006), each word shaping my understanding a little more. At the same time, I anonymised each dataset and removed the duplicate words. I then summarised the topics raised by three professional

groups of participants in the data. I gave the summarised accounts to my core supervisor, David, as an initial analysis and understanding of *what happened*.

Given the large volume of raw data, one of the more demanding tasks was translating all the Chinese transcripts into English. This translation significantly increased the time and effort required for a thorough data analysis. Beginning the task of translating a Chinese text into English, I turned to translation software, relying on it sentence by sentence. With each sentence transformed, I carefully reviewed for any errors or mistranslations. Following this initial review, a member of the faculty staff, who is a native Chinese speaker and a professional translator, helped to check the text, provided comments, and revised any errors and mistranslations. In particular, for specific terms such as Chinese idioms or newly coined expressions, where I was uncertain about conveying the precise meaning, I highlighted these sections for further review. This additional step significantly enhanced the translation's accuracy and ensured that the intended meaning of the participants was faithfully conveyed (see Appendix E). During this step to familiarise myself with the data, I wrote notes and memos on what I heard and read, developing initial ideas about categories and relationships (Maxwell, 2012). Additionally, during the subsequent data analysis, I consistently compared the Chinese and English texts to ensure that the participants' meanings were accurately conveyed within the specific context.

The coding process adhered to Saldaña's (2021) manual coding, involving inductive, line-by-line analysis of transcripts to assign codes reflecting emergent meanings. This approach acknowledged coding as a dynamic, context-sensitive endeavour necessitating profound immersion in the data to ensure analytical depth (Terry et al., 2017). The initial coding process focused on capturing a broad range of potential categories while retaining relevant surrounding data to preserve contextual integrity. Given the complexity of qualitative data, it was essential to acknowledge that individual data extracts could be

assigned multiple codes, reflecting their relevance across different themes. Examples illustrating this coding process can be found in Appendix F, which provides insights from Tao Hua's dataset.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the coding process, David and I independently coded the same transcripts, which represented 25% of the total number of transcripts. For example, through our independent coding (see Appendix F), I identified codes such as "educators are unaware of the procedure" and "involved various professional groups," while David's codes included "many teachers unaware of this" and "representatives of various groups." Achieving consensus on our coding decisions reinforced the analytical rigour and ensured consistency in the interpretation of the data.

Following the initial cycle of coding, concept coding (Saldaña, 2021) was employed as a second-cycle coding phase to move beyond individual participant accounts and identify overarching ideas and relationships. During this phase, the dataset was further segmented, categorised, and organised into thematic clusters (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Concept coding was conducted through iterative discussions with David, refining codes to develop broader concepts that captured deeper meanings within the dataset. For example, codes and sub-codes were grouped under broader categories such as "stakeholder engagement" and "professional collaboration" in the curriculum development in the finding Chapter 5. This process facilitated theoretical interpretation while remaining grounded in the data.

The codebook functions as both a methodological artefact, establishing standardised coding protocols, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and definitions (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), and an analytical scaffold, structuring thematic hierarchies to ensure analytical coherence (Saldaña, 2021). This phase focused on systematically identifying key concepts, which led to the iterative development and refinement of the codebook in collaboration with David (Creswell, 2014). Once the codebook was finalised, all

relevant coded data were consolidated into a structured document. The codebook was mapped hierarchically, with broad codes encompassing multiple sub-codes, ensuring a clear alignment between data extracts and conceptual interpretations.

To further refine thematic relationships, concept mapping (Impellizzeri et al., 2017) was employed to visually represent the dynamic interconnections among codes. This process required multiple revisions to enhance clarity and analytical utility (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout this iterative refinement, I systematically re-read transcripts, re-examined coded extracts, and posed critical questions to verify the accuracy and consistency of the identified relationships. This ensured that the conceptual framework remained grounded in the data while facilitating deeper theoretical interpretation.

The process of theming the codes (Saldaña, 2015) played a crucial role in structuring the study's findings. Each theme was systematically developed based on its theoretical framework and supported by the codebook. For example, the main theme of "Engaging with curriculum reform" in Chapter 5 was framed through curriculum theories and was systematically broken down into hierarchical sub-themes. These sub-themes, such as "Curriculum reform is an ongoing process" (see section 5.2.1), emphasised the recurring and evolving nature of policy change, while "procedures of curriculum development" (see section 5.3.1) presented how physical educators engage in curriculum development, emphasising the fundamental principles and procedures in this process.

Building on the constructed themes, the final stage involved interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. An iterative approach was applied, meaning analysis and interpretation were revisited in multiple cycles, each refining understanding of participants' experiences and alignment with the thematic structure. Throughout this process, I remained attentive to the tensions between representation and interpretation, acknowledging the dynamic nature of meaning while critically reflecting on

my role as a researcher. I was particularly conscious of how my positionality could influence the ways participants' insights were represented. To maintain rigour and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in both the data and the theoretical framework, I engaged in regular discussions with David, whose feedback helped me critically evaluate my analytical decisions and strengthen the findings.

4.6 Trustworthiness, reflexivity and ethics

Trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethics are fundamental considerations in qualitative research. Burr (2015) emphasises that researchers play a crucial role in interpreting participants' thoughts and experiences. This interpretative process inherently involves giving "voice" to participants and shaping their experiences, which can lead to diverse interpretations of the same events (Leavy, 2017). Therefore, maintaining trustworthiness in research involves upholding ethical principles and ensuring trustworthiness in the interpretation and representation of data. Additionally, qualitative researchers need to engage in reflexivity by continuously examining their own biases and positionalities and understanding how these may influence their interpretations (Leavy, 2017). As the primary actors in the research process, researchers must identify their values, assumptions, and biases at the outset and follow ethical guidelines throughout the study (Creswell, 2014). In the following sections, I detail the strategies employed to uphold trustworthiness and reflexivity and adhere to ethical considerations throughout my research process.

Trustworthiness: The fundamental objectives concerning trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry, as suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985), are how the findings of an inquiry are regarded as "worth paying attention to, worth taking account of..." (p. 290). Hence, when I embark on writing this thesis, I am aligning with a postmodernist perspective, and there arises a call for the revaluation and reconstruction of existing categories, modes of thought, and values (Best & Kellner, 1991). Moreover, writing, far from being a mere servant

of science (Howell, 2016), holds a deeper significance, and the possibility of ideal objects being its object; writing is the condition of the episteme (Derrida, 1976). In essence, writing plays a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of human understanding by serving as the medium through which knowledge is constructed and disseminated.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study utilised the concept of crystallisation (Ellingson, 2009), which reimagines traditional methodological triangulation from a postmodern perspective. In triangulation, different methods are used to “validate” findings based on fixed points. Crystallisation, however, embraces the idea of prisms reflecting and refracting various perspectives, creating different colours, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions (Richardson, 1994). In other words, crystallisation, like Foucault’s prism, breaks this mode by pointing out that lively experiences are a plurality with more than three dimensions (Flynn, 2005).

Ellingson (2009, p. 10) highlights the main principles of crystallisation that I followed in this thesis, including: (1) Offer deep, thickly described, complexly rendered interpretations of meanings about a phenomenon or group; (2) Represent ways of producing knowledge across multiple points of the qualitative continuum... often crystallized texts reflect several contrasting ways of knowing... (3) Reflexive consideration of the researcher’s self and roles in the process of research design, data collection, and representation. (4) embracing knowledge as situated, partial, constructed, multiple, embodied and enmeshed in power relations.

Reflexivity: Reflexivity in qualitative research refers to the process of critically reflecting on the knowledge we produce and our role in producing that knowledge (Clarke & Braun, 2013). As highlighted by Hammersley & Atkinson (1995), the researcher’s presence inevitably influences the information gathered, emphasising the dynamic interplay between the interviewer, the informant, and the interview context. In doing so, when considering

whether to approach my research as an insider or outsider researcher, I am mindful of the potential power dynamics that may arise, depending on how I perceive my role.

As a researcher, I embrace the perspective of critical and post-structural genres, which assert that knowledge is political and that researchers are not neutral, as our ultimate aims involve advocacy and action (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). By acknowledging an insider positionality, I recognise that researchers are integral to the research process and cannot fully eliminate biases (Landi, 2024). From an epistemological standpoint, I adopt a subjective position, understanding that human beings actively construct society, and that both meaningful realities and individual perspectives shape social phenomena (Crotty, 1998). Consequently, I consciously position myself within multiple identities throughout this thesis and critically examine how these influence my research decisions, interactions with participants, and interpretations of data.

My personal and professional experiences have profoundly shaped my engagement with this research. Growing up in Heilongjiang Province, China, my early schooling emphasised academic achievement over physical education. This background influenced my later decision to pursue a degree in physical education at Harbin Sports University, where I developed a newfound passion for sports skills. My subsequent role as a physical education teacher in Shanghai, where I gained an understanding not only of the benefits of physical education for students but also of the systemic challenges teachers face, particularly in an environment that prioritises core academic subjects. These experiences directly influence my research focus, as I sought to investigate the development and challenges of school physical education within this context.

In 2015, a significant life change, marrying and relocating to Scotland, marked a new chapter in both my personal and professional life. Over the past decade, my evolving roles as educator, researcher, and mother have shaped how I approach research, helping me navigate

the tensions between insider familiarity with the Shanghai educational context with critical reflection and remain aware of bias that could influence my interpretation of participants' perspectives. Through this research, I aim to inform Western audiences about the development of school physical education in China, including curriculum development and enactment, as well as the challenges faced by physical educators. While some challenges are context-specific, they also reflect broader, culturally nuanced issues in contemporary school physical education worldwide. By maintaining a reflexive stance throughout the research, I seek to deepen understanding of the field, facilitate cross-cultural dialogue, and contribute to global discussions on promoting physical education and health.

Ethics: Ethics is concerned with the principles that guide good, right, or virtuous behaviour, whereas applied ethics focuses on specific and nuanced difficulties within specific situations (Punch, 2014). The research in this thesis underwent an ethics process that included human and non-human relationships required by the University of Strathclyde. The project went through a rigorous review that ensured the research methods and design, sampling strategies and guidelines, and data safety storage were appropriate for the subjects, context, and schools and universities involved. Before initiating the research, ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate ethics committee at the University of Strathclyde (see Appendix C).

Ethical research practices within any investigative inquiry are fundamentally grounded in the principles of protecting participants (Leavy, 2017) and adhering to core ethical standards: “respect for persons, beneficence, and justice” (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p. 132). In this thesis, I paid attention to the rights of the participants and treated all participants equally, thereby ensuring no abuse of power. Participants volunteered for the study, and their identities remain anonymous to safeguard their privacy. During the recruitment process, I sent the participant information and consent forms (see Appendix D) to

each participant. I read them orally and asked for their verbal consent before each interview. All participants were pleased to share their thoughts and experiences on physical education and health, and wider life in the working environment of schools/universities. As a researcher, thus, I acknowledge my ethical obligation to produce a thesis that will resonate with readers and contribute to making physical education and health and the wider school contexts, equality and social justice in China.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter justified employing qualitative research methods within the critical poststructuralism paradigm. By adopting this paradigm, the study uncovers the complexities, boundaries, and power dynamics embedded in curriculum reform at the macro, meso and micro levels. Given this thesis's focus on how three distinct professional groups of physical educators engage with, enact of, and reflect on the new curriculum, their varying professional roles offer diverse experiences. Thus, this chapter provided a comprehensive background on these participant groups and a clear rationale for their selection. Additionally, this chapter details the data generation and analysis procedures, emphasising continuous reflexivity in the research process. Through communication and collaboration between the researcher and participants, a substantial amount of data was generated, offering deeper insights into the boundaries and possibilities of curriculum reform. In the following four chapters, I present the key findings of this research, providing a nuanced understanding that addresses the research questions.

Chapter 5: Engaging with the curriculum reform: empowering physical educators through curriculum development and professional learning

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the multifaceted nature of curriculum reform, exploring the dynamic interplay between physical educators' perceptions of new curriculum policies, their engagement in curriculum development, and their access to professional learning opportunities. Grounded in Foucault's (1988, 1991) theories, the analysis reveals how curriculum functions as both a tool for governance and a mechanism for legitimising certain forms of knowledge in physical education. Drawing on curriculum theories such as Young (1972) and Paraskeva (2016), the chapter argues that curriculum reform is not merely about content delivery but about controlling and prioritising educational values, thereby shaping physical educators' perceptions and practices.

The chapter is structured around three interconnected dimensions of curriculum reform: perception, curriculum development, and professional learning. The first section explores how physical education teacher educators, teacher-researchers, and teachers perceive new curriculum policies, focusing on their interpretations of the reform and their understanding of its overarching objectives. The curriculum, as Pinar (2000) states, is not mere policy adjustments but a profound reimagining of educational values and practices that reverberate through every layer of the profession. These changes, which encompass teaching methods, content, and overarching goals, are not merely technical adjustments but problems of "how to" (Landi, 2019). This process, often seen as an inevitable but necessary stage in educational change, sheds light on how teachers engage with and adjust to the demands of curriculum reform.

The second section shifts the focus to the intricate processes involved in curriculum development, emphasising that the creation of a new curriculum is far from straightforward.

It is a collaborative effort that unfolds across multiple stages of planning, coordination, and revision. Insights from teacher educators highlight the often-overlooked complexities of this process, offering comprehensive views of the foundational principles guiding curriculum development. This section also explores three critical phases in the dissemination and implementation of the new curriculum: communication, piloting, and textbook development. It examines the importance of these phases in driving the curriculum reform while also revealing the potential challenges associated with a top-down implementation approach. Finally, the section explores the challenges faced by teacher educators in their roles of developing both curriculum and textbooks, revealing the difficulties inherent in navigating this complex responsibility.

The third critical section focuses on professional learning, which emerges as a cornerstone of curriculum reform. This section emphasises the important role that professional learning opportunities play in empowering physical education teachers to engage meaningfully with the reformed curriculum. However, systemic inequities in access to these opportunities complicate the process. While some teachers benefit from multiple supportive resources, others face significant barriers, resulting in varied levels of engagement and unexpected experiences. Drawing on Braun et al.'s (2011) analysis of contextual dimensions, this section explores the key elements that influence teachers' engagement with professional learning, shedding light on the complexities of how these factors impact professional learning initiatives.

These three sections of this chapter, thus, paint a comprehensive picture of curriculum reform as a complex and layered process. Beyond technical adjustments, reform is a journey of professional transformation, requiring physical educators to engage critically with new knowledge, collaborate in curriculum development, and continuously empower their practice through ongoing professional learning.

5.2 Navigating the new curriculum: key changes and the path of reform

The curriculum reform entails a period of adjustment that can be challenging for physical educators. This “period of pain” is a natural part of the reform process, as it involves significant changes in teaching methods, curriculum content, concepts and overarching goals (Law, 2017). Physical educators, who are at the frontline of curriculum changes (Macdonald, 2003), not only understand and integrate new concepts but also adapt their instructional strategies to meet the revised curriculum standard. In this section, to deeply understand the impact of these changes, it is essential to understand the new curriculum standard from the perspective of teacher educators, teacher-researchers and in-service teachers. Exploring these viewpoints provides valuable insights into how they perceive and understand the new curriculum, aiming to offer a nuanced understanding of the broader implications of the reform.

5.2.1 The curriculum reform as an ongoing process

The curriculum reform has emerged as a reflection of historical evolution and socio-cultural and economic shifts (Paraskeva, 2021). This transformation was not a sudden happening but an ongoing journey, weaving together the threads of past practices with the aspirations of *new* things. This perspective resonates in conversations with teacher educators and experienced teacher-researchers. They believed that the essence of the reform lay in this intricate balance. The national curriculum is a living official document, reflecting both the history it emerged from and the future it aspires to shape. Through this perspective, the journey of curriculum reform seems like a continuous dialogue between the past and the present, rather than one that implies discarding all that had been in the past in favour of something new. As a lead teacher-researcher with 30 years of frontline teaching and professional training experience, Lan Li plays a crucial role in guiding in-service teachers

across Shanghai schools. Over the decades, she has cultivated a profound understanding of how curriculum reform fits into the broader educational landscape. As she stated:

The new curriculum reform does not mean that all the original things are discarded, but that we should incorporate many new things...

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

From Lan Li's perspective, the reform is not about abandoning the past but about integrating new ideas and approaches within established educational traditions. She emphasised that curriculum reform in China has never been characterised by radical shifts but rather by gradual, considered changes that align with societal development. Thoughtful modifications, rather than wholesale replacements, have defined each phase of reform, ensuring that the curriculum remains responsive to contemporary educational needs while respecting its historical foundations.

As the curriculum has evolved, however, some teacher educators have reflected on the challenges posed by previous curriculum reforms. In interviews, they pointed out specific issues that emerged, particularly regarding previous curriculum models. One of the teacher educators, Hao Miao, was the secretary and one of the members of the new PEH curriculum standard revision committee. Hao Miao explained how earlier curricula were influenced by the Soviet Union's model, particularly during what he described as "the era of the syllabus". These versions of the curriculum, while structured, left teachers uncertain about what to teach and how to approach each lesson. As he noted:

The 2001 version curriculum standard was very thin, resulting in many primary and secondary school PE teachers not knowing how to teach.

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

Reflecting on the reform introduced in 2001, Hao Miao emphasised that despite the good intentions behind it, the old version of the curriculum did not equip frontline teachers with the

practical guidance to enact the curriculum. His observations underscored the limitations of the previous rigid and centralised frameworks, particularly those inspired by Soviet Union concepts, which contributed to the confusion among teachers during that period. In response to these issues, Hao Miao explained that the new curriculum reform aims to address these shortcomings by learning from past experiences and providing a more comprehensive, supportive framework for teachers. As he noted:

We have drafted and revised the new curriculum standard based on the learning experience of the previous curriculum standards...In the 2022 edition, we have edited the new curriculum standards in detail and addressed the shortcomings of previous versions to provide clearer guidance to frontline teachers and give them more autonomy...

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

Hao Miao's perspectives demonstrated that the new curriculum reflects a move away from the overly rigid and theoretical models of the past towards a more nuanced and practical approach that takes into account the real-world challenges faced by teachers. In particular, it appears to balance sufficient guidance with greater flexibility, empowering teachers to tailor their lessons while maintaining coherence and consistency with national educational goals. This interpretation is consistent with other teacher educators' accounts.

Several teacher educators emphasised the importance of a curriculum that aligns with China's specific educational and cultural values. For instance, Tao Hua, who was a member of the national curriculum standard revision editorial committee, offered a critical analysis of the new curriculum and its broader implications. As he stated:

The new curriculum reflects China's cultural confidence and serves as a bridge for the international community to better understand and appreciate the nuanced differences in Chinese PE... We analysed the physical education curriculum standards of

different countries around the world, and we found that the philosophy of China's current curriculum standards is very advanced.

According to Tao Hua, the new PEH curriculum is ideologically complete and representative of the state's values. He reflected that while Chinese physical education used to be heavily influenced by Western models, the new curriculum now positions China on a more equal footing with the West. This transformation, in his view, aligns with the broader cultural self-confidence emphasised by Xi Jinping (2016). As he further added:

Now we believe that Western PE are not entirely good, there are advanced and non-advanced ones.... We used to think they were all advanced, so this is a big change.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

Tao Hua's reflections can be understood as a reform journey viewed through a historical and macro lens. His comments indicate that the new curriculum standard symbolises not only a change in educational practice but also a deeper cultural reassessment and a newfound confidence in China's approach. From this perspective, the curriculum's ideological alignment signals a more balanced and reflective engagement with international standards, challenging the dominance of Western models and affirming China's position in the global educational landscape.

5.2.2 The new curriculum is very comprehensive

Curriculum reform is often a double-edged sword: it brings the promise of innovation and improvement, but it also comes with significant challenges. From my analysis, this duality is evident in teacher educators' accounts of the new curriculum. While most acknowledged that its implementation would encounter practical obstacles, they consistently emphasised its comprehensiveness and thoughtful design. For instance, Ping Wei stated:

So far, I have not found any obvious shortcomings in the new curriculum itself...It's very comprehensive....But the implementation could be problematic.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

Sheng Yan echoed this sentiment, saying that:

I think the curriculum standard itself is not a problem...but the implementation remains unknown...The nature of the curriculum concept, guiding ideology, curriculum structure, curriculum content, assessment quality, and teaching recommendations is very comprehensive.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

These teacher educators' insights suggest that the new curriculum is regarded not merely as an improvement but as a meticulously designed framework intended to cover every aspect of education. They consistently highlighted its breadth, from ideology to content and from assessment standards to teaching strategies, often describing it as "perfect." While they unanimously praised its comprehensiveness, they also voiced concerns about its practical application. In their viewpoints, the challenge lies not in the framework itself but in how effectively it can be enacted in real-world classroom settings. Teacher educators such as Sheng Yan and Wei Ping expressed uncertainty, noting that while the curriculum provides a solid foundation, the path to successful implementation remains unclear and may be fraught with unforeseen obstacles.

This pattern of understanding was also evident among frontline physical education teachers. Like the teacher educators, they recognised the comprehensive nature of the curriculum, though their observations were rooted in specific classroom experiences. For instance, Song Chen from De Yuan School highlighted the curriculum's emphasis on lifelong learning, noting:

The new standards emphasise, for the sake of students' lifelong learning, I think it's pretty good and comprehensive, emphasising that students should master at least 1-2 motor skills.

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

Other teachers, such as Hong Yu and Ying Lu from Shu Ren Secondary School, also expressed their support, noting how the curriculum promotes *interdisciplinary learning and core competencies*, underscoring its comprehensive nature. These teachers' perspectives indicated that the curriculum is thoughtfully crafted to address the diverse developmental needs of students, ensuring that education extends beyond mere theoretical knowledge to encompass practical skills and real-world experiences.

Yet, despite this broad approval, it is worth noting that many teachers appeared to rely more on key concepts from official curriculum texts rather than their own hands-on experiences. During discussions, they often stayed at the surface level, referencing the curriculum's key ideas without providing detailed accounts of how these concepts translated into their daily teaching. Their attention instead shifted to the challenge of putting these ambitious concepts into practice. This indicates that while teachers recognise the curriculum's intent, their primary concern lies in the practical challenges of enacting these ambitious ideals in the classroom.

5.2.3 The new curriculum is driven by core competencies

The new curriculum, with its focus on core competencies, represents a profound shift in physical education and health, one that aligns with global trends (Yin et al., 2022a). From the teacher educators' perspectives, this competency-based approach plays a pivotal role in reshaping teaching practices. In particular, physical educators highlighted the importance of core competencies when discussing the impact of these changes. For instance, as Tao Hua noted:

The new curriculum standard is based on the core competencies outlined, which serve as the starting point and goals of the entire curriculum standard. This standard is centred on the development of students' core competencies, a worldwide trend.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

This reform represents a paradigm shift, positioning student development at the core of curriculum design and reinforcing China's alignment with international educational advancements. Further elaborating on the essence of core competencies, Zhan Bai, a lecturer at the University C, outlined their fundamental components. He explained:

In the new curriculum, three core competencies, motor ability, healthy behaviour and sports morality, are proposed. It contains the contents of health education. Some knowledge of PEH, as well as skills and behaviours, that is to say, only when a person has really mastered some knowledge of health, knowledge of sports, and then can they have a change of attitude towards PE, and only then can there be a behaviour change.

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

Zhan Bai's insights indicate that the curriculum's holistic approach, integrating knowledge, skill development, and behavioural change to enhance students' lifelong engagement with physical education and health.

Physical education teachers, in contrast, engage with core competencies primarily through their practical application in daily teaching. Hui Wang, a veteran teacher from Putuo District with over two decades of experience, has witnessed two periods of curriculum reforms over the years. Reflecting on the new curriculum standard, he recognised that this reform signals a philosophical shift in how teachers approach lesson design. As he stated:

In the past, our lesson design format was based on teaching content. However, with the introduction of the new curriculum standard, we have also changed the format of our lesson designs. Now, the goal is required to guide the content, rather than the content guiding the goal, marking a significant change.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

Hui Wang's reflection highlights the transition from content-driven instruction to a competency-based approach, requiring teachers to rethink how they plan lessons and guide learning. He further clarified that this shift involves moving beyond questions such as: "What content do I need to cover? What competencies do I want my students to develop?". He believed that this change needs a complete reorientation of lesson planning and teaching strategies.

Notably, among the teachers interviewed, Hui Wang demonstrated the deepest understanding of the curriculum changes and their implications. He explicitly acknowledged the direct impact of the reform on his teaching practice. In contrast, many other teachers have only a superficial understanding of this change in their teaching practices. Take Ying Lu, for example, a first-level physical education teacher from Jiading District. During her interview, she stated:

I think the new curriculum is mainly centred on its core competencies, because physical education is different from other subjects. After all, it is an outdoor classroom, so it is more capable of stimulating students' sense of collaboration.

(Teacher E, 14 December 2023)

Ying Lu's comment reflects partial comprehension, focusing on teamwork and collaboration while overlooking the full intent of a competencies-led approach. This limited understanding is even more evident among two teachers in the Yin Cai private school, who expressed a lack of clarity regarding core competencies. As they noted:

I only know that the new curriculum emphasises core competencies... But I don't have a lot of thoughts or a deep understanding of this concept.

(Bin Zhao, Teacher B, 12 December 2023)

Since I aimed for a title promotion, I've read a little new curriculum standard by myself. I only know the new curriculum emphasises core competencies.

(Peng Liu, Teacher A, 12 December 2023)

These responses indicate that these teachers have only a superficial awareness of core competencies, with a limited understanding of their pedagogical implications. For them, the term functions more as an educational slogan than as a transformative framework for guiding instructional practice.

Overall, the findings revealed a clear divide among teachers in understanding the new curriculum's focus on core competencies. While Hui Wang exemplifies a deep understanding and application of this shift, many others, such as Ying Lu, Bin Zhao and Peng Liu, approach the concept with only superficial engagement. This discrepancy highlights a persistent challenge in curriculum reform: translating complex theoretical ideas into practical teaching methods.

5.3 Unveiling the complexities of curriculum and textbook development

The development of a new curriculum is an ongoing and complex process involving careful planning and coordination across multiple stages. Despite its significance, many educators are not fully aware of the detailed procedures involved in curriculum-making, revealing that this intricate process is far from common sense. This section draws on insights from two professional groups: teacher educators and teacher-researchers, who shared their experiences in editing and revising both the curriculum and textbooks. Their perspectives illuminate the foundational principles guiding curriculum and textbook design, as well as the challenges encountered throughout the process. Their reflections further emphasise the collaborative and iterative nature of curriculum reform, highlighting the sustained commitment required to address obstacles and drive meaningful educational transformation.

5.3.1 Procedures of curriculum development

Curriculum development is a complex and multi-layered process, unfolding through several fundamental stages, each essential to shaping the new curriculum standard. During

discussions, some teacher educators, such as Tao Hua, highlighted a common misconception among teachers:

Although it involves numerous preliminary procedures of curriculum development, the majority of educators are unaware of... In fact, a lot of work has to be done from the top on these things, but the teachers don't know that. They believe that it's a policy document, and the state just sets it up.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

Tao Hua explained that many educators assume curriculum development is solely the responsibility of a specialised group of experts, overlooking the broader, multi-stage process. This misunderstanding points to a critical tension between policy formulation and teachers' awareness. The limited understanding of how curriculum standards are developed and implemented can restrict teachers' engagement with the reform. In response, several teacher educators have actively sought to clarify and explain the process in greater detail. Sheng Yan, another teacher educator who is at University C, pointed out that curriculum development is not the work of isolated experts. Instead, it is a highly collaborative effort, engaging various stakeholders within the professional field. As Sheng Yan explained:

The process began with the Ministry of Education bringing together representatives from key professional groups, such as teacher educators, teacher-researchers, and backbone schoolteachers... These groups worked closely to craft the curriculum, each contributing their unique expertise.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

This collaborative approach ensured that the curriculum reflected a diverse range of perspectives, integrating theoretical insights from academics with the practical experiences of frontline teachers. However, before the drafting process could begin, extensive research was conducted nationwide to assess the needs and expectations of both teachers and students. For

example, Tao Hua conducted fieldwork and research in Jiangxi Province, gathering empirical data and compiling reports to inform curriculum revisions. As he described:

We surveyed tens of thousands of students and teachers to understand their expectations and current challenges. Additionally, we conducted interviews with teachers to gather their opinions and suggestions, which was a fundamental requirement in the initial stages.

This approach ensured that the curriculum was not only policy-driven but also informed by the voices of those directly involved in the policy-making process: teachers and students. Once an initial draft of the curriculum standards was developed, the process transitioned into an extensive consultation phase, which spanned two to three years. Tao Hua noted that while drafting the curriculum might take only a few months, the consultation period was considerably longer, involving multiple rounds of national feedback. As he noted:

This consultation process spans all 31 provinces and municipalities in the nation, excluding Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Each province and municipality provides feedback and suggestions, which are used to make further revisions.

Tao Hua also stressed the importance of considering every piece of feedback gathered during this phase. He explained:

Each opinion should be carefully evaluated. If a change can be made, it must be made. If a suggestion cannot be implemented, a full explanation must be provided, detailing why the change wasn't possible.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

Following this extensive consultation, the curriculum underwent further revisions before its final release, ensuring that it was comprehensive, evidence-based, and reflective of diverse perspectives across the education sector. The findings from this study reveal five key procedural stages in national curriculum development, as illustrated in Figure 5.3 below.

The findings critically highlight the systematic, rigorously structured, and multifaceted nature of curriculum development, which synthesises the expertise of diverse stakeholders to respond effectively to the dynamic demands of the education system. Moreover, they emphasise that the curriculum is not merely a product of policymaking but rather a co-constructed framework that emerges through the collaboration of various educational professionals, thus underscoring the necessity of a collaborative, inclusive, and participatory approach to curriculum development.

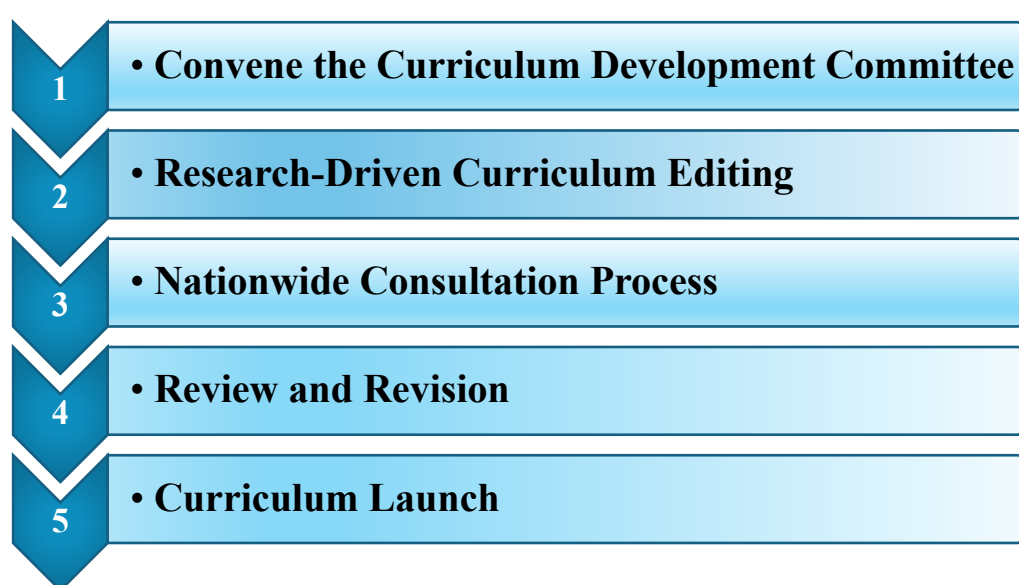


Figure 5.3: Key procedures in curriculum development

5.3.2 Key strategies for curriculum implementation at the national level

Following the release of the new curriculum standards, a series of critical steps was undertaken to ensure implementation. During the inquiries, teacher educators and teacher-researchers shared the simultaneous efforts in key action areas: curriculum communication, piloting, and textbook development (see Figure 5.4 below). Each stage played a vital role in promoting the curriculum reform. Meaningful communication informed and prepared educators while piloting, providing essential feedback for refinement. Concurrently, the development of textbooks supported the practical application of the new curriculum.

Together, these interconnected tasks were instrumental in driving and supporting the integration of the new curriculum across educational settings.

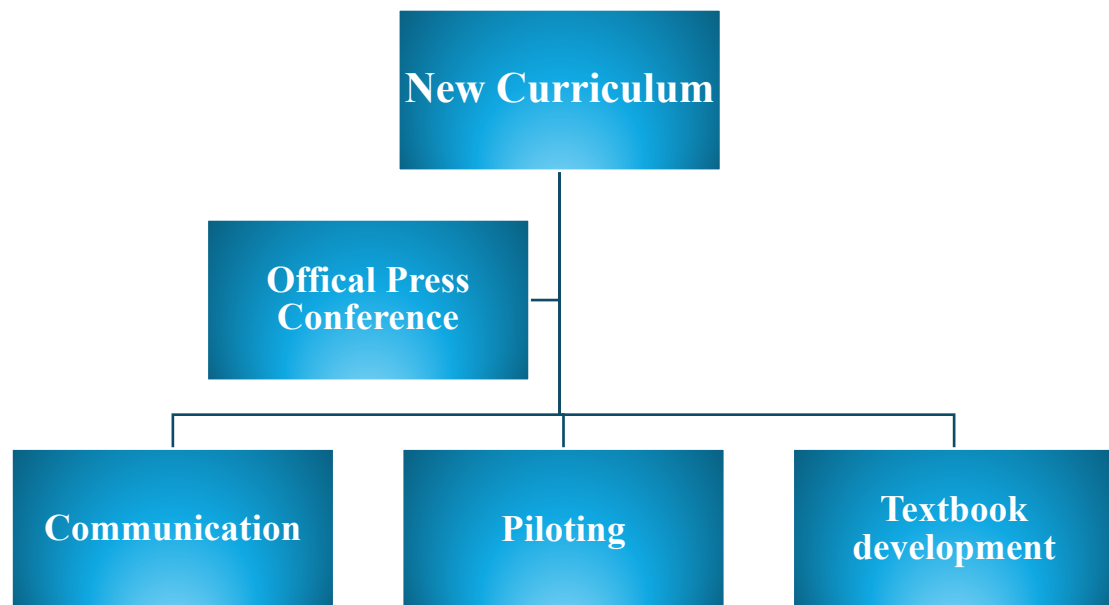


Figure 5.4: Key strategies for curriculum implementation

5.3.2.1 Communication of the new curriculum

In April 2022, as the pandemic continued to affect daily life, a significant shift occurred in the education sector with the Ministry of Education unveiling new curriculum standards. The transformation began with a live-streamed press conference, which was not merely an announcement but a crucial introduction to the changes that would reshape teaching and learning across the nation. For many physical educators, this moment was memorable and impactful, as Ming Guo, a teacher-researcher, recalled the press conference as a pivotal event. As he described: “The press conference provided a foundational overview that was essential for understanding the upcoming changes.” For Ming Guo, it marked the start of a new chapter. Given the constraints of the ongoing pandemic, he and his colleagues embarked on their learning journey online. He further added:

By studying the interpretations of the curriculum standards' editorial committees and integrating my understanding of the new standards, we were able to explore the curriculum from multiple dimensions...

(Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

According to Ming Guo, the Ministry of Education's communication strategy was well-structured, extending beyond the press conference into a comprehensive training process. Recognising the importance of disseminating the new curriculum standards to all educators, teacher educators emphasised the need for widespread learning. Sheng Yan explained:

After the introduction of the new curriculum standard, the first step is for all teachers to study it.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

Another teacher educator, Hao Miao, detailed the approach:

The Ministry of Education first trains the directors of the local education departments in each province and then trains the teachers-researchers and teachers in each city and province; the State can only train those at the provincial level.

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

Through the descriptions provided by teacher educators, it is evident that curriculum dissemination follows a top-down approach. While press conferences serve as an instrumental tool for initial communication, this linear model of dissemination raises concerns about its effectiveness and depth, potentially overlooking the complexities of ensuring deep understanding and engagement at all levels of the educational system. Such a one-way communication strategy may fail to account for the diverse needs and feedback of teachers, limiting the potential for a more inclusive, participatory process.

5.3.2.2 Strategies for curriculum promotion and piloting

As the new curriculum standards began to take shape, the Ministry of Education recognised the importance of not only communicating these changes but also examining their practical application. Some teacher educators indicated that to ensure a thorough evaluation and promotion of the curriculum, the Ministry of Education selected 44 pilot areas across the country. As Tao Hua indicated:

Since last year, the Ministry of Education in the country has set up 44 pilot areas, including Shandong, Inner Mongolia, Dalian and Shenzhen Futian District, around the country to do pilots.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

From Tao Hua's perspective, this broad range of pilot sites was chosen to provide a comprehensive view of how the new curriculum would function in various educational contexts and regions. The pilot programs allowed educators in these regions to evaluate the new curriculum, offering a real-world testing ground for its effectiveness and practicality. Through this process, the Ministry of Education sought to ensure that the new standards were both feasible and impactful, paving the way for a successful and informed national implementation.

Another teacher educator, Xiao Zhou, involved with the pilot work, shared the experience, including deep engagement with teachers to help them understand the new curriculum, including how and why to teach certain content. As he noted:

During pilots, we engaged in deep communication with the teachers, helping them to understand the new curriculum, including how and why to teach certain content...PE teachers learned about cutting-edge ideas and new concepts on curriculum reform...

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

Reflecting upon these findings, it is evident that the pilot phase served primarily as a mechanism for disseminating the new curriculum rather than a genuine platform for critical evaluation. While teacher educators emphasised the importance of introducing teachers to the reform, there was a conspicuous absence of discussion regarding challenges or issues encountered during the pilot process. This raises concerns about whether teacher feedback was actively solicited, meaningfully considered, or merely a formality within a top-down implementation framework.

5.3.2.3 The textbook development process

The journey to create new PEH textbooks in China is both meticulous and collaborative, intricately shaped by curriculum standards that span nine years of compulsory education. Each year's textbooks must align seamlessly with new curriculum standards, ensuring a consistent, cohesive educational experience across grade levels (MoE, 2022). In the Chinese education system, textbooks are viewed as essential resources (Xu, 2021), carefully crafted to deliver quality teaching and learning experiences. Teacher educators like Xiao Zhou, who served as the primary editor for health education content, understand the weight that textbooks carry. Reflecting on the process, Xiao Zhou noted:

Textbooks are crucial, and their preparation is equally important. It must adhere closely to the PEH curriculum standard. The national audit is stringent, and without any deviation...

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

Xiao Zhou's words reveal the intense attention to detail required in this process, a necessary step to uphold the integrity and consistency of the educational system. Another perspective is offered by Sheng Yan, who highlighted the delicate balance between adhering to curriculum standards and embracing the collaborative effort required to produce these textbooks. Sheng described how the process of developing textbooks closely mirrors the development of

curriculum standards, though it also demands extensive teamwork among multiple stakeholders. As Sheng Yan explained:

Textbook editing requires simultaneous writing and final selection by several publishers under the Ministry of Education... After the initial review, feedback and suggestions for revision were provided. Publishers who fail to incorporate the requirements of the new curriculum can be eliminated from the competition.

(Teacher Educator G, 15 December 2023)

For Sheng Yan, this is not simply a matter of writing and revising; it is a comprehensive, phased process designed to ensure quality, starting with a national pilot phase in December 2023. He noted that textbooks undergo rounds of revision based on feedback from this pilot, preparing for the anticipated release in September 2024 after final Ministry of Education approval.

This development timeline, stretching nearly two and a half years from drafting to classroom enactment, illustrates the rigour and complexity behind each textbook. The process is designed to ensure that each book aligns with the latest curriculum standards while also setting a consistent benchmark for quality education. Teacher educators across the country are now looking ahead, anticipating how these changes will reshape the classroom experience. As Ping Wei noted:

All compulsory textbooks for Year One through Year Nine will be completely different from previous ones. In the past, the textbooks primarily focused on skills like basketball, football, and running. Now, there's been a significant change...

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

His statement suggests a fundamental shift in the approach to physical education and health, moving beyond the traditional emphasis on sports proficiency to a more holistic focus on

physical, mental, and social development. However, the success of this shift will depend on how teachers are supported in enacting these pedagogical changes.

The findings indicated that the development of national PEH textbooks embodies a system-wide commitment to advancing physical education and health beyond fundamental physical skills, aiming for a more holistic approach. By aligning with evolving educational objectives, these textbooks are designed to offer structured, practical guidelines for effective teaching and learning. However, as state-sanctioned materials, their development process is constrained by strict standardisation, curricular uniformity, and regulatory oversight. This not only reinforces the authoritative role of textbooks as official pedagogical instruments but also embeds dominant ideologies and interests within educational content (Apple, 1993). In this context, textbooks serve as mechanisms for the dissemination of state-sanctioned knowledge, potentially legitimising particular ideological perspectives while marginalising alternative viewpoints (Wang & Phillion, 2010).

5.3.3 Challenges in creating assessment standards and health education content

In the previous section, I explored the complex process of curriculum and textbook development, revealing the professional insights of many participants who played active roles in these efforts. This section shifts focus to the specific challenges encountered within these processes, particularly the development of evaluation criteria and the integration of health education content.

5.3.3.1 The challenge of developing assessment standards

One of the most widely recognised challenges in the reform process is the creation of assessment criteria. Many teacher educators identified this as a particularly complex aspect of curriculum development. Sheng Yan, a teacher educator deeply engaged in the process, reflected on its significance:

I think the most difficult part of the curriculum development was creating the evaluation standard. I think it is not only in China but also worldwide.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

His comment highlights a global issue in education, where the challenge of designing fair and effective assessment standards extends beyond national borders. The difficulty lies not merely in defining performance benchmarks but in ensuring that assessment methodologies align with the broader educational objectives. At its core, the development of assessment criteria is a critical juncture where pedagogical ideals encounter the practicalities of enactment, with significant long-term implications for educational practice.

Hao Miao, another teacher educator engaged in the curriculum reform process, echoed these concerns, particularly regarding the shift from a traditional motor skills-based framework to a more holistic evaluation approach. He noted the inherent ambiguity in previous assessment methods:

In the past, we used terms like ‘mastery,’ ‘basic mastery,’ and ‘proficient mastery,’ but in reality, evaluating based on these terms isn’t straightforward, is it? What constitutes basic mastery? How do we define mastery?

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

Based on Hao Miao’s perspectives, these challenges underscore a fundamental issue in educational assessment: the tension between qualitative descriptors and the need for objective, measurable standards. The introduction of new evaluative dimensions, such as sports morality and health behaviours, further complicates this challenge. Traditionally, physical education assessment has prioritised tangible motor skills, which are relatively straightforward to measure. However, evaluating more abstract constructs, such as ethical conduct and sportsmanship, introduces a layer of subjectivity that is difficult to quantify.

Insights from teacher educators such as Sheng Yan and Hao Miao reveal not only the technical and conceptual challenges of building an evaluation framework but also the deeper implications these frameworks hold. Assessment systems do more than measure achievement; they shape educational values and priorities. In this sense, decisions about what and how to assess play a pivotal role in defining the future direction of teaching and learning in physical education and health.

5.3.3.2 The challenge of editing health education content

Integrating health education into the national curriculum and textbooks for the first time presented a significant challenge for teacher educators tasked with this responsibility. Among teacher educators, four served as primary or co-editors for the health education content, a role that brought both pride and pressure. They recognised the importance of this pioneering step but were also keenly aware of the complexities it introduced. Xiao Zhou, one of the main editors, reflected on the significance of this reform:

I think that integrating health education into the national compulsory education stage is a breakthrough, an innovation, and a development. Of course, there would be a challenge; no innovation without challenges.

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

His words capture the dual nature of the task. While the inclusion of health education marked a significant innovation, it simultaneously introduced a host of new challenges that required careful negotiation.

Ping Wei, another editor, directly confronted these difficulties in his work, particularly in editing the sections on sexual awareness and the prevention of sexual harassment topics being introduced in the curriculum. He explained:

As this is new content in the curriculum standards, I felt deeply during the editing process ... On the one hand, I must adhere to the curriculum standards as a guide; on

the other hand, I need to consider Chinese societal and cultural factors to ensure acceptability to stakeholders. So, I need to think very carefully about wording and pictures, be relatively reserved, aligning with Chinese social-cultural concepts.

His reflections reveal the delicate balancing act between educational innovation and cultural sensitivity. This was particularly pressing in relation to sex education, where acceptability among teachers, parents, and students depended on careful wording and presentation. Ping Wei further observed the regional disparities in how such content was received:

The chapter we were editing is piloted in cities and rural areas, covering the entire nation...I engaged with some pilots, and I found that urban teachers and students generally perceived it easily, but some rural teachers and students may find it somewhat difficult to understand... China is so huge that each region has distinct cultural differences. As national curriculum and textbooks, we strive to balance these differences as much as possible...

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

According to Ping Wei, the challenge of scale becomes evident: crafting a unified national curriculum that is also sensitive to profound regional and cultural diversity. The need for consistency while allowing for flexibility created an inherent tension within the textbook development process.

Additionally, the practical shortage of professional teachers with expertise in health education exacerbates these challenges. Sheng Yan, a core editor of the textbooks, stated:

Since PE teachers did not teach health education in the past, they now require teaching this knowledge, which is equivalent to starting from scratch. Many teachers lack knowledge in these areas.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

Sheng Yan indicated the structural challenge of teacher preparedness. In response, Xiao Zhou explained that the Ministry of Education initiated supplementary measures beyond textbook provision. Teacher educators from University A were commissioned to produce a series of instructional videos to support teachers in delivering health education. As Xiao Zhou, the lead of this project, noted:

Currently, we are producing 360 lessons of videos for different age groups, covering topics such as healthy, nurturing and safety awareness, following the new curriculum. These videos will be integrated into the Ministry of Education's smart platform and shown to students in PE lessons when indoor activities are required, such as on rainy days. We utilise various ways to support teachers and disseminate health knowledge...

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

Based on Xiao Zhou's insights, these initiatives represent a pragmatic attempt to bridge the immediate knowledge gap among teachers. Nevertheless, while technology-based resources provide valuable short-term support, they cannot replace the deeper need for sustained teacher professionalisation in health education. As such, this reliance on digital supplementation reflects both the strengths and limitations of the reform: it offers an accessible, scalable solution, yet risks framing teacher development as a logistical issue rather than a professional one.

5.4 Professional learning as the foundation for curriculum reform

Professional learning is a cornerstone of the ongoing curriculum reform, acting as a primary vehicle for translating and embedding new curriculum concepts within teaching practices (Fullan, 2000; 2012). These activities not only provide a platform for teachers to familiarise themselves with the curriculum but also enable them to refine their teaching methods and collaborate with colleagues, fostering a community of shared learning and

experience (Sinnema et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the significance and impact of professional learning are not uniform across contexts. Factors such as the quality of professional training and the level of school or district involvement can significantly influence how teachers engage with curriculum changes. This section explores how teachers participated in professional learning, what support they received, and what challenges they encountered in their efforts to adapt to the new curriculum reform.

5.4.1 Multiple professional learning activities to support teachers

As the curriculum reform takes shape, ensuring that teachers are well-informed and equipped to embrace the new curriculum is crucial. Central to this process is the state's multi-level approach to professional learning, which aims to enhance teachers' understanding and enable them to adopt the new curriculum into their teaching practices. The majority of physical educators in this study, deeply embedded at various grassroots levels, were optimistic that these multiple professional learning opportunities would provide teachers with the support they needed to engage with the new curriculum.

At the national level, teacher professional learning reflects the state's overarching strategies to regulate and shape teacher practices. Tao Hua, a teacher educator, emphasised how widespread these initiatives have become. Reflecting on the national landscape, he noted:

Nowadays, there are enormous national professional training sessions in all provinces and municipalities, as well as provincial or municipal professional training initiatives...

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

Tao Hua's words capture not only the scale of these efforts but also the structured, top-down approach of the education system. This coordinated effort from the national to the local level provides important support to teachers across the nation.

At the municipal level, Shanghai has emerged as a key hub for teachers' professional learning communities (PLCs). Lan Li, a lead teacher-researcher at Teacher Education Institution A, pointed out the important role of the institution, noting that:

The teacher-researchers in each district's PLCs regularly provide professional training for in-service teachers. There are so many such professional training opportunities, both online and offline.

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

This combination of online and face-to-face training reflects Shanghai's commitment to providing flexible and robust professional training sessions to meet the diverse needs of teachers.

Another teacher-researcher, Ming Guo, at Teacher Education Institution B, elaborated on the institute's focus on teacher training, emphasising the importance of helping teachers understand the fundamental principles behind the curriculum changes. As he noted:

We need to inform teachers about the basic content of the new curriculum, explaining why the content is divided in this way, the principles behind these decisions, and so on.

(Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

This focus on the why highlights the significance of professional learning in curriculum promotion. It enables teachers not only to understand the new curriculum objectives but also to understand how these objectives are developed, fostering a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the curriculum that can support more meaningful learning and enactment.

Beyond municipal initiatives, universities have actively shaped reform through targeted partnerships with schools. Dong Cao, a lecturer from University B, explained how the institution collaborates with primary and secondary schools to provide targeted support:

Our university is now cooperating with some primary and secondary schools to provide professional training for teachers in these schools and also help them to interpret the new curriculum and organise lesson design.

(Teacher educator F, 15 December 2023)

According to Dong Cao, the partnerships serve a dual function: they act as a mentor for translating policy into practice, facilitating the professional learning of teachers while also providing universities with valuable experiences to cultivate future teachers. As Day et al. (2021) state, these collaborations have the potential to inspire, add momentum, and catalyse new ways of thinking, teaching, and leading in schools. Through this process, universities and schools mutually benefit, reinforcing a system where professional learning not only supports the immediate demands of curriculum reform but also shapes the future of teacher preparation.

The district level further illustrates how structured, regular activities translate into practice. Song Chen, a teacher from Putuo District, indicated how the local department dedicates time every Thursday afternoon to collective teaching and research activities, all of which are aligned with the requirements of the new curriculum. As he explained:

All training this year has focused on the new curriculum, including lectures, expert workshops, classroom observation, and evaluation.

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

Similarly, Ying Lu, a teacher from Shu Ren School in Jiading District, highlighted the value of these professional learning sessions. In her district, training is held two to three times a month, followed by teaching and research group (TRG) meetings within the school. She further noted:

The principal attaches great importance to PE, and the district teacher-researcher often comes to observe PE lessons to provide guidance.

(Teacher E, 14 December 2023)

Her words highlight a support system that extends beyond simple information delivery. By incorporating expert feedback and practical guidance, Jiading District ensures that teachers receive actionable advice. This close integration of district-level initiatives with school-level activities reflects strong leadership support and a network designed to foster professional growth and promote curriculum reform.

Teacher experiences such as these resonate with the reflections of teacher educators, illustrating how structured, ongoing support translates into tangible benefits. Beyond regular training, districts are tailoring programs to the needs of teachers at different stages in their careers. For instance, Song Chen explained how his district's professional learning activities focus on mentoring younger teachers. As he noted:

The district has veteran mentoring teams that recruit interns and young teachers to specialise in learning the new curriculum standard.

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

Likewise, Yue Qian, another teacher in Qiu Zhi school from Jiading district, echoed this viewpoint, noting how the district offers collective learning activities specifically designed for teachers with 0-5 years of experience. She indicated:

Some professional training sessions are tailored based on teaching experience, particularly for novice teachers, to help them build their skills and adapt to the new curriculum.

(Teacher H, 14 December 2023)

These insights highlight the districts' commitment not only to understanding the curriculum standard but also to providing hands-on training. This tailored support ensures that novice teachers are well-prepared and supported as they step into their roles, reflecting a deep investment in their professional growth and the enactment of curriculum reform.

A wide range of professional learning opportunities, including national programs, municipal initiatives, university partnerships, and tailored district support, reflect a strong, coordinated effort to guide teachers through the curriculum reform process. While these professional learning activities provide a massive amount of support, it is critical to explore how teachers can translate these opportunities into practice.

5.4.2 Public school teachers benefit from multiple supports

Among a group of eight physical education teachers, six from three different public schools highlighted the critical impact of multiple professional learning activities in helping them adapt to the new curriculum. Hui Wang, one of these teachers, explained: “I have been inspired by a series of professional learning activities...” He emphasised the significance of these opportunities in shaping his understanding of the new curriculum. Further, he noted that

If I hadn’t participated in these activities, I wouldn’t have any idea about the curriculum standard. We need to understand and learn the content of the curriculum standard because it is constant professional learning, whether in concepts, content, or teaching methods.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

His experience illustrates how essential ongoing professional learning is for adapting to curriculum changes. Similarly, Ying Lu from Shu Ren School described how targeted professional training provided her with a clear framework for addressing reform demands. As she explained:

These professional trainings help us understand the general direction of the new curriculum and then apply targeted practices. While the concepts and content are now clear, we’ve encountered specific challenges in teaching practice. In the school, our TRGs have discussed these issues, and the principal invited experts to guide us.

(Teacher E, 14 December 2023)

Ying Lu's experience reflects a key aspect of professional learning that balances broad curriculum understanding with practical, on-the-ground support that addresses specific challenges in classroom practice. This approach, facilitated by TRGs and expert feedback, fosters a culture of collaboration and shared problem-solving, enhancing the overall impact of the reform.

In discussions with two other teachers from Shu Ren School, a strong sense of confidence in the reform process emerged. For example, when asked whether she felt uncertain about the new curriculum, Hong Yu responded:

I don't have any confusion at the moment... If I encounter any confusion, I can communicate with the teacher-researchers in a timely fashion, and they will provide me with great guidance and help.

(Teacher F, 14 December 2023)

Her words highlight the importance of timely access to expert support, which fosters confidence and ensures that teachers feel equipped to resolve challenges as they arise. Such mechanisms embed professional learning within everyday practice, enabling public schools to build strong networks of guidance and support.

Yue Qian, the youngest teacher among all the teachers with seven years of experience at Qiu Zhi School, also reflected on how professional learning activities influenced a shift in her teaching philosophy. She explained:

Throughout these professional learning activities, I have felt quite inspired. In the curriculum reform, we can no longer adhere to the traditional mode of teaching practice...

(Teacher H, 14 December 2023)

Her statement demonstrates how sustained engagement with professional learning encourages teachers to embrace new pedagogical approaches and move away from traditional methods,

aligning more closely with the reform's objectives. By contrast, Feng Xu, a senior teacher at Qiu Zhi School with more than 32 years of experience and additional administrative responsibilities, described a different experience. He admitted:

To be honest, as I hold another position as an administrator, I don't engage in a lot of external training and communication personally; most of it is communicated within TRGs.

(Teacher G, 13 December 2023)

While his colleagues took the lead on developing large unit content, he further added, "Most of the work is carried out by younger colleagues, and I merely participate in it a bit." His experience reveals that while professional learning opportunities were widely available, the extent of participation varied based on teachers' roles and responsibilities.

Overall, these perspectives highlight the transformative potential of professional learning in the context of curriculum reform. Teachers' experiences ranged from Hui Wang's and Yue Qian's enthusiastic embrace of new practices, to Ying Lu's recognition of structured support, to Feng Xu's more reserved involvement. These differences reflect not only personal roles and career stages but also how professional learning is mediated by institutional contexts and responsibilities.

5.4.3 Limited professional learning opportunities for private school teachers

In sharp contrast to teachers in public schools, teachers in the Ying Cai private school often face significant disparities in their access to professional learning opportunities. While teachers in public schools benefit from a range of structured internal and external training sessions, the experiences of two private school teachers revealed a distinct lack of similar support. Peng Liu, for instance, shared his frustration:

Our school hasn't provided such a platform for us... So over time, I had little communication with physical education teachers from other schools.

(Teacher A, 12 December 2023)

According to Peng Liu, this absence of both internal and external opportunities left him feeling professionally isolated, with limited avenues for collaboration or exchange through learning networks. Similarly, his colleague Bin Zhao highlighted the scarcity of structured training within his school. When asked about collective learning opportunities related to the new standards and core competencies, he replied:

Probably not. We have had a professional learning session before, but it seems to have been a long time.

(Teacher B, 12 December 2023)

Both teachers explained that although the district organises professional learning sessions every two weeks, private school staff often cannot participate. In their school, only the “principal teacher” was allowed to attend, and even then, little knowledge was shared afterwards. As they both admitted, there was “very little” discussion within TRGs following these sessions. This lack of systematic knowledge-sharing highlights how private school teachers are excluded from both external professional development and internal collaborative learning.

Peng Liu’s experience further illustrates the consequences of such exclusion. While preparing for a title promotion, he attempted to study the new curriculum independently. Yet, he acknowledged that his grasp of its concepts and content remained limited. He could only recall participating in one city-wide online session, which all teachers were required to attend. However, he described it as ineffective, explaining that one-off training sessions without follow-up engagement did little to deepen his understanding. When asked about the reasons behind the lack of support, Peng Liu offered a revealing explanation:

As the private schools are self-sufficient, my school primarily focuses on core subjects. Math and language teachers benefit from regular specialised training, with

experts often invited to provide guidance. They have more opportunities for collaborative learning and TRG discussions. However, PE teachers receive far less support from the school.

(Teacher A, 12 December 2023)

This prioritisation of academic subjects over physical education left the teachers marginalised, with fewer opportunities for collaboration and professional learning. The experiences of Peng Liu and Bin Zhao revealed significant disparities in professional learning support between public and private schools. It is important to emphasise that these observations regarding private schools are based on a single case study. In this context, while public school teachers are equipped with the resources, guidance, and collaboration needed to navigate curriculum reform, Peng Liu's voice suggested that teachers in his private school may experience professional isolation. The lack of structured support, combined with a focus on core subjects, leaves teachers with few opportunities for professional growth, limiting their ability to meet the demands of the reform.

5.4.4 Rethinking professional learning for teachers

While many of the above teacher educators expressed positive views in section 5.4.1 about the range of professional learning opportunities currently available, they also recognise significant issues in the professional training sessions. As Tao Hua pointed out, "Generally speaking, teachers may not lack training, but they lack high-quality training."

Tao Hua's reflections highlight a deeper concern about the limitations in how the new curriculum standard is understood and conveyed to teachers. He further stated:

In conducting professional training across the country, I have observed that even many experts and teacher-researchers have not fully understood the new curriculum standard.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

As he noted that this lack of deep understanding can have a knock-on effect, as those responsible for guiding teachers may inadvertently reinforce outdated concepts rather than help them embrace the innovative, competency-based approach required by the new curriculum. He added:

Their understanding of the new curriculum is limited, and their perspectives remain rooted in traditional concepts of PE.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

Similarly, Wei Ping, another teacher educator at University A, acknowledged that progress has been made in teacher professional learning, but also said that limitations still exist. “We now actually provide a series of professional training for teachers every year,” he said, acknowledging that the infrastructure for teacher training is improving. However, when asked whether this training is sufficient, he answered:

Not enough. But there is no way. According to the current situation, we have to wait for the opportunity. It is impossible to change everything in one or two years. It is very difficult...

Ping Wei’s statements illustrate the systemic challenges within professional training. Despite ongoing efforts to support teachers, transforming ingrained educational practices across the country is a slow and challenging process. In some regions, especially outside major cities like Shanghai, the situation is even more difficult. Ping Wei noted the disparity in the professional training systems available to physical education teachers in different areas, highlighting that:

China is now also relatively poor for the group of physical education teachers. In some places, there is no professional teacher training system.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

Ping Wei's observations align with broader evidence that teacher professional development opportunities and qualifications remain uneven across China, particularly between urban and rural contexts (e.g. Wang et al., 2017; Liu, Li, & Chen, 2024). In cities like Shanghai, where teachers often hold undergraduate or even postgraduate degrees and demonstrate high levels of professional expertise (Zhang, Ding, & Xu, 2016), the teacher educators in this study perceived them as having a stronger foundation for translating curriculum into practice. As Wei Ping affirmed, "There's no question about their ability." However, he added with concern, "It would be worrying that in other areas, it might lead to some kind of misunderstanding." This perspective aligns with previous studies (Peng et al., 2014; Li, Shi, & Xue, 2020; Xiang & Stillwell, 2023), suggests that the unevenness in teacher qualifications and access to professional training continues to pose challenges for curriculum implementation nationwide.

The reflections of Tao Hua and Ping Wei reveal a complex picture of professional learning in China. While progress has been made in providing more training opportunities for teachers, the quality, equity of these opportunities and depth of understanding among both trainers and teachers still require significant improvement. This rethinking of professional learning stresses that, for meaningful curriculum reform to succeed, teachers need not only access to regular professional learning but also high-quality, well-structured sessions.

5.4.5 Factors influencing teachers' engagement in curriculum reform

Engagement in curriculum reform among physical educators is influenced by several interrelated factors, particularly school leadership and the demographics of the teaching workforce. While some teachers attribute challenges in engagement to the quality of training, many argue that the support of school leadership is important in shaping a teacher's willingness to adapt to new curriculum standards.

Zhan Bai, a teacher educator, emphasised the critical role of principals in promoting physical education. He stated:

The principal is an essential factor... how much importance they place on PE directly impacts the development of the entire school's PE program.

(Teacher educator H, December 15, 2023)

Zhan Bai acknowledged that while broader social and cultural factors are relevant, Shanghai's supportive cultural background amplifies the influence of school leadership. Echoing this, Lan Li, a dedicated teacher-researcher, highlighted that leadership fosters a positive school environment. As she noted:

A principal who doesn't understand physical education isn't a good school leader...

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

She explained that when principals are engaged, teachers are more motivated to pursue professional learning and adopt new curricula, fostering a positive environment for growth.

As mentioned in sections 5.4.1, 5.4.2 and 5.4.3, the experiences of teachers at Ying Cai School and Shu Ren School illustrate the practical impact of leadership. At Ying Cai, teachers reported significant challenges due to a lack of principal support, whereas teachers at Shu Ren described thriving under leadership that actively promotes professional development. This contrast highlights how supportive leadership can empower teachers to embrace new curriculum standards and enhance engagement in educational reform.

Nonetheless, the path to curriculum reform is influenced not only by leadership but also by teacher demographics, particularly age and teaching experience. Many participants highlighted that many older teachers, especially those nearing retirement, are accustomed to traditional teaching methods. Ping Wei observed that engagement levels among older teachers tend to be lower due to their extensive experience, stating, "Many older teachers' thoughts are relatively fixed" (Teacher educator C, December 16, 2023). He believed that

such established mindsets could limit their willingness or ability to adopt new ideas. In contrast, some participants indicated that younger teachers, many of whom have recently graduated, are generally more receptive to new approaches. As Ming Gao noted:

Teachers under the age of 40 are likely to be the backbone of our district. Most of them can learn and practice according to models advocated by the new curriculum.

(Teacher-researcher B, December 18, 2023)

Several participants emphasised that the process of reform is gradual and closely linked to teacher demographics. Hao Miao emphasised that for many older teachers, adherence to traditional methods reflects a well-formed teaching philosophy rather than a failure. As he noted:

They may not want to accept new ideas... Do you think they are wrong? They are not wrong either... This is understandable...

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

Similarly, Tao Hua observed that many teachers retain traditional educational concepts, which can make them resistant to the new curriculum:

Their mindset hasn't fully adjusted to the changes... However, we cannot enforce them...it might take time.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

He suggested adopting a balanced approach in which new and experienced teachers collaborate, leveraging each other's strengths to enhance teaching practice.

These findings illustrate that engagement with curriculum reform is shaped by a complex interplay of leadership, age, and individual educational philosophies. Older teachers' adherence to established practices reflects professional experience rather than unwillingness, while younger teachers' flexibility positions them as agents of change.

Advancing curriculum reform, therefore, requires a nuanced, collaborative approach that respects existing practices while fostering engagement among all teachers.

5.5 Discussion

One of the central findings in this chapter is that the nature of the national curriculum is not merely a technical exercise (Pinar et al., 1995) but a highly political and ideological process shaped by shifting state priorities (Apple, 1990). This reflects long-standing arguments in curriculum theory that knowledge is socially constructed and mediated through power relations (Apple, 1993; Young, 1972; Goodson, 1990). In the Chinese context, the curriculum has consistently reflected the CPC's vision for society, shaping its structure, aims, and pedagogical emphases in line with evolving ideological commitments (Hayhoe, 1989; Jin, 2013; Chen, 2023). Such findings resonate with broader debates in physical education scholarship that highlight how physical education is often mobilised to advance national priorities (Kirk, 2010; Green, 2008; Penney, 2006).

Teacher educators in this study contrasted the new curriculum with earlier Soviet-inspired models (Liang & Hong, 2012; Zeng, 2011), which emphasised rigid standardisation, centralised control, and ideological conformity (Jin, 2013). While acknowledging these historical limitations, they framed the new PEH curriculum not simply as a rejection of the past but as a synthesis of global discourses and Chinese cultural values. As evidenced in section 5.2.1, the teacher educator commented: "Western PE are not entirely good, there are advanced and non-advanced". This perspective aligns with decolonial curriculum approaches, which emphasise critical engagement with Western theories rather than wholesale adoption or rejection (Paraskeva, 2016; Smith, 2021). This finding suggests that this ideological shift is not about rejecting global engagement but rather about fostering a more confident and context-specific framework for education. The selective and evaluative approach to external models reflects a growing focus on repositioning China in global education (Lu, 2021). By

critically engaging with Western influences rather than passively adopting them, Chinese physical educators argued for a philosophy of the new curriculum that is both globally aware and locally rooted.

Curriculum reform is, however, not a one-off achievement but a dynamic process influenced by political, social, and ideological shifts (Penney, 2006). Under Xi Jinping's leadership, education policy has been increasingly harnessed to strengthen cultural confidence and reinforce national identity (Law, 2017; Chen, 2023). Teacher educators in this study reflected this shift, often articulating pride in the new curriculum's perceived superiority to Western models. As Chen (2023) suggests, it is part of the CPC's strategy to reinforce ideological loyalty and cultural nationalism, portraying Chinese culture as inherently valuable and independent of Western standards. In this influence, teacher educators are encouraged not just to take pride in Chinese culture but to critically assess Western influences, embracing global engagement only when it aligns with or enhances Chinese cultural values (Law, 2017). This critical approach moves beyond past reforms that either rigidly followed Soviet models or passively absorbed Western frameworks, fostering a curriculum that is culturally grounded yet globally aware (Guo, 2018). These findings suggest that the boost of cultural confidence reflects a broader desire to redefine China's role in global education as a selective force that integrates into Western educational philosophies while also shaping its educational trajectory by social culture.

Nonetheless, while the discourse of cultural confidence is prominent, an underlying tension emerges. Teacher educators' dual role as practitioners and state-aligned curriculum developers means that their commitment to the new curriculum also reinforces dominant state narratives. According to Muller & Young (2019), knowledge transmitted through education is neither absolute nor arbitrary; it is shaped by available sets of meanings that emerge from collective social processes. These meanings were not constructed on their own but are rather

determined by broader societal forces. This dynamic is particularly evident in the response of teacher educators involved in curriculum and textbook development. Their unanimous view that the new curriculum standard is “very comprehensive” and has “no shortcomings” suggests an uncritical acceptance of the curriculum’s authority. Such consensus highlights what Young (1972) describes as the curriculum’s “controlling power” and Goodson’s (1990) observation that curriculum documents act as instruments of governance. Additionally, Chinese physical educators’ deference to curriculum authority may also be influenced by Confucian cultural values, which emphasise obedience and respect for authority (Yin, 2013; Yu, 2008; Zhang, 2015a). Within this framework, questioning official directives is often seen as socially inappropriate, fostering instead a culture of compliance. This ideological conformity limits physical educators’ ability to engage critically with alternative pedagogical models, thereby restricting innovation and risking maintaining the status quo. It can be said that teacher educators play a crucial role in mediating curriculum reform, yet I raise concerns about the extent to which they can challenge dominant narratives.

Despite the ambitious goals of the new reform, uncertainty remains regarding implementation. Teacher educator Sheng Yan noted (section 5.2.2) that “implementation remains unknown,” highlighting challenges in translating policy into practice. Physical education teachers in this study frequently demonstrated only a superficial understanding and limited engagement with the curriculum’s core principles. This finding showed that teachers positioned themselves as passive recipients of policy within the traditional ‘fidelity’ perspective (Penney & Evans, 2005). This observation is consistent with previous research in Scotland (Priestley & Minty, 2013; Priestley et al., 2015), which found that although teachers often outwardly embrace new curriculum ideas, their interaction with the content tends to remain at a surface level. Scholars emphasise that meaningful curriculum reform requires teachers to be active participants, critically reflecting on their experiences and

exercising agency in shaping policy and practice (Penney & Alfrey, 2022; Gray et al., 2023; Lambert & Penney, 2019). As key policy actors, teachers' understanding of the curriculum directly impacts student learning and instructional outcomes (Hindman & Stronge, 2009; Bakker & Bal, 2010). If teachers fail to understand curriculum goals, their transformative potential may not be realised, and reform efforts could become “lip service” rather than meaningful educational change.

As Ball et al. (2012) highlight, engagement with curriculum is not a neutral act; it represents a professional decision with implications for educators themselves and their students. The findings in the second part of this chapter support Carl's definition by illustrating the complexity of curriculum development and providing a detailed explanation of several important stages of curriculum reform and challenges in the curriculum and textbook development process.

A key insight from the findings is the identification of five essential procedures in national curriculum development. This challenges the dominant tradition in education, which often views curriculum as a fixed product rather than as a collaborative, socially constructed body of knowledge (Miller, 1990). The inclusion of teacher educators, teacher-researchers, teachers, and other stakeholders in the curriculum development process demonstrates a commitment to leveraging diverse expertise. This collaborative approach is crucial, as it aims to ensure that curriculum design is informed by practical, on-the-ground insights from educators who understand the realities of teaching and learning. Particularly, the consultation phase, spanning two to three years, reflects the complexity of gathering, analysing, and incorporating stakeholders' views from across the country.

However, as teacher educators such as Tao Hua and Sheng Yan emphasised (section 5.3.1), “the majority of teachers are unaware of this process”. Many perceive curriculum development as the work of a small group of experts, highlighting the intricate relationship

between teachers and curriculum (Ben-Peretz, 1990). Teachers often view curriculum as a top-down policy imposed by the state rather than a product of collaborative and reflective processes. Such perceptions can diminish teacher agency and constrain meaningful engagement with curriculum reform. From the lens of Ball et al. (2012), this is particularly significant: teachers' engagement or lack thereof is a professional decision shaped by their understanding of policy and the opportunities available to influence it. Without a clear understanding of the complex, collaborative nature of curriculum development, teachers are less likely to feel empowered to influence or adapt policies to fit their unique classroom contexts (James et al., 2008; Kimpston, 1985).

The findings in section 5.3.2 of this chapter highlight three critical areas within the fidelity perspective following the release of the national curriculum: communication, piloting, and textbook development. While these strategies demonstrate careful coordination, their effectiveness depends on balancing centralised control with localised adaptation (Marsh & Huberman, 1984; Priestley et al., 2015). Although these phases represent a structured effort to implement reform at the national level, they also reflect a linear process with limited interconnectedness, which may constrain dynamic teacher engagement.

Specifically, the Ministry of Education's communication strategy relied on a tiered, top-down implementation model. Through a decentralised approach, it aims to ensure a unified understanding of the new curriculum by systematically transmitting information from national authorities to provincial and local levels (Meng et al., 2021). Specifically, the Ministry of Education's communication strategy relied on a tiered, top-down implementation model. This decentralised approach sought to ensure a consistent understanding of the new curriculum by systematically transmitting information from national authorities to provincial and local levels (Meng et al., 2021; Ball et al., 2012). Beyond information dissemination, the strategy aimed to instil a shared cultural mindset among physical educators, aligning their

practices with the values of the reformed curriculum (Marsh & Huberman, 1984; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). However, as Connelly (1972) critiques, such an approach resembles a “general magic system,” in which top-down technical methods, including implementation, dissemination, and teacher retraining, are deployed to drive change without necessarily engaging teachers as co-constructors of the curriculum. This linear model raises concerns about fostering genuine understanding and professional agency among educators (Priestley et al., 2012; Ball et al., 2012). While top-down communication may promote consistency, it risks constraining teacher autonomy and limiting opportunities for contextual adaptation (James et al., 2008).

The piloting phase, encompassing dissemination and implementation across 44 diverse regions, serves as a critical site for curriculum engagement, allowing teachers to interact with, interpret, and potentially shape the new curriculum. This geographic and contextual diversity is a strength, as it highlights how reforms function differently in varied educational settings and offers opportunities for teachers to engage with curriculum content and pedagogical approaches in meaningful ways (Ball et al., 2012). As highlighted by teacher educator Xiao Zhou in section 5.3.2.2, piloting can foster dialogue between policymakers and teachers. Yet, in practice, teachers often remain positioned as recipients of centrally defined curriculum ideas, reflecting Ben-Peretz’s (1990) observation that authoritative curriculum documents may conflict with teachers’ adaptive and relational classroom practices.

Curriculum engagement is inherently interpretive and socially mediated (Pinar, 2000). Even within structured pilot programs, teachers negotiate meaning, adapt materials, and exercise professional judgment in ways that shape the enacted curriculum. Priestley et al. (2012, 2015) emphasise that curriculum enactment involves iterative negotiation between structural constraints and teacher agency; opportunities for engagement are only meaningful when they influence decision-making. Without such integration, pilot projects risk being

symbolic exercises rather than authentic spaces for teacher agency. Stenhouse (1975) similarly highlights that genuine reform depends on teacher participation in both curriculum and professional development. Thus, the pilot phase can be viewed as both enabling and constraining engagement: it provides a structured context for teachers to interact with new curriculum ideas, but systemic and top-down limitations may restrict the depth and scope of that engagement.

The textbook development phase, as highlighted in the findings, follows a meticulous, two-and-a-half-year process that emphasises collaboration among multiple stakeholders to ensure textbooks align with new curriculum standards. This systematic approach, while ensuring consistency and adherence to national educational goals, also reflects the political and organisational dimensions of textbook creation in China. Textbooks, as “official knowledge”, hold significant legitimacy within the education system, a concept rooted in political governance (Suchman, 1995). This legitimacy underscores the authority of textbooks in shaping educational outcomes, reinforcing the state’s control over what is taught in schools (Xu, 2021). The process of selecting textbooks, however, through publisher competitions, negotiations, and compromises among dominant groups, reveals the underlying political dynamics at play (Fuchs & Bock, 2018). The competition between publishers ensures that only those who meet stringent national standards are selected, yet this can inadvertently marginalise alternative perspectives or innovative pedagogical approaches. While these textbooks reflect the priorities of the state and other dominant groups, such as policymakers and educational authorities, they may not fully account for the needs and concerns of non-dominant groups, such as teachers (Apple & Oliver, 1996; Apple & Teitelbaum, 1986). These groups may challenge, resist, or reinterpret the content based on their experiences, highlighting the tension between top-down control and local adaptation. Thus, while the textbook development process is a collaborative effort among key stakeholders, as discussed

by Sheng Yan in section 5.3.2.3, it is crucial to recognise the limitations of this approach. The top-down nature of the process may undermine the potential for genuine teacher agency and teachers' engagement, potentially stifling diverse educational voices and perspectives within the curriculum.

The findings also illustrated technical and socio-cultural complexities in areas such as assessment standards and health education content. A key challenge, highlighted in section 5.3.1.1, is the shift from traditional, performance-based assessments toward process-oriented evaluations, which emphasise holistic development, reflect global trends in formative, continuous assessment (López-Pastor et al., 2013). Nevertheless, teacher educators' concerns about vague descriptors like “basic mastery” and “proficient mastery” expose the inadequacies of conventional metrics in capturing the nuanced goals of the reformed curriculum, including moral and social behaviours. Hay & Penney (2012) assert that assessment is a form of “systematic message,” shaping educational practices and influencing how subjects like physical education are valued. The continued reliance on outdated metrics risks perpetuating narrow definitions of success, which may marginalise broader objectives such as social, emotional, and moral development (Yang et al. 2025).

The integration of health education, particularly sensitive topics like sexual awareness and harassment prevention, presents additional complexities. As teacher educators Xiao Zhou and Ping Wei highlighted in section 5.3.3.2, this requires the delicate task of balancing pedagogical rigour with cultural sensitivity. The challenge lies in adapting content to accommodate diverse regional contexts and varying levels of societal acceptance, reflecting broader tensions between standardisation and localisation in curriculum reform. Paraskeva (2016) notes that cultural norms shape what is deemed legitimate knowledge, making it difficult to create content that is both nationally consistent and locally relevant. This complexity is particularly evident in the textbook development process, which must navigate

the socio-cultural differences across China's regions. While rigorous textbook development ensures consistency, it also raises critical questions regarding the inclusion and representation of minority cultures. Previous research indicates that dominant ethnic groups, particularly the Han majority, are disproportionately represented in textbooks, often presenting their perspectives as universal (Wang & Phillion, 2010). Conversely, ethnic minority knowledge tends to be marginalised or underrepresented, indicating that textbook editing practices can both reinforce existing power dynamics and limit cultural diversity in education. Addressing this imbalance requires intentional efforts to integrate diverse cultural perspectives, fostering a more inclusive and equitable curriculum that reflects China's multicultural society.

The introduction of health education content further highlighted the professional gaps among physical education teachers, particularly regarding their subject knowledge and health literacy. To mitigate these challenges, the Ministry of Education, as noted by Xiao Zhou (section 5.3.3.2), implemented an alternative strategy by producing pre-recorded instructional videos. These pre-packaged materials offer consistent, targeted guidance, thereby reducing the need for teachers to interpret complex content (Apple, 1981; Parker & Leat, 2021). However, while these resources provide support, scholars caution against over-relying on "teacher-proof" curricula, which risk diminishing teacher autonomy and curbing dynamic, responsive teaching practices (Kirk, 1990; Leat et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). Although pre-recorded videos may streamline content delivery in the short term, they may inadvertently deskill teachers by limiting opportunities to adapt materials to the unique needs of their students and local contexts. Consequently, while these resources provide a temporary solution to the urgent professional capacity gap, they do not address the long-term necessity of developing teachers' knowledge, skills, and health literacy. I argue that sustainable improvements in health education require prioritising the professional development of in-service teachers alongside strengthening health literacy among pre-service teachers.

The third crucial section of the findings illuminates the complex interplay of power and knowledge within Shanghai's educational system, aligning with previous research on the city's leadership in curriculum reform and professional learning efforts (Liang et al., 2016; Qian & Walker, 2013; Deng & Zhao, 2014). In contrast, international contexts such as New Zealand and Scotland highlight the critical issue of a lack of professional learning opportunities for physical education teachers during policy implementation (Petrie & Lisahunter, 2011; Atencio et al., 2012). In Shanghai, however, as I discussed in section 5.4.1, physical educators expressed strong appreciation for the multiple professional learning opportunities available to them, reflecting the city's unique socio-economic and educational systems, which shape teachers' perceptions and experiences.

This positive outlook affirms that Shanghai's policies align with its socio-economic values, positioning the city as a hub of educational innovation within a global context (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Lingard, 2016). This is because the physical educators' favourable perspective suggests that Shanghai's governance framework promotes collaboration among local education departments and university-school partnerships, facilitated by a decentralised system (Tan, 2012). This decentralised approach generates diverse opportunities for professional learning, fostering a power dynamic that strengthens connections among educational stakeholders.

Although Shanghai's education system offers rich professional learning opportunities, the findings highlight significant concerns for economically disadvantaged regions outside of Shanghai. As teacher educator Ping Wei noted in section 5.4.4, the rural-urban disparity in education remains a persistent social issue in China. This disparity can be attributed to macro-level government decentralisation, which has granted wealthier regions like Shanghai greater autonomy to invest in educational programs. In contrast, poorer rural areas continue to be under-resourced and marginalised (Ngok, 2007), resulting in widening disparities in

education quality and teacher support systems (Zhou & Zhu, 2019). This regional inequality underscores broader issues related to the distribution of knowledge, raising critical questions about how socio-cultural and economic contexts influence access to professional learning opportunities. In this light, the inequitable access to professional learning serves as a reflection of broader social justice issues, emphasising that knowledge related to curriculum reform is not equally accessible but is contingent on geographic and socio-economic factors.

At a micro level, as I noted in sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3, the study also identified key differences in professional learning experiences between public and private schools in Shanghai. The majority of teachers in public schools reported that they benefited greatly from organising professional learning opportunities in section 5.4.2, both in terms of time, space, and internal and external support (Zhang, 2015). However, this model is not universally applicable, as individual factors, such as a teacher's position within the educational hierarchy or their characteristics, can affect access to and the quality of these opportunities. This question highlights a fundamental concern raised by teacher educator Tao Hua, in section 5.4.4, that teachers may not lack professional learning opportunities but lack *high-quality* training. The teacher educator's observations suggest that while the infrastructure for professional learning exists, the depth and meaningful learning may be limited.

This raises important questions about the nature of professional learning. Although structures are in place, professional learning can sometimes become a procedural task, and it remains to be seen whether this becomes a *box-ticking* exercise or whether it can facilitate transformative professional development opportunities. When the focus shifts to fulfilling administrative requirements over substantive engagement, teachers may only achieve surface-level understandings of curriculum changes (Maclean et al., 2015). Consequently, the disconnect between available opportunities and their impact demonstrates a critical flaw in the design and execution of professional learning initiatives. Rather than fostering innovative

practices, PLCs may inadvertently reinforce routine behaviours, giving the false impression of progress without meaningful change.

As Petrie (2016) notes, it is crucial to recognise that teachers are not a generic group. Their agency and experience in curriculum reform are shaped by their personal values, professional context, engagement level, and institutional priorities. One context that came to matter was being in a private or public school. While public school teachers reported benefiting from the organisation of PLCs in terms of time, space, and diverse learning opportunities (Zhang & Pang, 2016), these experiences were not the same for everyone. For example, a teacher's position in leadership or their personal interests in the content (Ha et al., 2008) affect access to and the quality of these opportunities.

However, private school teachers' access to professional learning was not merely incidental but was indicative of institutionalised power relations. As Peng Liu commented in section 5.4.3, mathematics and language teachers consistently received regular professional training, whereas physical education teachers remain neglected. This indicated the hierarchical structure of knowledge within the educational framework. This constructed hierarchy of subjects reflects the broader systemic inequalities within educational institutions, where certain forms of knowledge are prioritised over others (Foucault, 1982). As a result, physical education teachers experience fewer professional learning opportunities, perpetuating their marginalisation within the schools. It is important to note, however, that conclusions regarding private schools are drawn from a single case study of Ying Cai School. From this institutional perspective, the findings are particularly concerning because they suggest that physical education is undervalued in performance-driven, self-sufficient school models. As Lawson (2018) highlights, schools often lack mechanisms to clearly define the purpose and importance of physical education, leaving it marginalised compared to other subjects. In the case of Ying Cai School, teachers received fewer professional learning

opportunities, reinforcing the cycle of neglect and highlighting the need for caution in generalising this pattern across all private school contexts. Nevertheless, the inequalities observed in this study resonate with broader international patterns. Similar disparities in access to professional learning and the marginalisation of physical education teachers have been reported in countries such as the United States (Beddoes et al., 2014; Richards et al., 2022) and Sweden (Ferry & Westerlund, 2023). These parallels indicate that structural prioritisation of certain subjects over others is a common feature of education systems worldwide, underscoring the wider implications of knowledge hierarchies and resource distribution for teacher professional development.

In light of these disparities, as Braun et al. (2011) argue, it is crucial to consider the contextual factors in which professional learning occurs. The findings in this chapter reveal that teacher engagement in curriculum reform is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including leadership, teacher demographics, and deeply embedded educational philosophies. Leadership, in particular, emerges as a pivotal element influencing teachers' willingness to embrace the new curriculum. This finding aligns with previous studies (Alfrey & O'Connor, 2024; Gu et al., 2018; Hickey et al., 2022), which highlight the crucial role of school principals and a supportive school climate for physical education in driving curriculum reform and teacher professional learning. As the findings showed in 5.4.2, in public schools like Shu Ren, strong leadership has fostered a culture of collective learning, inviting external experts to mentor teachers and empowering them to lead curriculum changes. In contrast, teachers in Ying Cai private school in section 5.4.3 reported limited understanding of the new curriculum and a lack of support from school leaders, leading to feelings of isolation. Therefore, the findings suggest that private schools need to adopt a more equitable approach to professional learning that equally values physical education and empowers teachers. I argue that the principal needs to provide a collective learning environment and support for

teachers' professional learning and prioritise a culture of collaboration, regardless of subject area. By doing so, the school can provide a collaborative learning environment that benefits all teachers and promotes meaningful curriculum change.

Furthermore, the findings in section 5.4.5 indicated that age and teaching experience are critical factors influencing teachers' engagement with curriculum reform, underscoring the importance of professional cultures as conceptualised by Braun et al. (2011). Senior teachers (over 50 years old) often display resistance to change, which can be attributed to their deeply ingrained teaching philosophies and well-established pedagogical practices. This resistance, however, as the teacher educator Hao Miao stated, should not be viewed as an outright rejection of reform but rather as a reflection of the educational values developed over years of experience. These teacher educators may view new approaches as a challenge to the methods they have honed and trusted, perceiving traditional practices as more effective. In contrast, younger teachers, often more adaptable and open to innovation, are generally more enthusiastic about adopting the new curriculum. This finding suggests that the reform requires a balanced approach that leverages the strengths of both experienced and novice teachers. Collaborative initiatives, where experienced educators mentor younger colleagues while also learning new strategies, can foster mutual growth and innovation.

One of the most significant barriers to curriculum reform is the challenge of changing teachers' educational philosophies. As previous studies (Armour, 1997; Placek et al., 1995; McEvoy et al., 2017) have shown, deeply held beliefs and established practices can hinder engagement with reform efforts. The findings of this study align with those of Green (2000, 2002) and offer valuable sociological insights into how physical education teachers may view traditional values as a key issue in their willingness to adopt pedagogical innovations. While these values can provide a sense of purpose and direction, they often restrict openness to innovative curriculum concepts.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented the varying engagement of three professional groups of physical educators in the curriculum reform process, offering insights based on their professional experiences and roles. It also provides a nuanced analysis of the similarities and differences in the responsibilities of teacher educators, teacher researchers, and in-service teachers within this process. Teacher educators, in particular, were deeply involved in curriculum and textbook development, so they took on the role of being policymakers. Thus, their deep involvement in this process reveals the depth and collaborative efforts involved in the complexity of curriculum/textbook development.

Furthermore, this chapter also highlighted a disparity in participation among in-service teachers. While a substantial amount of research and advice from in-service teachers has been collected during the curriculum development process, the majority of these teachers were not directly involved. Therefore, on the surface, they embraced the concept of the new curriculum, but their understanding of the curriculum was one-sided. It was more like being influenced by traditional Chinese culture and obeying the authority of the document text. However, teachers who engage in professional learning activities during the dissemination phase of curriculum reform are often influenced by a range of factors. These include external and internal contexts such as district expert support, school environments, leadership, personal circumstances, and disciplinary priorities, all of which shape the extent of their engagements. These factors may also lead to teachers' enactment of curriculum policies, which will be presented in the following two chapters.

The findings of this chapter were originally published in Sport, Education and Society (Yang et al., 2025). I thank the journal editors and reviewers for their support and acknowledge Taylor & Francis for their policies that permit the reprinting of article results in this doctoral thesis.

Chapter 6: Enabling curriculum transformation: reimagining physical education, physical activity, and health education

6.1 Introduction

China's new PEH curriculum represents a bold step in reimagining educational priorities, aiming to integrate physical education (PE), physical activity (PA), and health education into a comprehensive framework. This chapter explores the transformative journey of the new curriculum, highlighting the dynamic interplay between policy intentions and the interpretations of physical educators. Drawing on curriculum enactment as a social practice (Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Ball et al., 2012), this chapter frames curriculum reform as an interpretative and contested process rather than a straightforward, top-down implementation.

Physical educators act not as passive implementers but as policy actors who assign meaning to policies in unique institutional and cultural contexts (Alfrey et al., 2017). Priestley & Philippou (2018) advocate for nuanced approaches to curriculum-making as a multi-layered series of social practices, including framing policy intentions, facilitating sense-making, and enacting practice. While curriculum policies are designed to achieve specific goals, they are inevitably shaped by interpretations and adaptations of physical educators, often with unintended and uncertain outcomes (MacLean et al., 2015). From this perspective, this chapter is an illustration of the process of policy enactment at work.

The chapter focuses on two critical issues, each addressing important aspects of PEH curriculum reform and revealing the reframing of educational priorities. In the first section, I explore the evolving relationship between PE and PA within the new curriculum, positioning them as co-constructive forces in promoting health and well-being. Using macro (governmental policy), meso (teacher education and schools), and micro (classroom-level) analyses, this section uncovers how physical educators navigate new mandates, such as specific exercise intensity targets, to integrate PA into school classroom practices. These

shifts are shaped by sociopolitical goals and local realities, particularly in the Shanghai context, where physical educators' tension policy demands with the practicalities of fostering meaningful physical activity. This finding reveals the interconnection of policy discourse, institutional structures, and classroom practices, showing how PE and PA become intertwined in ways that redefine traditional boundaries. In the second section, I explore the integration of health education into the PEH curriculum, a critical part of the shift towards a more holistic approach to public health. The findings illustrate how health education aligns with national strategy, framed as policy-as-discourse (Ball et al., 2011b), responding to both global health trends and national public health concerns. Yet, it also brings tensions and challenges for physical educators, who must balance the bio-medical ideology of "healthism" with the realities of classroom practice (O'Sullivan, 2004; Evans et al., 2004). Through physical educators' perspectives, this section explores the role of health education within the new PEH curriculum, along with the resistance and systemic constraints that shape its classroom practice. Therefore, this chapter underscores how the PEH curriculum reimagines educational priorities, empowering physical educators to navigate its evolving goals while contending with opportunities, constraints, and contradictions.

6.2 Redefining the roles of physical education and physical activity

The transformation of the PEH curriculum marks a crucial moment for re-evaluating the roles of PE and PA in China's context. Achieving meaningful change requires a deep understanding of the subject's inherent nature, shaped by the complex interplay of social, political, and cultural forces (Kirk, 2010). A social epistemological approach offers a critical framework for exploring these dynamics, emphasising the interconnectedness of knowledge, societal practices, and the evolving purposes of physical education. According to Kirk (1992a), the nature of physical education is influenced by what people do in its name within society and what people do within its domain. Likewise, discussions surrounding PA are

deeply embedded in diverse interpretations, as physical and cultural spaces shape lived experiences, health, and societal norms (Phoenix & Bell, 2019; Bairner, 2014; Piggin, 2019). Rather than seeking a universal definition of PA, Piggin (2020) advocates for embracing multiple perspectives and inviting inclusive and critical dialogues about its meaning and scope.

In a significant moment, China's new PEH curriculum explicitly positions PA as both a component of PE and a metric for evaluating the quality of day-to-day practice. For the first time, clear guidelines outline specific exercise indicators for students during physical education classes. As previously mentioned in section 2.9.5, these include mandates such as incorporating group and individual exercises with intensities of at least 75% and 50%, respectively, ensuring all students achieve MVPA with heart rates between 140 and 160 beats per minute, and integrating 10 minutes of diverse physical fitness training (MoE, 2022). The shifts signify an effort to redefine physical education not just as an educational domain but as a vehicle of measurable health and fitness outcomes.

This section begins by investigating the purposes of physical education and how to interpret the MVPA indicator in the new PEH curriculum. It then examines the relationship between PE and PA through macro, meso, and micro-level analyses, exploring how physical educators understand and interpret these interconnections. This approach uncovers the interactions between government policy, institutional implementation, and classroom practices. The analysis underscores the evolving roles of PE and PA as critical elements in fostering health and integration within the educational landscape.

6.2.1 Repositioning physical education for holistic development

Discussions with teacher educators revealed a persistent tension between the policy-level recognition of physical education and its practical implementation in schools. While the new curriculum acknowledges physical education's significance, its broader educational

functions are often overshadowed in day-to-day teaching practices. This concern prompted reflections on the fundamental role of physical education in fostering students' holistic development. As one teacher educator, Ping Wei, remarked, "I believe that PE serves as a vehicle of education..." For him, education is a systematic process aimed at nurturing students' comprehensive abilities, such as cognitive, emotional, and physical. He added:

In the teaching practice, teachers should focus on the educational functions of PE. It's crucial to recognise that PE plays a vital role in nurturing individuals, not just physically, but in ways that shape their well-being...

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

Ping Wei's statements challenge traditional utilitarian views of PE and align with modern conceptions of physical education, emphasising "education through the physical" (Williams, 1930). This reflects a sociological perspective that highlights the social construction of education and the forms of knowledge it prioritises (Green, 2008). Ping Wei's perspective resonated across the discussions. Dong Cao, for example, highlighted physical education's unique function to foster holistic development:

PE stands as the only school subject capable of fostering students' holistic development in morality, intelligence, physical, aesthetics and labour...

(Teacher educator F, 15 December 2023)

However, as Dong Cao expressed concerns, within a performance-oriented school culture, the intrinsic value of physical education is often overlooked. Similarly, Tao Hua noted:

Although the goal of core competencies was proposed in the new curriculum, how to promote the holistic development of students in teaching practice is worthy of further thinking and exploration.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

These teacher educators' insights illustrate the complexities of translating policy intentions into classroom practice and the challenges of realising physical education's holistic potential within an education system that prioritises measurable outcomes.

While most teacher educators emphasised the general importance of physical education, Zhan Bai, an early-career teacher educator at University C, specifically addressed its role in fostering socialisation and interpersonal skills, an aspect often overlooked. He argued:

PE is important as the sole subject focused on cultivating students' health dimensions, unlike subjects such as Chinese literacy or mathematics. I believe it's crucial to highlight how PE fosters socialisation and social skills among students, particularly in compulsory education... While PE enhances physical fitness, its potential in developing socialisation and social skills often remains overlooked.

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

Zhan Bai's perspective demonstrates the broader issue that the social and emotional contributions of physical education are often marginalised in practice, despite their potential to foster students' social skills and promote affective growth.

Collectively, the discussions among teacher educators revealed a collective ambition to redefine physical education as an essential pillar of students' holistic development (Lynch, 2019), one that fosters intellectual, emotional, social, and physical growth. This perspective aligns with scholarly arguments emphasising the evolving role of physical education in contemporary education (Evans et al., 2004; Kirk et al., 2018; Welk et al., 2006).

Teachers also recognised physical education's diverse contributions, describing it as a means of "nurturing personal growth," "enhancing physical and mental well-being," and "fostering resilience and willpower". Yet, perspectives among teachers varied, with some still operating within a traditional framework that equates holistic development primarily with

physical competence. Yue Qian, for instance, appreciated the curriculum's emphasis on diverse sports activities tailored to different educational stages:

In promoting the holistic development of students, I think the new curriculum emphasises enhancing students' interests in primary school and diversifying activities for junior high school students. This diversified approach helps promote the well-rounded development of students.

(Teacher H, 14 December 2023)

Similarly, Feng Xu and Bin Zhao, two teachers, reflected on the evolving relationship between cognitive and athletic abilities among today's youth. As they stated:

Honestly, I think the well-rounded development of students nowadays is directly proportional to their intelligence. Today, smart students tend to excel in sports as well. In contrast, I think that some students who are less good at academics can't even do basic movements well. This is concerning...

(Feng Xu, Teacher G, 14 December 2023)

Generally speaking, if a student is good at sports, he or she is strong performance at many other areas. There's a significant trend emerging among students today. When I was a child, I wasn't particularly strong in academics, but I was good at sports. Nowadays, it seems students are achieving both academic and athletic excellence, and this is becoming a positive trend.

(Bin Zhao, Teacher B, 13 December 2023)

Based on Feng Xu and Bin Zhao's perspectives, they link cognitive and physical abilities, suggesting that academic success and athletic performance increasingly go hand in hand. Nevertheless, I am concerned that this perspective risks reducing holistic development to a simplistic equation of intelligence and athletic ability. By focusing primarily on measurable skills and academic performance, these views overlook the emotional, social, and ethical

dimensions of growth, qualities that are equally essential to shaping well-rounded individuals.

6.2.2 The exercise indicator as a key guiding metric

For many teacher educators, the new exercise indicators in China's PEH curriculum represent more than numerical benchmarks; they are seen as a "guiding metric", shaping both teaching practices and student engagement. These scientifically derived guidelines provide a framework for physical education classes, emphasising fitness and health. Ping Wei, a teacher educator, described the rationale behind these indicators:

These exercise indicators are undoubtedly scientific; we conducted numerous experiments using this data in the early stages.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

From Ping Wei's perspective, the indicators were developed to address a growing concern: the decline in youth fitness. They now act as instructional guides for teachers, ensuring that the focus in physical education classes remains on enhancing fitness and overall health. Bo Hu expanded on the scientific rationale, particularly the prescribed heart rate range, emphasising that the metrics are the result of extensive research and pilot programs, aligned with WHO recommendations:

The heart rate range has been extensively studied... the data resulted from repeated trials to establish such a range. There are certainly individual differences among students, but the foundation is solid.

(Teacher educator E, 16 December 2023)

Despite the consensus about the benefits of these indicators, scepticism exists among some teacher educators like Zhan Bai. While he acknowledged the curriculum's intent to address the decline in student fitness, he raised critical concerns about the practical application of these standards:

The new curriculum standard focuses on the amount and intensity of children's exercise, which was not required before. It stipulates the amount and intensity of exercise in response to the problem of poor physical fitness.

Zhan Bai questioned whether uniform standards could lead to a “one-size-fits-all” approach, overlooking individual differences. He posed critical challenges:

How can teachers monitor and adjust these indicators effectively during class? How can lessons meet these standards while accounting for diverse fitness levels? These issues remain unclear.

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

From these perspectives, it appears that while exercise indicators provide structure and accountability, they may also introduce unintended consequences. For instance, an overemphasis on meeting heart rate targets could diminish some students' intrinsic enjoyment of physical activity, particularly those who struggle to meet the prescribed thresholds. Moreover, this focus on measurable outcomes might overshadow broader goals of physical education, such as fostering a love for movement, developing social and emotional skills, and inspiring lifelong habits of physical activity. Such questions challenge physical educators to reflect critically on the evolving definition of PE and its relationship with PA.

6.2.3 The co-constitutive relationship between PE and PA

The relationship between PE and PA lies at the heart of discussions about the evolving role of PEH curriculum. The majority of physical educators believed that both components are interdependent: PE provides structured learning opportunities, while PA extends the benefits of formal lessons into daily practice, supporting students' holistic development and well-being.

6.2.3.1 Macro level: regional implementation and prioritisation

At the macro (policy) level, PE and PA are distinguished by their intent and scope. Zhan Bai, a teacher educator, described PA as a broad category encompassing all forms of bodily movement without specific educational goals, whereas PE is a structured curriculum component designed to develop students' skills and values:

The most important function of PE is to enable students to become well-rounded individuals in society. However, PA is a broad category that includes any body movement as a pure activity, regarded as neutral.

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

Building on this distinction, Ping Wei emphasised the intentionality inherent in PE, noting that “unlike the neutrality of PA, PE serves as a tool for achieving specific educational goals.” He acknowledged that fully separating PE and PA within the Chinese education system is challenging, given the long hours students spend in school. Consequently, PA, whether during formal physical education lessons or unstructured breaks, naturally becomes integrated into their daily routines. As he explained:

PA is a part of school PE that it is difficult to separate it. Especially in the Chinese context, students spend a long time in school, usually from 8 am to 5 pm. In this situation, in addition to regular physical education classes, there are also physical activities in school to promote students' health and well-being.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

Xiao Zhou, a teacher educator and health education researcher, similarly highlighted that national policymakers had begun to recognise the link between physical activity and mental health, a shift prompted by troubling research findings. He recalled uncovering high rates of depression among primary and secondary students nationwide. Yet, he emphasised that the research also revealed a positive correlation, as he explained:

When we were doing research, we found that students with efficient physical activity had a lower incidence of depression. So, the government has begun to require students to ensure one hour of physical activity every day during school time. This has a positive effect on the physical and mental health development of students.

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

From these teacher educators' perspectives, it is evident that national policy now mandates daily PA for students, reflecting a growing governmental commitment to well-being. Yet, achieving these ambitious goals is easier said than done. While cities like Shanghai have embraced this vision wholeheartedly, other regions struggle to keep pace. Hao Miao, a teacher educator, praised Shanghai's proactive approach:

Many primary and secondary schools have at least one PE class a day, often with more class time than core subjects...

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

Nonetheless, not all regions have been able to achieve this level of commitment. Sheng Yan, a teacher educator at University C, noted that while first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou are at the forefront of curriculum reform, less developed regions continue to struggle with ensuring consistent PE and PA time. He observed:

The Shanghai government attaches great importance to physical education, whether in implementing curriculum standards or ensuring students' physical education classes and physical activity time...Even on the eve of the Gaokao, students in Shanghai still have PE lessons. This phenomenon may seem incredible in other provinces...

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

In sum, at the macro level, Shanghai serves as a model for successful policy implementation, demonstrating how a strong governmental commitment can translate into meaningful curricular changes. However, as Sheng Yan's comments indicate, disparities

persist, with many regions struggling to match Shanghai's prioritisation of physical education. These inconsistencies highlight the need for further policy interventions to ensure that PE and PA are not just well-intentioned mandates but fully realised components of students' daily education across all regions of China.

6.2.3.2 Meso level: teacher education and school commitment

At the meso level, schools and teacher education programs are important in translating policy into practice. A recurring theme in teacher-researchers' insights was the importance of equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to integrate both PE and PA into students' daily routines. In Shanghai, teacher education programs emphasise aligning curriculum objectives with classroom practice and integrating PA throughout the school day. Lan Li, a lead teacher-researcher at Teacher Education Institution A, described institutional initiatives to provide daily opportunities for PA:

Schools organise 30 minutes of outdoor physical activities for all students during the big break time. Then, from 3:00 to 3:30 after class, students have another dedicated time for PA sessions.

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

According to Lan Li, these initiatives show that many schools have incorporated physical activity into the school-based curriculum, aiming to provide students with diverse and engaging opportunities. She also explained that, to enhance the quantity of exercise in physical education lessons, exercise indicators are used as a key evaluation metric when assessing class quality:

Currently, we have specific requirements for exercise intensity in PE lessons, so this standard is also used as a basis for evaluating the quality of teachers' classes.

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

Lan Li further reflected that while scientific indicators like the MAPV offer an objective evaluation of physical education, they should not be seen as the sole determinant of quality. In her viewpoint, quality physical education must also consider student engagement, skill development, and the broader educational and emotional benefits of physical activity.

Ming Gao, another lead teacher-researcher at Teacher Education Institution B, extended this point by stressing the need for integration and continuity between PE and PA. He argued that physical education cannot exist in isolation but must extend into extracurricular activities and informal opportunities for movement. As he explained:

I think teaching practice can't be disconnected from extracurricular activities... We need to integrate and bridge what happens in the physical education classes with the physical activities outside of them. So, when we train in-service teachers, we need to do targeted training to better link PE practice with PA.

(Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

Based on Ming Gao's and Lan Li's perspectives, a cohesive approach is required—one where formal lessons and extracurricular activities work together to provide students with comprehensive PA experiences. The findings suggest that significant progress is being made at the meso level, particularly in teacher education and school commitment. Shanghai's teacher education programs and schools serve as a model, showing that when educators and institutions are actively engaged in policy implementation, the impact can be both profound and far-reaching.

6.2.3.3 Micro level: classroom practice

At the micro level, teachers discussed how they manage the relationship between PE and PA within their classrooms. While the two components are often integrated, the teachers believed that there is a distinction between them, even as they view them as co-constructive.

Hui Wang and Ping Liu, physical education teachers in the Putuo district, stressed this interdependence. Hui Wang explained:

Physical activity acts as a complement to PE class. For instance, if we learn a particular sports skill in class, students can reinforce what they've learned through physical activities outside of class.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

Hui Wang emphasised that PA serves as an outlet for relaxation and well-being, allowing students to practice and internalise the skills they have gained in physical education lessons. This approach not only supports students' engagement with physical education but also encourages them to extend their physical activity beyond the classroom. Similarly, Ping Liu noted:

PA is an important way for students to relax their bodies and mind, which is an indispensable part of our school PE. On the other hand, PE is the foundation of PA. Without PE, it is difficult for students to master sports skills to participate in PA in school or out of school.

(Teacher A, 13 December 2023)

Ying Lu also reflected on the co-constructive nature of PE and PA, while distinguishing between the two:

PE is led by teachers, and students need to go through a learning process under the guidance of the teacher...In contrast, PA emphasises active student participation and motivation to engage with sports.

(Teacher E, 13 December 2023)

Despite differences in conceptualising PE and PA, all the teachers agreed that the two are mutually reinforcing. They believed that PE provides the foundation for students to engage meaningfully in PA, and PA, in turn, enhances and consolidates the learning that takes place

in physical education lessons. These perspectives demonstrate that the symbiotic relationship between the two ensures that students not only acquire the skills and knowledge they need during formal lessons but also have the opportunity to apply them in a more relaxed, informal context, reinforcing their physical and health development.

Overall, across macro, meso, and micro levels, the findings position Shanghai as an emergent site where PE and PA are not merely integrated but continually co-constitute one another in shaping students' health and well-being. Physical educators' accounts across these levels reveal how policy, institutional practice, and classroom pedagogy intersect to produce fluid configurations of movement, learning, and engagement. These perspectives reveal a nuanced understanding of the relationship between PE and PA, illustrating the complexity of integrating both into the curriculum while recognising their distinct yet mutually reinforcing roles. In the Shanghai context, these entanglements signal a shift toward a cohesive assemblage of movement and education, conceptualised here as Physical Education Activity (PEA). PEA foregrounds the dynamic interplay between structured curricular learning and the evolving movement practices continually produced within the rhythms of the school day.

6.3 Unpacking health education in China's new PEH curriculum: navigating policy, practice and challenges

The integration of health education into China's new PEH curriculum marks a transformative shift in the nation's priorities in public health and education. This change is emblematic of a broader move toward policy as discourse (Ball et al., 2011b), with healthism, a bio-medical ideology, emerging as a dominant force influencing physical education in China, in alignment with global trends and the country's pressing public health concerns (O'Sullivan, 2004; Evans et al., 2004).

This theme unfolds across three interrelated subthemes: the role of health education within the new curriculum, the challenges of its transformation, and the realities of classroom

practice. Through the perspectives of teacher educators and teachers, this section traces how health education is interpreted, resisted, constrained, and adapted. This exploration illuminates the tensions and challenges that arise as health education moves from the abstract realm of policy text to its practical enactment in the classroom.

6.3.1 The role of health education in the new curriculum

The integration of health education into the new PEH curriculum signifies a shift in the school physical education system toward the ideology of healthism and preventive biomedicine as new missions (Jiang and Jiang 2021; Weng 2021). This transformation has garnered widespread recognition among teacher educators, who viewed it as deeply aligned with the core principles of the *Healthy China 2030* strategy. Teacher educators highlighted that the integration of health content into the PEH curriculum aims to enhance students' health consciousness and promote healthy behaviours. These efforts, they believed, contribute not only to the realisation of the nation's long-term health goals but also to the aspiration of personal lifelong health. The integration of health education into the new PEH curriculum signifies a shift towards emphasising “disease prevention,” “health consciousness,” and the attainment of both national long-term health objectives and “individual lifelong health” goals (MoE, 2022). Compared to previous versions of the PEH curriculum, teacher educators in this study noted that this integration has significantly enhanced the comprehensiveness of the curriculum.

In addition, teacher educators argued that the incorporation of health as a new knowledge domain signifies a substantive integration and redefinition of physical education and health discipline within the school system, moving beyond a superficial label. As Wei Ping noted, “The discipline now includes not only physical education or sport, but also health.” Meanwhile, he underscored that the expanded focus on health within the new curriculum reflects a forward-thinking approach aimed at enhancing students' health

knowledge, behaviours, and well-being, rather than solely focusing on physical fitness. This finding suggests that Ping Wei's advocacy for health education's expanded mandate epitomises healthism's ideological pivot toward individual self-governance, wherein personal health choices are framed as moral-technical acts of citizenship. Meanwhile, his statement inadvertently highlights the enduring tensions embedded in policy enactment processes: the biopolitical governance of health demands a precarious alignment between bodily discipline and collectivist nation-building imperatives.

Similarly, Xiao Zhou, a teacher educator and editor of health education in the PEH textbook, further reinforced this point, describing the inclusion of health education in the national compulsory education curriculum and textbooks as a “breakthrough”, “innovation”, and “advancement”. As he noted, health education now encompasses a wide range of topics, explicitly outlined in the new curriculum and mandated for instruction. He stated:

Health education now covers a wide range of topics, including healthy eating, growth and development, safety, adolescent health, sexual harassment defence, and disease prevention...

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

For Xiao Zhou, health education is not just content; it is a vehicle for this larger vision of consciousness of prevention, directly into the formative years of students. His statement aligns with McCuaig et al. (2012)'s argument, integrating health literacy can help schools meet societal expectations for school-based health education while delivering curricula that are meaningful and engaging for both teachers and students. He believed that the aims were to shape students' attitudes and behaviours toward health, promoting long-term well-being rather than focusing solely on physical fitness. My interpretation is that his framing of health education as a “breakthrough” illustrates healthism's ideological emphasis on preventive self-regulation. While covering a wide range of topics like that, however, this policy-driven

expansion also might expose tensions between aspirational curricular mandates and the enactment realities where teachers could reduce complex health topics to testable content (such as body and fitness testing) under systemic pressures.

Despite its visionary goals, the allocation of health education within the school system has sparked debate. The new curriculum mandates that physical education teachers teach health education content every semester in primary and secondary schools at all levels. According to the new curriculum standard, physical education and health classes should be offered in all grades of the nine-year compulsory education system in the country, accounting for 10% to 11% of the total class hours (MoE, 2022). However, participants reported that, in reality, the required class hours have not been increased; instead, health education content is incorporated into existing physical education lessons. As Sheng Yan, another teacher educator and co-editor for health education, explained:

For example, primary schools typically allocate four PE lessons per week over a 16-week semester, totalling 48 lessons. Rather than adding six lessons of health education to make it 54 lessons, these six hours are absorbed within the original 48-hour structure.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

According to Sheng Yan, this arrangement forces teachers to make trade-offs in their instructional priorities. This concern was echoed by Tao Hua, who observed that many physical education teachers only deliver health education when regular physical activities are disrupted, “such as on rainy or smoggy days.”

The findings indicate that, although the reform’s vision is commendable, its structural design inadvertently marginalises health education. These findings suggest the absence of additional instructional time represents a systemic compromise that may ultimately undermine the reform’s objectives. While the policy framework underscores the importance

of health education, teacher educators have highlighted a key concern: although the curriculum and textbooks appear well-designed, it remains uncertain what will happen and how they will be taught in schools. As one educator noted, “This would be a big challenge.”

6.3.2 Challenges in its transformation

In reality, the majority of teachers are struggling to incorporate health education into their teaching practice.

(Hao Miao, Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

As Hao Miao’s statement, many teacher educators shared the core concerns about the difficulties in translating policy into classroom practice. One of the most pressing challenges is teachers’ lack of preparedness in health-related knowledge. Zhan Bai, another teacher educator at University C, noted that despite the Ministry of Education mandate to include health education as a core module in undergraduate physical education programs since 2019, substantial gaps remain:

Many universities, whether focused on sports or comprehensive universities, still lack dedicated health education lecturers or professors.

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

From Zhan Bai perspective, the absence of qualified faculty reveals a glaring disconnect between policy ambitions and institutional realities. Based on this finding, it is clear that the lack of specialised staff has a knock-on effect: Pre-service teachers graduate without the knowledge or confidence needed to teach health topics, and in-service teachers are left without opportunities for meaningful professional learning. Consequently, while the policy may be sound in intent, its execution is hindered by systemic deficiencies in teacher training and a lack of qualified teacher educators.

Teacher educators also pointed to deeper challenges beyond knowledge gaps. Hao Miao identified the deeper issues: the entrenched philosophies and professional identities of

physical education teachers. He argued that many teachers were still confined to traditional methods of teaching physical education that emphasise “health” in a narrow sense, such as focusing primarily on and testing students’ physical fitness. His point emphasises that curriculum reform is not merely about providing teachers with new content knowledge; it also involves challenging and shifting their foundational beliefs about education and teaching. As he further noted:

Most people still regard themselves as physical education teachers, not as physical education and health teachers.

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

This suggests that teachers’ long-standing professional identities and beliefs shape how they interpret and enact the curriculum. In my interpretation, this reveals that reform is not only about providing new content knowledge but also about challenging and shifting teachers’ foundational beliefs about education. Teachers’ philosophies, shaped over years of training and experience, affect the ways they approach new curriculum demands (Green, 2002).

Further complicating matters are structural constraints, including inadequate resources. Tao Hua explained that the quality and extent of health education also depend on the resources available at local schools. As he indicated:

When teachers teach health education content, the school should have the corresponding equipment. However, most schools lack proper equipment.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

For Tao Hua, this issue cannot be solely attributed to teachers not taking their responsibilities seriously. This finding suggests that limited resources compound the challenges of curricular reform, making it difficult for teachers to enact health education as envisioned.

Bo Hu, a teacher educator at University A, added that the issue is not solely about the issues other teacher educators posed. He acknowledged that while some teachers may be

aware of what health education entails, the real challenge lies in empowering that awareness into action. Using the example of quitting smoking, he illustrated how awareness does not lead to behaviour change, stating:

If a person realises that smoking is harmful to health and then decides to quit smoking, this is how awareness can be translated into action. Perhaps what many teachers lack is the motivation to turn awareness into action...

(Teacher educator E, 16 December 2023)

Bo Hu's analogy sharply reflects a critical issue in the transformation of classroom practice: how can individuals, and in this case, teachers, transform awareness into action? His insight touches on a broader issue within health education and public health strategies: knowledge without motivation or support is passive. Teachers, positioned as transformative intellectuals (hooks, 1994), face the dual challenge of acquiring knowledge and cultivating the motivation to apply it. The findings suggest that while policy may advocate for the integration of health education, its enactment depends on teachers' intrinsic motivation, access to support, and confidence in their ability to make a meaningful difference.

In the Chinese context, the lack of institutional support for critical health pedagogy, such as training teachers to deconstruct healthism in the reformed curriculum, forces educators to depend very much on themselves. Therefore, the findings indicate that the enactment of health education faces systemic barriers, including unprepared teachers, resistant professional identities, and resource shortages. I argue that while policy may lay the groundwork, its success hinges on addressing these foundational challenges. The reform needs to go beyond knowledge dissemination to empower teachers with the tools, motivation, and confidence to embrace their expanded roles.

6.3.3 The realities of classroom practice

To understand the challenges from the perspective of teachers, those on the front lines of education were reached out to, beginning with Bin Zhao, who was a physical education teacher at Ying Cai School:

Jing: Can you share your thoughts on the health education content of the new curriculum?

Bin Zhao: Sorry, I am not very familiar with this aspect of content. However, I do have some insights into health and nutrition due to my fitness training.

Jing: Have you tried to incorporate this knowledge into your teaching approach?

Bin Zhao: Actually, no...as the lesson schedule is quite tight now, so we don't have time to teach students this knowledge.

(Teacher B, 13 December 2023)

Bin Zhao's perspective sheds light on a challenge many teachers face: a system that demands much but provides little room to accommodate new priorities. His resistance was not due to a lack of health knowledge; indeed, his background in fitness had given him a wealth of insights. The real issue lay in the rigid structure of his teaching schedule, which left little room for health education. It was not about unwillingness or disregard; it was about navigating a system that did not allow space for integration.

Bin Zhao's experience was echoed by other teachers, who similarly reported that health education content was often squeezed between other curricular demands. Nevertheless, some teachers found ways to integrate health education within the constraints of their daily practice. For example, Ying Lu, a backbone teacher at Shu Ren School, described her approach:

I didn't specifically teach health-related content, but I would tell students what to pay attention to in each class... For instance, I would emphasise dressing appropriately

and maintaining a healthy diet, and I would remind them to drink water after running or strenuous exercise.

(Teacher E, 14 December 2023)

Ying Lu's words show her effort to embed health education in small, practical ways. From my perspective, this highlights how teachers can exercise agency to address policy goals, even when structural support is limited. Similarly, Hui Wang, a veteran physical education teacher at De Yuan School, shared:

I tend to focus more on how to deal with daily injuries, how to warm up adequately to prevent sprains, because these are more common among students.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

Hui Wang's perspective emphasises attention to immediate, tangible needs. My interpretation is that this focus reflects both the teachers' priorities and the constraints imposed by their teaching context, resulting in a fragmented approach to health education.

These teachers' insights illustrate the diverse ways teachers adapt the policy to their local contexts and personal experiences. In my analysis, these findings underscore that day-to-day practice is often fragmented and inconsistent: teachers modify the curriculum based on their knowledge, priorities, and available resources. Structural barriers such as limited time, insufficient resources, and a lack of formal training further marginalise health education. Yet, despite the constraints, in their ways, teachers like Ying Lu and Hui Wang sought to incorporate elements of health education into their teaching practice.

6.4 Discussion

In this chapter, I have identified three key conceptual domains, PE, PA, and health education, that are integrated into the PEH curriculum standard. The findings in these sections highlight how the fluidity of conceptual meanings and the relationships between these areas, along with the deconstruction of dominant discourses, offer a more nuanced

understanding of how PE, PA, and health education are interpreted, adopted, and positioned within the educational system.

The findings in section 6.2 reveal persistent tensions between policy rhetoric and classroom practice, illustrating how physical education is discursively constructed within broader socio-political frameworks. Teacher educators advocate for physical education as a vehicle for holistic student development, encompassing morality, intelligence, physical, aesthetics, and labour—goals consistent with global physical education initiatives (McEvoy et al., 2017; Lynch, 2019; Hardman, 2011). Despite this aspirational vision, its influence on everyday practice appears limited. The teacher educator (Zhan Bai) observed that the physical dimension of physical education frequently receives the greatest attention, while other crucial aspects, such as social and emotional development, are often neglected. This mirrors international research showing that physical education tends to prioritise physical health over broader learning outcomes (Stirrup et al., 2024). Although physical education has the potential to foster social interaction, socio-moral learning, and emotional development (Beni et al., 2017; Green, 2020; Sandford et al., 2024), these dimensions are often marginalised, suggesting that the discourse of holistic development may function more as symbolic rhetoric than as a substantive educational priority.

Moreover, as the teacher educator highlights, even when policy promotes holistic growth, its enactment is constrained by entrenched subject hierarchies, performance-oriented school cultures, and reductive interpretations of student development. These tensions reflect Foucault's (1980) concept of discourse as both enabling and constraining: physical education is simultaneously legitimised as an educational tool while being regulated by dominant policy and cultural frameworks. Policies are interpreted and adapted by physical educators navigating institutional pressures and competing priorities (Ball et al., 2012), supporting Ball's (2003) concept of "policy as text and discourse," in which policy intentions can be

reshaped by cultural and institutional barriers. Consequently, despite policy emphasis on core competencies and holistic development, physical education's entrenched status as a "non-academic" subject continues to limit its educational potential (Lawson, 2018; Green, 2008). The findings also reveal a tendency among some teachers to narrow the purposes of physical education. For instance, teachers observed a discourse linking cognitive and motor abilities, which reinforces an elitist framework privileging students with both intellectual and physical advantages. While acknowledging the mind-body interrelationship, this perspective risks perpetuating inequality and restricting physical education's capacity to support all students (Maher et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2011). Such a constrained view exacerbates educational disparities and undermines physical education's potential to promote holistic student development, particularly in emotional, moral, and social domains (Hooper et al., 2020; Teraoka et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2025).

Section 6.2.2 presented evidence suggesting that the introduction of MVPA indicators within teaching practice functions as a subtle form of governance, wherein regulating behaviour becomes a mechanism for controlling practice. Teacher educators interpreted MVPA indicators as a guiding metric, functioning as a mechanism of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979) that regulates classroom practices and shapes students' bodies and behaviours according to pre-defined health norms. For example, teacher educators argued that MVPA indicators align with scientific rigour and the WHO's health standards. This interpretation positions the new curriculum as institutionalising these indicators, framing them as "truth" and establishing the physiological measurement of the body as the dominant discourse within classroom practice. This emphasis on MVPA can be understood through the concepts of surveillance, discipline, and normalisation (Foucault, 1979). The indicators operate as a mechanism of monitoring, shaping both teacher and student behaviours by defining what counts as acceptable or ideal within the physical education classroom. As the

teacher educator highlighted, however, such a “one-size-fits-all” approach risks marginalising individual differences and needs. Heart rate monitoring and similar measures may narrow the focus of physical education to quantifiable outcomes, potentially reducing it to an exercise in physiological efficiency and compliance. This emphasis may inadvertently privilege physical fitness over broader educational objectives, such as social, emotional, and cognitive development (Gray, MacLean, & Mulholland, 2012; MacLean et al., 2015). From a Foucauldian (1991) perspective, MVPA metrics illustrate how power operates subtly to regulate knowledge, behaviour, and pedagogical practice. While these indicators reinforce and legitimise the centrality of physical health in teaching, they also risk narrowing the educational scope of physical education, marginalising diverse student experiences and potentially undermining the holistic aims of the subject (Yang et al., 2025). In this sense, MVPA indicators exemplify how curriculum policy can simultaneously discipline and govern, privileging measurable outcomes while constraining broader educational possibilities.

The interplay between PE and PA, as discussed in section 6.2.3, reveals a significant shift in educational practice, shaped by policies and influenced by macro, meso, and micro-level perspectives. Through this three-level analysis, findings suggest that in Shanghai, a new context-specific definition of PEA has emerged. At the macro level, curriculum policy positions PE and PA as distinct yet co-constructive elements. Teacher educators tend to interpret these concepts in a variety of ways, based on larger ideological perspectives within educational policies. As reflected in the insights of teacher educators (section 6.2.3.2), these definitions are understood as socially constructed (Kirk, 2010; Piggin, 2020). Within this framing, PA is regarded as neutral, encompassing all forms of bodily movement without intrinsic educational or ideological purpose, whereas PE is positioned as educationally functional and inherently non-neutral. This interpretation aligns with what Freire (2000)

suggested about education, where educational practices are never value-free but instead reflect and serve certain socio-political agendas and broader objectives in society. In addition, a key example of this is the Shanghai government's efforts to ensure at least one hour of daily PA in schools, positioning it as an important component of school physical education. The findings of this study indicated that teacher educators perceive the policy as serving a dual purpose. As Xiao Zhou observed, this policy seeks to mitigate a perceived health crisis, whereas Wei Ping emphasised the regulatory dimension, reflecting the high daily school attendance of 8–9 hours. Thus, at the macro level, PEA embodies a dynamic interplay between ideological intent and practical regulation.

The meso level, as presented in section 6.2.3.2, highlights the proactive efforts of teacher education programs and schools to align PA with educational goals. Teacher education programs play a crucial role in equipping teachers with the necessary tools to integrate both PA and PE into students' daily routines. However, the reliance on MVPA metrics to assess the “quality” of physical education lessons, as mentioned by teacher-researcher Lan Li, raises concerns about the reduction of the embodied, experiential aspects of education to mere quantifiable outcomes.

At the micro level, teachers' perspectives highlight a clear distinction yet acknowledge the interdependence of the two. The evidence provided by teacher Hui Wang and Peng Liu (see section 6.2.3.3) is that while PE classes teach the foundational skills necessary for engaging in physical activities, PA serves as a complementary practice that allows students to internalise and apply those skills in informal classroom settings. In Shanghai, this interdependence is reinforced by policies mandating daily physical activity, positioning schools as central sites for promoting students' health and fostering exercise habits. Yet, a comparison with the United States reveals contrasting challenges: school-based PA there often constitutes the only opportunity for less active students to meet recommended

activity levels, but overall engagement remains low (Meyer et al., 2011; Hills et al., 2015). This comparison underscores how policy and curricular frameworks critically shape the realisation of physical activity goals. It also illustrates the importance of continually re-evaluating the role of physical activity within physical education, as argued by Penney and Chandler (2000), to ensure that both components adapt to the evolving needs of students and broader educational objectives.

The reconceptualisation of PEA can be interpreted through Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of deterritorialisation, which destabilises fixed categories and boundaries, enabling transformation and reconfiguration. Deterritorialisation refers to the destabilisation of fixed categories and boundaries, enabling fluidity, transformation, and reconfiguration (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Within this framework, the boundary between curricular PE and broader PA is deterritorialized: movement and learning extend beyond formal classes into classrooms, playgrounds, and daily school routines. PA is relational, interacting with, extending, and transforming PE. Consequently, PEA can be conceptualised as a dynamic assemblage, shaped by tensions between institutional regulation and emergent practice, reflecting the nonlinear, contingent nature of curriculum enactment (Macdonald, 2003; Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Ball et al., 2012). In doing so, PEA offers significant opportunities for educational innovation. It challenges Western-centric models that confine PA to voluntary extracurricular settings (Kokko et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2023), advocating for the comprehensive integration of movement into everyday school life.

Despite its conceptual potential, PEA is not without limitations. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note, deterritorialisation carries the risk of reterritorialization. The blurring of boundaries between PE and PA may obscure the unique pedagogical aims of PE, reducing emphasis on skill acquisition, critical bodily engagement, and meaningful learning. First, there is a risk that lessons focus on fulfilling activity quotas rather than fostering holistic

development or meaningful participation. Second, the emphasis on MVPA or other quantitative metrics risks privileging measurable physical output over qualitative educational experiences. This reductionist approach may undervalue student agency, creativity, and affective engagement with movement. Third, PEA's reliance on context-specific enactment requires alignment across policy, school structures, teacher education, and classroom practice. Implementing PEA in different sociocultural, economic, or institutional contexts may be challenging, limiting its broader application.

In sum, PEA provides a conceptual and practical framework for reimagining physical education that is attentive to the dynamic interplay of structure, agency, and context while remaining critically aware of its limitations. While Shanghai's context demonstrates potential, broader application requires careful consideration of local contexts, resource availability, policy frameworks, and cultural norms to avoid superficial implementation or unintended challenges.

The second main finding of this chapter (see section 6.3) examined responses to healthism as a dominant discourse within the Chinese context. The integration of health education into the PEH curriculum represents the introduction of new knowledge. Using policy discourse and enactment theory, the findings illustrate how these discourses are (re)produced, adapted, negotiated, and resisted.

Similar patterns are observed in Australia, where health education is a component of the school HPE curriculum, with increasing emphasis on adolescent health literacy (Peralta & Rowling, 2018). The Australian HPE Curriculum identifies health literacy as one of its five key propositions, framing it as an empowerment strategy that encourages young people to take proactive steps in promoting both their own and others' well-being (Alfrey & Brown, 2013; Wright, O'Flynn, & Welch, 2018). However, this framing has been critiqued as a "marriage of convenience" between health education and dominant educational discourses.

Alfrey and Brown (2013) argue that, while the inclusion of health literacy represents a progressive step, it may also serve to legitimise health education within the broader educational system, subtly guiding behaviours and reinforcing expectations of personal responsibility. In China, health education similarly aligns with national policies, including the Healthy China 2030 strategy and global health discourses and is framed to promote health literacy while supporting self-regulation and personal responsibility for health. These parallels across contexts support the argument that healthism reflects a biopolitical agenda (Revel, 2009), in which control over bodies is exercised not through overt force but through subtle governance mechanisms that shape behaviours and attitudes (Sharma, 2021).

The findings in section 6.3.1 revealed that the integration of health education serves as part of a broader effort to regulate its content through institutional mechanisms. Schools are thereby positioned as key sites for cultivating health-conscious individuals, reinforcing the role of education in advancing national health objectives (Quennerstedt et al., 2021). Teacher educators, such as Ping Wei and Xiao Zhou (see section 6.3.1), emphasised that the inclusion of health education content is transformative for the PEH curriculum and has the potential to raise the status of the subject. These interpretations, on the one hand, highlight the complexity of the relationship between physical education and health education (Fitzpatrick & Burrows, 2017), and on the other hand, illustrate how the goals of physical education evolve in response to the changing priorities of social policies (O’Sullivan, 2004). This dual perspective underscores the potential for health education integration to enhance the legitimate knowledge of the subject within the education system.

Despite teacher educators perceiving the curriculum materials as well-designed, the findings reveal systemic challenges and deeper complexities. As critiqued by Evans, Rich, & Davies (2004), healthism as a dominant discourse often results in superficial interventions akin to “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” Such approaches obscure underlying structural issues

and diminish the state's role in addressing the social determinants of health but emphasise individual responsibility and visible solutions (Rich & Evans, 2012). Teacher educators identified significant barriers to enacting health education, including time constraints, insufficient professional development, and institutional limitations. As the findings in section 6.3.2 showed, teachers were expected to deliver health education within these constraints, often without adequate resources, training, or support, which limited the educational potential of the curriculum content. As a result, teachers are frequently expected to implement complex health education policies without adequate preparation or resources, severely limiting the potential for meaningful translation of curriculum intentions into classroom practice. These findings align with broader physical education enactment challenges (Alfrey and O'Connor 2024): without comprehensive training and resources, meaningful classroom practice remains unlikely.

In the lived reality of classrooms, as Ball (2015) highlights, teachers navigate complex environments where their professional authority and subjectivity are continuously negotiated, a tension evident in China's PEH curriculum reform. Although nominal pedagogical autonomy, teachers prioritise physical training, injury prevention, and warm-up routines over the broader health literacy goals during physical education classes. These adaptive strategies, though pragmatic, reflect how institutional constraints commodify teacher agency into survival tactics rather than transformative praxis. Moreover, there were varying interpretations of health education content; for instance, some teachers simplified health education to a "reminder to hydrate" (Ying Lu). These observations align with O'Sullivan, Calderón, and Moody (2019), who emphasise the pivotal role of teachers' beliefs, professional competence, and interpretative agency in mediating the translation of educational policies into classroom realities.

This dynamic of constrained agency is further illuminated through Foucault's (1998) assertion that "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). Resistance manifests not in overt opposition but in selective adaptation, as teachers prioritise content aligned with their existing practices and institutional priorities (Webb & Quennerstedt, 2010). Webb (2006) suggests that teachers may resist certain strategies through performative acts, engaging with them in ways that are disingenuous or only partially aligned with the intended policy goals. In section 6.3.3, three teachers illustrated how health content is often overlooked, with teachers incorporating it only when it is convenient or directly relevant to other classroom activities. In doing so, health education may be likely to remain perceived as an optional addition to the curriculum, rather than as a central, core component of physical education and health. In so doing, I believe that the values of the policy have not been internalised by teachers as essential indicators of what it means to be a "good" teacher (Perryman et al., 2017), so the teachers had already taken up the "ownership" of policy. Moreover, a failure to recognise teachers' enactment of health education raises critical questions about power dynamics within the education system. This finding aligns with Perryman et al.'s (2017) argument that individuals being "dominated yet free" captures the paradox teachers face: while they possess agency to interpret policies, their actions are constrained by institutional power structures. Evidence from the findings of this study suggests that teachers often seek legitimacy from policy documents to justify their practices, which limits deeper engagement with reform values.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter illustrated how PA and health education have become legitimate aspects of the new PEH curriculum and how they are being practised in the physical education classroom. The integration of these two core components reflects, on the one hand, the growing national emphasis on student health and well-being. On the other hand, it highlights

how governance techniques work as subtle control mechanisms, shaping instructional practices and influencing teachers' and students' behaviours. These power technologies not only determine curriculum content but also act as mediators to guide teachers in how to adopt health education content and MVPA indicators in the classroom. While physical educators in Shanghai were re-interpreting and re-contextualising the relationship between PE and PA, critical concerns remain. A key issue is that relying on a "scientific exercise indicator" as a standardised measure of teaching quality may lead to a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, the emphasis on physical fitness may overshadow other key goals of physical education, such as fostering students' social skills, moral development, and overall well-being. Similarly, the integration of health education presents practical challenges. Teachers often face systemic barriers (e.g. time constraints) and a lack of professional learning support, leading to resistance to teaching health education content. As a result, teachers may regard health education as a secondary option or even as a null curriculum rather than a meaningful part of their teaching.

Chapter 7: Enacting new PEH curriculum: classroom practices, open classes, and physical education teacher education

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the ambitious, transformative goals of the PEH curriculum, focusing on how physical educators interpret the policies that integrate physical education, physical activity, and health education into a comprehensive framework. Building on that foundation, this chapter shifts attention to the practical realities of the specific concepts and the critical influence of local contexts in shaping this enactment of policy. This chapter explores how physical educators interpret, adapt and resist new curriculum concepts into their daily practices. Drawing on Deleuze & Guattari's (1983, 1987) work, this chapter illuminates how they approach and respond to the challenges of curriculum change, confronting both the potential for innovative transformation and the resistance of entrenched structures. Thus, Chapters 6 and 7 address the second research question of this thesis, offering a thoughtful analysis of the dynamic interplay between policy and practice.

This chapter unfolds in three interconnected themes, reflecting the dynamic interplay between pedagogical practice, professional culture, and teacher education. To begin with, it examines how physical educators make sense and adopt key curriculum concepts in day-to-day teaching practice, specifically, *large unit content design*, *the integration of learning-practice-competition*, and *interdisciplinary learning*. It highlights the conflicts teachers face as they negotiate between the aspirations of the new concepts and the constraints of traditional pedagogical norms, revealing how professional roles, individual agency, and school contexts converge in the enactment of the curriculum. This section paints a nuanced understanding of how change unfolds in the micro level of the classroom, including both possibilities and limitations.

The second theme turns to open classes, a deeply rooted tradition in Chinese educational culture. To be frank, at the beginning of this research journey in Shanghai, I had not considered anything about open classes. Yet, through discussions with participants, the topic emerged consistently. In the Chinese educational context, an open class is a lesson conducted by a teacher and observed by colleagues and administrators, either from within the school or externally (Liang, 2011; Wu & Clarke, 2018). Some physical education teachers expressed scepticism about the practical enactment of the innovative practices encouraged by the new curriculum. They believed that well-structured practices were challenging to teach in their daily classroom and could only be demonstrated in open classes. Thus, physical educators criticised the performative issues of open classes, suggesting that the emphasis on external evaluation often overshadowed opportunities for authentic professional development. This section critically examines the tensions between the formalised structure of open classes and their potential to integrate innovative teaching practices, questioning whether they serve as platforms for meaningful transformation or perpetuate surface-level compliance with reform goals.

The final theme focuses on PETE programs in higher education and their critical role in cultivating future educators as transformative agents in curriculum reform. This section analyses how PETE programs respond to reform demands while contending with socio-cultural stereotypes and institutional expectations. It argues that PETE programs play a crucial role in fostering critical engagement, empowering PETE students to adapt to curricular changes, and cultivating dynamic professional identities. By encouraging PETE students to break stereotypes and embrace innovation, PETE programs can act as transformative spaces for future teachers in physical education. Through these three themes, this chapter illustrates curriculum enactment as a dynamic, contested, and multi-layered process shaped by both institutional structures and individual agency.

7.2 Transforming physical education classroom practices: opportunities and challenges

This section explores two distinct professional groups: teacher-researchers and in-service teachers who interpreted, negotiated, and resisted the new curriculum concepts within the dynamic realities of classroom settings. These physical educators make sense of new concepts that were shaped by their professional roles, experiences, and local contexts. They provided rich insights into how the transformative potential of the curriculum is realised or constrained in practice. According to the theory of policy enactment developed by Ball et al. (2012), policy is not implemented in a line but rather enacted within dynamic, localised contexts. This section critically examines how teachers enact three key curriculum concepts in their daily practice: *large unit content design*, *learning-practice-competition integration*, and *interdisciplinary learning*. By analysing these varied interpretations, this section presents a nuanced perspective on the realities of curriculum transformation in physical education, bridging the aspirations of reform with the challenges of daily practice.

7.2.1 *The large units as a mainstream approach*

The integration of large units has emerged as a significant shift in the new curriculum, marking a substantial transformation in the teaching and learning of physical education. Two teacher-researchers who have recognised and embraced this innovative approach believe that large units would become a mainstream method in classroom practice. Lan Li, a lead teacher-researcher at Teacher Education Institution A, emphasised the advantages of this systematic approach. As she explained:

I believe that large unit design offers a systematic teaching and learning process. Each unit consists of 18 lessons of well-structured teaching content. Now, teachers only need to complete two large units in one semester, making it more manageable and effective.

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

Her insights reflect a growing consensus that a structured framework can enhance the learning experience, allowing students to more deeply engage with the learning process. Similarly, another teacher-researcher, Ming Guo at the Teacher Education Institution B, highlighted that a large unit design fills critical issues left by previous curriculum reforms, particularly the fragmented learning of knowledge and skills. As he noted:

The large units design should become mainstream in future teaching practice...In the past, teaching practice was often fragmented, with teachers covering various topics such as basketball or gymnastics separately in the classroom...

While both teacher-researchers praised the advantages of large unit content design, they expressed concerns about the challenges of enactment. For instance, Ming Guo further raised a key question regarding the enactment process:

The main challenge that teachers face when designing content is to make each unit progressive and non-repetitive, spiralling up.... So, how to integrate the requirements of the three core competencies into the 18 lessons of teaching practice? This is more difficult...

(Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

Ming Guo reflected on his experiences during professional training sessions with other teacher-researchers and backbone in-service teachers. He observed that even seasoned teacher-researchers struggled with the intricacies of large unit design. He added: “It will be even more difficult for in-service teachers. If a teacher does it, he or she must be a good teacher”. Therefore, Ming Guo and Lan Li consistently believed that structured training and continuous professional learning for teachers should be carried out at the district and school levels to enable them to master the necessary skills to adopt a large unit design in practice.

Some teachers have embraced the large unit design, recognising its potential to reshape their teaching practices. From their perspective, this shift was experienced as a move

away from fragmented teaching towards a more connected curriculum. At De Yuan School, Song Chen, a dedicated physical education teacher, described the change in his practice:

Now, the biggest change in my classroom is the adoption of a large unit content design....We taught each sports skill separately, and each lesson focused on practising the technical movements of one or two different items. For basketball, for instance, we might only teach dribbling in one semester and then focus on shooting in the next.

This approach was quite fragmented.

With the introduction of large-unit content design, however, Song Chen reported a different teaching method:

I've designed lessons that intertwine various basketball skills, fostering a more systematic practice of the game. Instead of just learning dribbling or shooting in isolation, students can now see how these skills interact during a real game scenario.

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

A similar perspective was expressed by Feng Xu, at Qiu Zhi School, who explained his experiences with a badminton unit for Year One students:

I want them to master these essential skills. After two or three months of consistent practice, I expect they'll be able to build confidence to play and even engage in two-player badminton games.

(Teacher G, 13 December 2023)

Reflecting on the perspectives, teachers recognise its transformative potential to overcome fragmented learning and foster deeper student engagement, yet the challenges of practical application expose systemic tensions. The policy's prescriptive framework, while innovative, clashes with the realities of classroom diversity and teachers' varying capacities. The difficulties teachers experienced in integrating core competencies into classroom practice highlighted that the policy underestimated the need for professional capacities.

7.2.2 Integration of the learning-practice-competition concept

One of the most significant shifts in the new curriculum is the integration of learning-practice-competition, a foundational principle embedded in the curriculum standard. This is not just a theoretical idea; it's one of the six foundational principles embedded in the new curriculum standard. During discussions, teacher-researchers and teachers shared their perspectives on how they are embracing this integration. Lan Li, a teacher-researcher responsible for supporting colleagues in adopting new concepts, explained her understanding of this model:

Integration of learning-practice-competition is essentially a continuum in the learning process that allows children to acquire both knowledge and skills. After they learn, teachers need to create opportunities for students to practice and participate in competitions. Meanwhile, students can also achieve the effect of promoting practice through competitions.

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

From her perspective, integration requires teachers to design learning as a systematic process where practice and competition reinforce each other. Ming Guo, another teacher-researcher, echoed this view, contrasting the model with traditional drills:

This integration requires teachers to develop thoughtful, well-structured lesson plans that extend beyond simple drills or isolated skills.

(Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

He argued that the core value of this approach is its ability to connect classroom learning with after-school physical activities, enriching students' experiences and ensuring a seamless link between in-class lessons and after-school practice.

While teacher-researchers highlighted the potential of integrating learning-practice-competition for transforming physical education, translating this concept into practice has

also exposed several issues. Hong Yu, a physical education teacher at Shu Ren school, shared her experiences of the daily practice of the integration of the learning-practice-competition concept in her classroom. As she explained:

I've developed competition sessions in my classroom practice. I think some students are highly motivated by competitions, especially those with good sports skills.

(Teacher F, 14 December 2023)

Hong Yu also reflected that during the competitive activities, students can find technical problems that can motivate their further practice. Her approach reveals how competition can drive engagement and uncover areas for improvement, making practice more focused and meaningful. Similarly, Song Chen, another teacher, shared how he integrated learning and practice into his teaching. After covering the core material, he focused on organising tiered practice sessions. He explained:

In my classroom, students who have a good mastery of techniques participate in smaller competitions, while those who need more help continue working on foundational skills...

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

According to Song Chen, the learning-practice-competition is a process that emphasises the gradual progression of student learning. He highlighted a crucial point: while the learning-practice-competition concept promotes skill development, it requires constant adjustment to align with different teaching goals and content.

While many teachers were keen on embracing the learning-practice-competition concept, some have encountered some challenges in their classrooms. Yue Qian, for instance, shared her struggles with embedding this approach into every lesson, particularly given the constraints of time. As she explained:

A PE lesson is only 40 minutes. I need to manage classroom discipline, conduct warm-up activities, spend another 10 minutes on fitness training... For me, I am trying to integrate the learning-practice-competition, but it is somewhat difficult.

(Teacher H, 14 December 2023)

Similarly, Hui Wang highlighted the challenges posed by large class sizes:

In a classroom with often more than 40 students, it becomes difficult to integrate the learning-practice-competition lesson design.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

He admitted that while learning and practice were feasible, the competitive element remained underdeveloped due to the difficulty of managing large groups.

These insights from teacher-researchers and teachers reflect both the potential and the challenges of integrating the concept of learning-practice-competition into their day-to-day classroom. While it can create a more engaging learning environment, practical obstacles such as limited time and large class sizes can make it difficult for teachers to fully integrate all aspects of the model into everyday lessons.

7.2.3 Interdisciplinary learning: enthusiasm and scepticism

Interdisciplinary learning has emerged as a vital component of the new curriculum standard, offering an innovative method for physical education and health to fulfil its educational objectives. This concept aims to promote the comprehensive development of students in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labour dimensions (MoE, 2022). As the concept integrates into the curriculum, teachers have shared a variety of perspectives, revealing both acceptance and resistance.

At Shu Ren school, a pilot school for the curriculum reforms, the commitment to enhancing physical education is evident. Hong Yu, one of the enthusiastic teachers, shared

how she adopted interdisciplinary learning into her teaching practice. Using martial arts as an example, Hong Yu explained:

Martial arts have a strong historical aspect. I introduce students to its origins, which seamlessly cross over into history... The characteristics of martial arts emphasise symmetry and a blend of softness and hardness. Through the process of learning, students can appreciate these elements...

(Teacher F, 14 December 2023)

Hong Yu also referred to the patriotic dimensions of martial arts, which she integrated into her lessons. When I asked about what challenges she faced in applying interdisciplinary learning, Hong Yu reflected thoughtfully. “Umm, maybe not,” she replied, though she acknowledged the extensive preparatory work she conducted during the initial stages of enactment. “In the following phases, I may transition into a series of martial arts activities. However, it does depend on the student’s circumstances,” she noted. Hong Yu further pointed out that students often encounter significant academic pressure, which can limit their available time for practice.

Similarly, Ying Lu, another teacher at Shu Ren school, embraced the potential of interdisciplinary learning. According to the new curriculum standard, this approach must be integrated into 5% of the lesson hours each semester. Ying Lu explained how she applies this by incorporating interdisciplinary themes into her football lessons. For example, she assigned homework tasks in which students explored the origins of football or researched their favourite players. She explained:

When I teach football, I adopt interdisciplinary learning by assigning homework that requires students to explore the origins of the sport and research their favourite football stars...

(Teacher F, 14 December 2023)

During class, Ying Lu organised the students into groups, each representing a different national football team. “Additionally, students are tasked with creating a poster that represents their team, including the team logo and name, as an independent project,” she shared. This collaborative approach shifts the focus from merely achieving a single goal to fostering structured learning. Ying Lu is mindful of her students’ varying abilities. For those who may struggle with physical activities due to limitations, she assigns alternative roles such as photography or conducting interviews, ensuring that everyone feels included and engaged. “They’re often more willing to try these roles,” she noted with satisfaction, indicating that this approach not only fosters engagement but also encourages students to take on responsibilities that align with their strengths, ensuring that no one feels left out.

From my interpretation, these examples illustrate how teachers, like Hong Yu and Ying Lu, have used interdisciplinary learning to enrich the content of physical education, connecting physical skills with history, aesthetics, and cultural knowledge. Their teaching practices reflect the broader vision of the new curriculum, where physical education is positioned not only as skill acquisition but as a site of cultural and moral development.

Nevertheless, not all teachers share the same enthusiasm for this innovative content. Song Chen from De Yuan School and Feng Xu from Qiu Zhi School, both veteran male teachers, voiced their scepticism, raising concerns about the practicality of interdisciplinary content in physical education. During a conversation, Song Chen posed a critical question, as he stated:

We often discuss interdisciplinary learning, but what does interdisciplinary mean? In lesson design, we emphasise cultivating students’ will and personal qualities, which can also be considered interdisciplinary. Similarly, when explaining movements, we often use principles of physical mechanics to analyse movement skills, which are also

interdisciplinary. I think it's unnecessary... PE itself has these functions, so PE classrooms should be simpler.

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

Feng Xu, from Qiu Zhi School, raised similar concerns. He asked:

How do we cross disciplines? For example, if the teacher shouts commands in English, does that count as integrating English into physical education?

Interdisciplinarity is flashy without substance. Innovation needs a certain foundation.

Just like eating, you must first learn to hold chopsticks...

For Feng Xu, interdisciplinary learning may seem glamorous on the surface, but it lacks real depth or value. During the conversation, he made it clear that he favours traditional teaching methods, likening them to the basic skill of using chopsticks, which is a foundational tool necessary for more advanced tasks. His perspective resonated deeply with me, prompting a follow-up question.

Jing: So, you mean that interdisciplinarity doesn't make much sense?

Feng Xu: Yes, it is meaningless. But sometimes we need to complete tasks... For example, sometimes we have to adopt interdisciplinary learning, such as showing in open classes.

(Teacher G, 14 December 2023)

His statement indicated several key phrases:

Flashy without substance-Meaningless-Tasks-Show

Feng Xu's remarks prompted deeper reflection on several critical issues: the superficial nature of certain educational trends, the pressure to fulfil prescribed tasks, and the performative aspects of teaching during open classes. Each of these points merits further exploration, revealing the complexities and tensions inherent in current educational practices.

This leads naturally to the next section, where I examine the issues and implications of conducting open classes in the context of curriculum enactment in schools.

7.3 Open class: Do the issues overshadow the essence?

This section explores the intricate dynamics of “open classes,” a new finding of this study. The term “open class” is deeply ingrained in the professional lives of teachers across China, as educators in every school regularly conduct and observe countless open classes throughout their teaching careers (Liang, 2011). The open class phenomenon serves as a professional development mechanism where teachers open their classrooms to peers and mentors for observation, critique, and collective learning (Wu & Clarke, 2018). Organised through TRGs and PLCs, open classes foster collaboration, mutual learning, and gradual pedagogical improvement (Zhang & Wong, 2018).

Through the perspectives of three groups of physical educators, this discussion critically examines the challenges associated with integrating innovative curriculum concepts into daily teaching practice. Teacher educators and in-service teachers emphasised the extensive preparation required for open classes and their often performative nature, questioning their practical relevance to routine practice. In contrast, the teacher-researcher presented an alternative perspective, arguing that open classes serve as valuable opportunities for in-depth curriculum engagement and professional development. This section situates open classes within the broader context of educational reform, highlighting the tension between performative expectations and substantive pedagogical advancement while raising critical questions about their role in fostering meaningful teaching practices and professional learning.

7.3.1 Open class as merely a performance...

Ball’s (2003) analysis of performativity in educational reform is particularly relevant to this finding, as many teachers and teacher educators critique the performative nature of

open classes. Ball defines performativity as a “technology, a culture, and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons, and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition...” (p. 216). This critique aligns with the experiences and reflections shared by physical educators during my exploration of how curriculum concepts are integrated into classroom practice. Notably, a pervasive sense of distrust and resistance toward new methods emerged among teachers.

Liu Peng, a teacher at Ying Cai School, epitomised this scepticism with his critical reflections. During our conversation, he acknowledged the appealing ideas presented in the new curriculum but was clear about his stance: he would not integrate these concepts into his daily teaching.

Peng Liu: I believe that in open classes, such as those at the city or district level, or open lessons for title promotion, I will adopt the new concepts and content. However, in daily lessons, I do not pay attention to them.

Jing: Is there a significant difference between regular and open classes?

Peng Liu: Of course, I strongly believe that the majority of teachers do not employ the open class format in their teaching practice.

Jing: Would you consider applying these new concepts to your regular lessons?

Peng Liu: Um... probably not... for me, nothing to change.

(Teacher B, 13 December 2023)

From my interpretation, Liu Peng’s response underscores a key challenge in curriculum adoption: while teachers may incorporate new concepts in open classes to meet external expectations, they often resist applying them to day-to-day teaching practice. This pattern reflects a broader culture of performativity, where innovation is surface-level, driven by evaluation rather than genuine pedagogical transformation. Other teachers expressed similar concerns. Song Chen, from De Yuan School, stated:

We all know that an open lesson differs from a regular daily lesson...Designing an open lesson requires a lot of energy... It is unrealistic to teach daily classes based on open classes.

(Teacher C,13 December 2023)

At Qiu Zhi School, Feng Xu and Yue Qian emphasised the burdens that open classes impose on both teachers and students. Feng Xu observed:

If daily lessons were like open classes, teachers would be exhausted... Open classes are also good-looking, and the surface work is done very well.

(Teacher G,14 December 2023)

Yue Qian, the youngest teacher I interviewed among the teachers' group with seven years of experience, added her viewpoints to the conversation. As she noted:

Both teachers and students are more engaged in performing, going through the preparation and rehearsal process step by step for a long time...I've felt that the students were unhappy during the rehearsals of the lessons.

(Teacher H,14 December 2023)

Teacher educators have also participated in the debate on its issues. Zhan Bai, a young teacher educator from the University C, articulates a critical viewpoint on this issue. As he noted:

Open classes are just performance... showing the best curriculum practice. The students are required to move neatly, and the teacher's lesson is designed with every movement and command in mind... An open class is too torturous for both the teacher and the students.

He further emphasised the preparation required for open classes, often involving at least ten lessons of rehearsal:

I think teachers should be allowed to concentrate more on the study of daily teaching practices, rather than being consumed by the demands of conducting various forms of open lessons.

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

Zhan Bai's critique highlights the broader issue within educational reform: under the pressures of performativity, open classes prioritise appearances over meaningful engagement. Teachers design lessons not to enhance student learning but to meet evaluators' expectations, reducing teaching to a series of staged displays. This performative culture ultimately constrains the transformative potential of curriculum reform, as innovation remains superficial rather than deeply embedded in daily practice.

7.3.2 The essence of open class

Ball (2003) conceptualises performativity in curriculum reform as a regulatory mechanism that governs education through targets, indicators, and evaluations, characteristic of an "advanced liberal" mode of governance. This framework is essential for understanding the role of open classes not only as a tool for teacher professionalisation but also as a mechanism for state regulation. While open classes have been subject to significant criticism, perspectives on their value diverge across professional groups, revealing the complexity of their role in educational practice.

Lan Li, as a lead teacher-researcher, was responsible for teacher professional training, class observation, and open class evaluations. While many teachers viewed open classes with questions, often criticising the intense effort required to prepare them, Lan Li offered a more nuanced and balanced perspective, one shaped by her deep involvement in the education field. It requires individual practitioners to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations. Lan Li reflected on the challenges teachers face when preparing for these lessons. As she explained:

There's no denying it...The preparation for an open lesson can take more than a month of intensive practice...It's a lot of work, no doubt... There's no denying it... Despite this, Lan Li pointed out the benefits she believed outweighed the difficulties. She spoke with conviction:

The impact on a teacher's professional development is profound once the open lesson takes shape. It influences their teaching philosophy, and it enhances their pedagogical skills. What they learn from an open class doesn't just stay there; it spills over into their everyday teaching practice.

From her perspective, open lessons acted as catalysts for teacher growth. As she explained:

The essence of the open lesson lies not in the performance itself, but in the growth of the teacher and the collaboration that comes from the research team behind them. It's a process that brings out the benefits in both.

(Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

The contrasting perspectives presented by physical educators underscore the broader debate surrounding the role of open classes in professional development. For teachers like Liu Peng and Song Chen, open classes represent an artificial and impractical demand that imposes undue pressure. By contrast, the teacher-researcher, Lan Li, perceived open classes as vital tools for pedagogical refinement and sustained professional learning.

In the end, the question remains: Do the challenges associated with open lessons—over-preparation, performance pressure, and a disconnect from everyday teaching ultimately outweigh their potential to foster genuine professional growth? Or, as Lan Li suggested, is there something deeper, something transformative, waiting to be uncovered in the process? Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between in the delicate tension between performance and practice, between appearance and substance.

Reflecting on the findings of this section, the complex dynamics surrounding open lessons reveal a significant tension between performance and authentic teaching practices, illustrating the challenges teachers face in adapting to new curriculum standards. This tension underscores the necessity for reform in PETE programs, emphasising the importance of equipping future educators with the tools to integrate innovative curriculum concepts into their daily teaching.

7.4 Reconfiguring physical education teacher education: empowering pre-service teachers through new curriculum reform

Throughout the conversations with teacher educators, a prevailing consensus emerged: curriculum reform is a complex and often gradual process, fraught with obstacles and resistance. Yet, despite these challenges, there is optimism, particularly regarding the preparation of pre-service teachers, which has become a focal point for transformative change. In 2022, the Ministry of Education introduced the initiative *New Era-New Curriculum- New Teacher*, which emphasised the need for teacher training institutions to align with the evolving requirements of basic education reform. The policy called for normal universities to continuously innovate teacher education systems, ensuring they meet high standards and adapt to new approaches. It further highlighted a comprehensive restructuring of teacher training programs, advocating for an integrated model that synthesises general knowledge, subject expertise, and professional capacities. The overarching goal is to cultivate a generation of outstanding educators capable of addressing the demands of contemporary education.

This section examines how PETE programs are being redesigned to integrate the new curriculum standard and equip pre-service teachers with the pedagogical and professional competencies necessary to inspire the next generation. Furthermore, it critically explores the broader challenges posed by entrenched social stereotypes within the context of PETE,

particularly how these stereotypes pose barriers to achieving social justice in physical education. The discussion also highlights how teacher educators actively challenge these stereotypes, fostering the development of dynamic professional identities among future educators. By addressing these multifaceted issues, this section seeks to provide deeper insight into how PETE programs can be restructured to promote an equitable and progressive physical education landscape.

7.4.1 Aligning teacher preparation with evolving curriculum demands

Teacher educators at the Universities A and C shared a collective responsibility in shaping the future of physical education. In particular, their involvement in PETE programs allows them to prepare undergraduate students, referred to as *normal students* in physical education, to address the new curriculum standard over four years of study. These students are recruited based on their performance in the Gaokao, which assesses both academic achievement and athletic abilities. They expressed a sense of confidence in their ability to cultivate pre-service teachers, highlighting that this task is notably more straightforward than retraining their in-service counterparts.

Hao Miao, a teacher educator from University A, explained how they have restructured their approach to preparing pre-service teachers under the new curriculum standard. The first major change was the introduction of a mandatory module on the new PEH curriculum standard across all undergraduate programs. This module forms the cornerstone of the program, ensuring that every pre-service teacher fully understands the principles and objectives of the updated curriculum. “They must learn these concepts early on, so when they enter the teaching world, they’re well-prepared,” Hao Miao emphasised.

In addition, University A introduced a second mandatory module, “Interpretation of International Curriculum Standards,” aimed at broadening pre-service teachers’ perspectives by exposing them to global trends in physical education. This addition was designed to

expose pre-service teachers to the latest global trends in physical education. “We want our pre-service teachers to be ahead of the curve, to understand how physical education is evolving internationally,” Hao Miao noted with pride.

The third component of the program is a six-month school placement to enhance the pre-service teachers’ teaching practices and experiences. During this period, pre-service teachers are placed in schools, where they work closely with experienced mentors, engaging in lesson planning, course design, and hands-on teaching. Hao Miao explained:

These mentors don’t just supervise; they actively guide the pre-service teachers in applying the new curriculum standard in real-world settings... It’s one thing to learn about new teaching methods in the classroom, but it’s another to apply them while teaching real students, navigating the daily challenges of a school environment.

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

Hao Miao believed that the future of physical education depends not only on policy changes but also on the capabilities of these pre-service teachers. Through these comprehensive initiatives, University A seeks to equip future educators with the necessary pedagogical knowledge and practical experience to enact curriculum throughout their careers.

Similarly, at University C, teacher educators emphasised the need to enhance professional competence to meet the new curriculum’s high expectations. In particular, pre-service teachers are now expected to master both strong theoretical knowledge and advanced sport-specific skills. As one educator, Sheng Yan explained:

In the past, there wasn’t much emphasis on the motor skills of PE teachers in primary and secondary schools. Now, however, students are expected to learn specific sports skills, such as badminton, starting from the third year of primary school, aiming for proficiency by the sixth year... This means that physical education teachers are required to have advanced sport-specific skills.

Sheng Yan believed that this shift has exposed critical issues in teacher preparation, where many teachers have struggled to teach specialised skills due to inadequate training. In response to the evolving demands of physical education, University C has proactively enhanced its PETE program. As he explained:

Starting in 2023, we have readjusted our approach to cultivating pre-service teachers to bridge their capabilities with curriculum requirements... After mastering one main speciality, they must also excel in a secondary one. These changes ensure that graduates can teach at least two sports at a professional level.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

Sheng Yan argued that this strategic shift not only broadens the skill set of future physical education teachers but also equips them to meet the evolving demands of the curriculum.

Through these targeted reforms, universities A and C are taking significant strides in shaping a new generation of physical education teachers, equipping them with a strong foundation in curriculum standards, exposure to international trends, and specialised skills to meet the evolving needs of schools and students. Despite these advances, challenges remain, particularly regarding health education. Historically, PETE programs in China have included minimal health-related content, limiting graduates' ability to deliver health education effectively in schools. Ping Wei highlighted this gap:

In China, the proportion of health-related content in PETE programs at both sports universities and normal universities has historically been very low. PETE students have never learned a dedicated module on health education.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

Similarly, Sheng Yan noted the limited alignment between the PETE course and school-based health education, as he said:

PETE programs often focus on areas such as exercise physiology, exercise biochemistry and nutrition... While these courses are valuable, they do not directly align with what is taught in health education for primary and secondary schools.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

This discrepancy exposes a fundamental issue in PETE programs, as they fail to equip future educators with the necessary competencies to enact of health education in schools.

Recognising this issue, both universities A and C have made strides to address it by incorporating health education as a mandatory course in their undergraduate PETE programs. Xiao Zhou from the University A explained:

All majors of physical education, sports training, and sociology of sports have taken this course since 2017. Health education is a mandatory course in our university.

However, Xiao Zhou also expressed concerns about the current state of teacher preparation. He believed that current novice teachers should be equipped to teach health literacy. While pre-service teachers are required to study health education, their training remains largely theoretical, limiting its practical application. He explained:

They understand the content, and it's a required course, but whether they can teach it is another matter...

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

Similarly, at University C, as teacher educators indicated, health education was formally integrated into the PETE curriculum following the Ministry of Education's 2019 mandate, which designated health education as one of eight compulsory courses for all undergraduate physical education majors. However, as Zhan Bai noted in section 5.3.2, enactment challenges persist: many universities, including University C, continue to face a shortage of qualified health education lecturers and professors.

In sum, these findings demonstrate that the transformation of PETE programs in Shanghai's universities shows both progress and challenges. Breaking away from outdated practices is a positive step. However, constant reflection is necessary to avoid falling into traditional training models. PETE programs need to maintain a dynamic and reflexive approach, continuously evaluating and adapting their practices.

7.4.2 Empowering pre-service teachers to break stereotypes

The pre-service teachers we train today will be the backbone of tomorrow's curriculum reform.

(Zhan Bai, teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

As Bai Zhan's statement pointed out, the crucial role of teacher education in shaping the future of physical education is. Interviews with teacher educators revealed a shared concern over the profound impact of societal perceptions on the professional identities of pre-service teachers. A prevailing issue is the persistent undervaluation of the physical education profession, which not only affects how in-service teachers are perceived but also shapes the self-perception and professional aspirations of pre-service teachers. Teacher educators widely acknowledge that addressing these deeply ingrained stereotypes is a fundamental aspect of pre-service training, essential for cultivating professional confidence and securing broader recognition for physical education teachers within the educational system.

At the societal level, physical education teachers have historically been regarded as having lower status compared to teachers of other academic subjects. As teacher educator Bo Hu noted:

The stereotype of physical education teachers is that they are simple-minded and strong-limbed, but this is unfair.

(Teacher educator E, 16 December 2023)

His observation highlights a common misconception that reduces the field of physical education to mere physical ability while disregarding the intellectual and pedagogical expertise required to teach and promote it effectively. Hao Miao attributed this stereotype to deep-rooted sociocultural influences, explaining that traditional Chinese culture has long prioritised literary knowledge over physical education. He referenced the Chinese idiom “重文轻武” (*valuing literature over martial arts*) to illustrate how historical governance strategies favoured civil officials over military personnel, thereby contributing to the longstanding devaluation of physical education. This perspective reflects broader cultural and political factors that have shaped societal perceptions toward the profession.

These stereotypes are not only prevalent in broader society but are also reinforced through everyday discourse. Dong Cao, a teacher educator at University B, pointed out how this stereotype manifests in everyday language. As he explained:

This is a social phenomenon...For example, many people often say, ‘Is your math class taught by a physical education teacher?’ This is a social prejudice against physical education teachers.

(Teacher educator E, 15 December 2023)

This remark illustrates, from my perspective, how social discourse subtly undermines the professional recognition of physical education teachers, reinforcing the perception that their expertise is inferior to other educators. Therefore, these social prejudices have unfairly diminished the professional status of physical education teachers and weakened their role within the school system.

The impact of these stereotypes goes beyond in-service teachers, affecting the confidence and professional development of pre-service teachers. Tao Hua, a teacher educator at University A, addressed how this stereotype affects PETE students at the university. He explained:

In our university, PETE students are often seen as muscular individuals, giving the impression of being unacademic. Although the university recruits from the top 10 students in the province, they are often unfairly labelled as unacademic...

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

From his statement, it is evident that social prejudices can diminish recognition of pre-service teachers' skills and knowledge, potentially affecting their confidence and professional development. These social stereotypes also have a direct impact on the teacher educators themselves. As Bo Hu noted:

When we went on a business trip to recruit students in other cities, many people were quite enthusiastic about the teacher educators at University A. But when they asked me what subject I was from and what I taught, I said I taught physical education, and their enthusiasm dropped significantly...

Bo Hu further reflected on how institutional policies mirror these societal biases, as he stated:

I think the social status of PE teachers is relatively low compared to that of core subject teachers. For instance, our university has a strong physical education program that received an A+ in the national evaluation. However, the university's policies, resources, and funding for physical education remain lower than those allocated to other academic disciplines.

(Teacher educator E, 16 December 2023)

Bo Hu's statement indicated that the challenge of changing social stereotypes in PETE settings is significant and complex. Despite the high academic and professional standards within physical education programs, the allocation of fewer resources and lower status within universities reinforces the notion that physical education is secondary to traditional academic disciplines, perpetuating a cycle of marginalisation.

To challenge and break these stereotypes, many teacher educators emphasised the importance of encouraging pre-service teachers to expand their roles and reshape their professional identities and social cognition. As a teacher educator and professor at University A, Ping Wei stressed a multi-faceted approach to cultivating pre-service teachers. He acknowledged that the new curriculum standard encompasses a wide range of knowledge areas, particularly health and nutrition.

I integrate the content of the new curriculum standard to educate PETE students. In my lectures, I often tell my students that a professional physical education teacher should possess a breadth of knowledge akin to an *encyclopaedia*, including medicine, biology, sports training, health, and rehabilitation.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

For Ping Wei, this call for a more comprehensive professional identity directly challenges the traditional view of physical education teachers as mere “sportsmen/women.” Ping Wei further asserted:

PE teachers are not solely physical education majors; they are also regarded as experts in scientific and medical fields.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

Ping Wei’s approach, in my analysis, is essential in breaking free from limiting stereotypes and encourages PETE students to recognise the diverse, interdisciplinary nature of their future roles. By fostering this broader professional identity, Ping Wei pushed back against the reductionist views that have long dominated perceptions of the profession. He argued that adopting a holistic approach will better equip pre-service teachers to address the complex needs of their future teachers, transforming the role of physical education teachers into that of well-rounded educators.

Reflecting on the findings, it is evident that the persistent stereotypes surrounding pre-service teachers are deeply ingrained in both societal perceptions and institutional practices. Despite the efforts of teacher educators to challenge these biases, physical education continues to be marginalised compared to other academic subjects. The findings highlight a critical issue: addressing these pervasive social stereotypes in PETE requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including teacher educators, institutions, and society at large. The next chapter further explores the social challenges faced by in-service teachers.

7.5 Discussion

This chapter examined how physical educators translate the new concepts into day-to-day practice. The findings provided a nuanced understanding of how these new concepts can be incorporated into local contexts, revealing both possibilities and practical challenges. The findings emerging highlight the complexities and inherent contradictions involved in the enactment of innovative curriculum concepts. Drawing on policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012), these practices illustrate how educators interpret, adapt, and materialise policy, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between institutional expectations and individual agency. Such practices also function as mechanisms of power, enabling teachers to influence one another while simultaneously providing evidence of how policies are realised in specific educational settings (Paraskeva, 2016). Consistent with prior research (Thorburn et al., 2019; Green, 2000; O'Sullivan, Calderón, & Moody, 2019; Alfrey & O'Connor, 2024), the findings in sections 7.2.1, 7.2.2 and 7.2.3 illustrated that teachers' enacting of these innovative concepts is constrained by practical challenges such as limited time, class size, deeply rooted personal beliefs, and the broader contextual realities.

The large unit content design in the physical education curriculum was seen by the teacher-researchers and teachers as a transformative approach toward a more systematised way of teaching and learning. This is evidenced by the discussion led by the teacher-

researchers mentioned in section 7.2.1, whereby they indicated the advantages it yields in enabling learners to acquire coherent sports-as-techniques and movement skills development. These perspectives align with Casey & Kirk's (2021) argument that the predominant short-unit format in physical education often offers little in terms of developing physical competence or gaining a substantive understanding of physical activity by students. As a result, *large-unit design* was viewed as a strategy to overcome these limitations and promote more systematic teaching and learning. Yet, a key question is the degree to which teachers themselves can adapt to this pedagogical shift. As teacher-researcher Ming Guo noted, progressive and non-repetitive unit design places significant demands on teachers' knowledge, learning, and practical application of the curriculum framework (Penney, 2013). This underscores the importance of targeted professional training, ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared to adopt large-unit designs. Without such support, even well-structured curricula may fail to translate into meaningful classroom practice.

Likewise, the *integration of learning-practice-competition* strategies was interpreted as a core principle of the new curriculum, yet it is fraught with challenges. Teacher-researchers interpreted this strategy as one organised curriculum design emphasising the process of learning, while in reality, teachers faced some practical difficulties in their everyday practice. Teachers interpreted this strategy as a coherent curriculum design emphasising the learning process; however, practical constraints such as large class sizes, limited time, and high performance expectations often hindered its classroom practice (Casey & Kirk, 2021; Thorburn et al., 2011; Tinning, 2012; Alfrey & O'Connor, 2024). Notably, perhaps, the integrative model carries a strong resemblance to traditional multi-activity-based practice. Casey & Kirk (2021) critique this approach for its failure to move learners beyond basic competencies, even within highly supportive educational systems. This raises concerns about whether the policy truly disrupts outdated teaching methods or simply reinforces them

under a new label. Additionally, the heavy emphasis on competition within this framework introduces further complexities. For instance, as the physical education teacher highlighted, managing a class of over 40 students made it particularly difficult to provide individualised support, especially in competitive settings. Moreover, while competition can motivate some learners, it may exacerbate disparities between students with different skill levels, potentially reinforcing educational inequalities. This mirrors critiques in physical education literature that performance-oriented pedagogy can perpetuate inequities and reproduce gendered differences in physical competence (Ennis, 1999; Kirk, 2013).

The findings in section 7.2.3 highlight two contrasting actions among teachers regarding interdisciplinary learning: strong enthusiasm and strong opposition. At Shu Ren School, two female teachers demonstrated particularly positive engagement, actively integrating interdisciplinary approaches into their teaching practices. In doing so, they not only embraced innovation but also became key drivers of pedagogical change within their school. The school's status as a pilot for curriculum reform, combined with the principal's strong emphasis on physical education and professional support, created a context conducive to pedagogical innovations (Son & Kim, 2016; Alfrey & O'Connor, 2024). His supportive leadership environment enabled these teachers to internalise external mandates and reinterpret them as opportunities for personal and professional development. In this case, both teachers internalised external mandates and reinterpreted them as opportunities for personal and professional development. By adapting the new curriculum to their specific teaching contexts, both teachers negotiated policy expectations with their professional capacities, exercising agency in their pedagogical decisions. This interpretative and negotiating practice illustrates the process of curriculum enactment and thus underlines a dynamic interplay at work between external support structures and individual teacher agency. A particularly illustrative example is Hong Yu's integration of patriotism into martial arts instruction,

blending sports skills with historical education. While innovative, this approach also highlights the operation of the hidden curriculum, where ideological values are embedded implicitly within pedagogical practice (Kirk, 1988; Gordon, 1982). It is worth noting that patriotism is reflected within the national curriculum, representing broader sociopolitical and cultural ideologies. Thus, such a focus illustrates how educational frameworks function as regulatory and control mechanisms for knowledge, where specific beliefs and values are not only explicitly taught but also subtly reinforced through pedagogical practices.

Drawing on the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizomatic thinking, knowledge is understood as dynamic, non-linear, and produced through connections between diverse domains. Interdisciplinary learning theoretically embodies this rhizomatic potential by fostering integration across knowledge areas. Despite its innovative potential, however, resistance among many teachers highlighted the performative nature of certain policy-driven practices. For example, Feng Xu critiqued interdisciplinarity as "flashy without substance," demonstrating a performative rather than substantive engagement. In this instance, interdisciplinarity is superficially applied to satisfy external mandates rather than being meaningfully integrated into the learning process. This resistance can be understood through the contrast between rhizomatic and arborescent structures (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Pringle & Landi, 2017). Consequently, while interdisciplinary learning holds rhizomatic potential, structural constraints, entrenched beliefs, and performative policy pressures often limit its transformative impact. Instead, it reinforces the status quo and does not challenge or alter it.

The performative dangers of curriculum reform are also captured in the second main finding in section 7.3. Across three professional groups of physical educators, findings indicate that many teachers question the formalist approach of open classes, seeing them as misaligned with genuine professional development. As the teacher Song Chen noted, "It is

unrealistic to teach daily classes based on open classes”, and Yue Qian emphasised that lessons were frequently “rehearsed” to meet professional imperatives, prioritising performance over meaningful engagement. Open classes thus exemplify disciplinary power, wherein institutional observation and judgment shape teachers’ practices and internalise evaluative norms (Foucault, 1979, 1991). Their observational character functions as a monitoring mechanism, producing conformity and regulating professional behaviour. Teachers’ compliance reflects both the influence of external policy mandates and the internalisation of systemic expectations, illustrating how power operates subtly within educational practice (Lemke, 2002; Perryman et al., 2017). More critically, this process reflects how institutional practices guide teacher conduct to achieve policy objectives while maintaining hierarchical control (Ball, 2003). In doing so, open classes operate not merely as professional development tools but as technologies of governance, shaping both teachers’ and students’ behaviour and limiting meaningful teaching and learning.

Open classes represent one of the novel findings of this thesis. Prior research in China (e.g., Wu & Clarke, 2018; Zhang & Wong, 2018) has focused primarily on their potential to facilitate professional development and promote collective learning among teachers. These studies emphasise the collaborative and reflective aspects of open classes but pay less attention to the performative pressures that influence how teachers enact them. In contrast, the findings in this thesis indicate that their performative features often overshadow these goals. The teacher educator reported that evaluators establish criteria for “best practice,” imposing externally constructed ideals that may not reflect the contextual realities of individual classrooms. This finding extends the literature by demonstrating how open classes can function simultaneously as professional development tools and as instruments of hierarchical control, revealing a previously underexplored tension between policy intention and classroom enactment.

Nevertheless, the consequences of these dynamics extend beyond teachers and significantly impact students' learning experiences. Teacher educator Zhan Bai described open classes as “torturous” and “exhausting”, comments that reveal the emotional impact this performative culture takes on both teachers and students. As a teacher, Yue Qian observed that students were “unhappy” during rehearsal sessions, highlighting how these practices can undermine meaningful participation. On the surface, open classes may appear student-centred, demonstrating the primary goals and content of the new curriculum. However, in practice, students are often reduced to passive participants, functioning as part of a performative machine (Freire, 2000). They follow the teacher's direction and adhere to rigid evaluation criteria, catering more to external evaluative standards than engaging as active learners. This issue may stifle student autonomy to some extent and turn the learning process into an exercise in conformity rather than a real opportunity for personal growth.

Thus, the power exerted through open classes extends beyond shaping teaching practices; it reshapes the student experience, perpetuating a cycle of performativity that prioritises superficial displays of success over meaningful learning. By focusing on meeting external criteria, open classes risk stifling the relational and transformative aspects of education, limiting both the teacher's capacity to innovate and the student's ability to engage meaningfully with the curriculum. These findings suggest the need to critically re-evaluate the role of open classes in the educational system. To break the cycle of performativity, I would argue that educational practices must shift focus from external compliance to fostering genuine, context-driven teaching and learning. By challenging the performative culture, the relational and transformative potential of education might be more fully realised for both teachers and students.

The third key findings in section 7.4 concern how PETE programs in China have responded to recent curriculum reform. The findings revealed that two universities in

Shanghai, Universities A and C, have reframed their programs in line with the new PEH requirements. Teacher educators in these institutions were challenging established norms, rethinking professional identities, and adopting new pedagogical approaches. These developments can be understood as part of shifting educational assemblages, traversed by movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983;1987).

From an assemblage perspective, PETE programs are not fixed entities but contingent configurations produced through the interaction of policy directives, institutional priorities, teacher educator practices, and broader social expectations (DeLanda, 2016; Nail, 2017). Curriculum reform thus operates as a force that unsettles existing assemblages, opening them to new arrangements. At both Universities A and C, the integration of health education into PETE reflects a deterritorialising movement: the established sports-dominant curriculum was destabilised and reconfigured around discourses of health, wellbeing, and social responsibility. In this sense, deterritorialisation is generative, producing openings for teacher education programs to expand their remit and align with broader curricular purposes (Kirk, 2010; Armour, 2011).

Nonetheless, Universities A and C approached this process differently, illustrating how deterritorialisation is neither uniform nor linear but shaped by local contexts and institutional priorities. At University A, deterritorialisation was particularly evident in a comprehensive restructuring of teacher education. First, the university embedded the new national curriculum standards into teacher training, ensuring that pre-service teachers became familiar with policy requirements before entering the profession. Similar approaches exist in the United States, where national standards strongly shape teacher education (Kim et al., 2015; Piletic & Davis, 2010). Second, University A integrated international curriculum frameworks, broadening the scope of teacher preparation. Third, it introduced six-month school internships to provide hands-on experience. This combination of national alignment,

global perspectives, and practical training reflects a comprehensive approach to PETE reform. Such multi-faceted strategies constitute a typical way in which deterritorialisation nurtures innovation, adaptability, and a redefinition of professional preparation. The outcome was a multi-layered assemblage in which global, national, and local forces intersected, forming what might be described as a hybridised PETE assemblage. This multiple-strategy illustrates what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call a “line of flight”, a trajectory of becoming that disrupts rigid binaries between sport and health, local and global, and theory and practice.

University C offers a contrasting trajectory. Here, the program was adapted to include health education but retained a strong emphasis on sport-specific skill development. While this approach strengthens technical expertise, it risks reterritorializing PETE within a traditional, sport-dominant framework. By privileging certain sports and performance metrics, such reterritorialisation reinforces hierarchies that have long structured physical education, privileging athletic bodies and technical mastery over broader pedagogical or health-oriented outcomes (Wright, 1996; Azzarito, 2009). The findings suggest that while curriculum reform may trigger deterritorialisation, its transformative potential is not guaranteed. Old patterns can reassert themselves, often under the guise of reform or professionalisation. At University C, reform simultaneously opened and constrained possibilities, leaning towards reterritorialisation into traditional forms. This dynamic reflects Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) claim that deterritorialisation always carries its opposite: movements of reterritorialisation that redirect or limit its transformative force.

In sum, these contrasting cases illustrate that deterritorialisation is neither uniform nor linear but contingent on the multiplicity of local assemblages. Teacher educators’ desires, institutional histories, policy logics, and broader discursive forces converge differently across contexts, producing divergent trajectories of reform. Viewing PETE programs through the

lens of assemblage and deterritorialisation highlights its deeply ambivalent character: reform is not simply a story of progress or resistance but a contested process in which innovation and tradition, global and local, sport and health continually intersect. These findings emphasise that deterritorialisation always carries the risk of reterritorialisation, whereby new openings are recaptured by familiar logics. For PETE programs in these universities, this underscores the importance of ongoing reflexivity and critical engagement: without careful attention to these dynamics, reform efforts may inadvertently reproduce the very structures they aim to disrupt, rather than sustaining new becomings in teacher education practice.

Beyond curriculum restructuring, a key finding in section 7.4.2 highlighted the role of teacher educators in challenging societal stereotypes of physical education teachers and disrupting the collective professional identity of the field. As Bo Hu observed, societal perceptions of physical education teachers as “simple-minded,” “muscular,” or primarily “athletic” undermine professional recognition. These stereotypes reflect arborescent, hierarchical thinking, constraining professional possibilities and reinforcing narrow, reductive identity categories (Azzarito & Solmon, 2009; Wright, 1996). As previous research has shown, the low status of physical education is often bound up with wider gendered, classed, and cultural hierarchies (Castro-García et al., 2024; Preece & Bullingham, 2022), a dynamic that resonates with Hao Miao’s observation that “literature was valued over martial arts” (Yu, 2008; Zhang, 2015b).

Teacher educators at Universities A and C responded by cultivating dynamic, relational professional identities among pre-service teachers capable of resisting fixed expectations and opening new trajectories for practice. As Paraskeva (2016) argues, engaging with multiple and shifting identities is vital for disrupting dominant assumptions of stable professional roles. For example, Ping Wei encouraged pre-service teachers to position themselves as “experts in health and medical fields” and as an “encyclopaedia,” expanding

the intellectual scope of PE beyond narrow, sport-based framings. In doing so, teacher educators enacted what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe as processes of becoming: identity conceived not as fixed but as generative, relational, and continuously evolving (see also Pringle & Landi, 2017). Here, teacher educators operate as catalysts, enabling pre-service teachers to traverse “lines of flight” and deterritorialise conventional professional norms.

Yet, these initiatives unfold within broader sociocultural and institutional assemblages that both enable and constrain transformation. The findings align with research suggesting that the sustainability of PETE innovation depends not only on pedagogical creativity but also on navigating institutional priorities and the systemic marginalisation of physical education (Gong, Young & MacPhail, 2023). As Bo Hu observed, the classification of university disciplines reproduces inequalities in the distribution of resources and funding, positioning physical education as a marginal field. Such classification is not neutral; it carries cultural and symbolic weight, diminishing the perceived educational value of concepts such as giftedness (Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015) and reinforcing hierarchies of legitimate knowledge. I argue that without the intentional cultivation of critical reflection, pre-service teachers risk internalising and reproducing these dominant discourses rather than contesting them (Standal & Moe, 2013; Ovens et al., 2018; Fitzpatrick & Allen, 2019). Thus, the findings extend this argument by showing that teacher educators’ interventions are not merely supplementary but essential: they actively foster reflexivity and open moments of deterritorialisation within assemblages that are otherwise resistant to change.

Within this context of constraint, teacher educators actively cultivated the capacity of pre-service teachers to act as transformative intellectuals (Stenhouse, 1975). As the teacher educator, Zhan Bai stressed, pre-service teachers are “the backbone of tomorrow’s curriculum reform.” Realising this potential requires adopting rhizomatic thinking (Deleuze

& Guattari, 1987), a non-hierarchical, interconnected, and nonlinear approach to knowledge and identity. Rhizomatic thinking equips pre-service teachers to navigate uncertainty, contest dominant narratives, and continually reconfigure their professional identities, pedagogical knowledge, and practices. In this way, the pedagogical strategies intersect with broader sociocultural forces, enabling transformative possibilities while remaining critically aware of structural constraints. Therefore, I argue that the significance of these findings lies not only in demonstrating the persistence of reductive stereotypes, but also in showing how teacher educators can mobilise theory-informed practices to destabilise them. By embedding rhizomatic, relational approaches into PETE, teacher educators generate spaces for professional becoming that resist hierarchical categorisation and expand the intellectual legitimacy of physical education within education.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how physical educators interpreted, negotiated, and resisted new curriculum policies in real-world practice. On the surface, teachers seemed to comply with the reform, attempting to adopt some new concepts into their day-to-day teaching practices. Yet, behind this superficial compliance, teachers exposed the formalism and performativity of some aspects of the curriculum reform, especially the open class. Teachers believed that these innovative pedagogical practices were only reflected in open classes, while their daily teaching was very different. As a result, open classes have become performative exercises designed to meet external expectations and evaluation rather than real teaching transformation. Under the pressure of presenting a “perfect” class, teachers usually prioritise highly structured, rehearsed lessons and ignore students’ meaningful learning experiences. This emphasis on performativity ultimately obscures the open classroom’s intended purpose as a space for professional learning, thereby undermining the broader goals of curriculum reform.

Furthermore, this chapter illustrated the significance of new curriculum reform in reframing PETE programs to better prepare future teachers. Two universities examined in this research have adapted PETE programs to align with evolving curriculum demands, providing a pragmatic trajectory for future teachers. However, teacher educators also revealed that social stereotypes and social justice issues profoundly impact physical education teachers in their careers. In the process of educating pre-service teachers, teacher educators intentionally encouraged PETE students to move beyond their identities, such as athletes and embrace the possibilities to become. In addition to adapting to the demands of evolving curriculum policies, including acquiring professional skills and knowledge, future teachers must also embrace multiple professional identities and challenge social justice issues. More importantly, it is essential to cultivate their rhizomatic thinking to better develop adaptability, creativity, and interconnectedness rather than adhering to a linear process of reproduction.

Chapter 8: Critical reflection on PEH curriculum reform: dominance, assessment, precarity and hope

8.1 Introduction

Chapter 8 provides a critical reflection on the ongoing PEH curriculum reform in China, focusing on the tensions, conflicts, challenges, and aspirations within the specific sociocultural context that shape its development. This chapter explores four major themes and aims to address the third research question. The first section explores how deeply ingrained traditional pedagogical methods continue to shape teaching concepts and practices in physical education. Drawing on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), the analysis highlights the tension between three dominant traditional approaches, *discipline*, *spoon-feeding*, and *sheep-herding*, and the emerging curriculum concepts. This section highlights the hidden (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Kirk, 1988) and null curricula (Eisner, 1979), which shape what is taught and what is left out.

The second section then shifts to explore the impact of China's exam-oriented educational system on the PEH curriculum reform (Chen & Brown, 2013; Meng et al., 2021). Specifically, it addresses how high-stakes fitness testing has elevated the status of physical education but simultaneously limits the broader developmental goals of the new curriculum. Physical educators are caught in a struggle to balance performance-based assessments with the more holistic goals outlined in the reform. In the third section of this chapter, the focus moves to the precarious positions of physical education teachers, drawing on Kirk's (2020) work. It examines how systemic marginalisation (Johns & Dimmock, 1999; Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015; Richards et al., 2018) results in inequities in pay, career promotion, and safety concerns, contributing to professional instability and leaving physical education teachers vulnerable within the broader educational system.

Finally, the chapter explores the hopes of physical educators, offering a vision for the future of physical education in schools. Despite the challenges they face, these physical educators remain passionate advocates for the field, deeply committed to enhancing the role of physical education's future. Through Foucault's (1988) concepts, the findings reveal how physical educators are shaping a positive future for physical education in China, one that transcends current limitations and strives toward meaningful transformation. This chapter thus explores the complex interplay between tradition, reform, uncertainty, and future aspirations, offering a comprehensive analysis of the ongoing PEH curriculum reform in China.

8.2 The dominance of traditional approaches in physical education

Physical education in China, like in many other parts of the world, has historically been influenced by traditional military-style training, strict discipline (Kirk, 1996), multi-activity-based methods, and physical education-as-sport-techniques approaches (Kirk, 2010; Casey & Kirk, 2021). For decades, these traditional methods rooted in structured routines, rigid discipline, and teacher-led methods have been the prevailing norms in classroom practice, shaping both the role of teachers and the experiences of students. As discussed in Chapter 2, physical education has gradually evolved to embrace broader educational objectives, such as promoting lifelong learning, physical and mental health, and personal development (Hardman, 2011; McEvoy et al., 2017). Despite ongoing calls for curriculum reform, however, the influence of these traditional pedagogical approaches remains deeply ingrained in physical education practices.

In this section, I explore the reflections of physical education teacher educators and teachers, offering insight into how this entrenched culture continues to shape their teaching philosophies and approaches. The section is divided into four key themes: Disciplined structure in physical education, which explores the cultural tensions surrounding traditional

methods; two pedagogical practices, the spoon-feeding and sheep-herding approaches, which reflect dominant teaching styles; and how teachers make sense of quality physical education, specifically how they interpret the meaningful day-to-day practice within the context of these traditional methods.

8.2.1 Structured discipline in the physical education classroom

In physical education classrooms, there exist numerous views regarding what the learning of the subject should achieve and how it is managed. Many physical educators focus more on the subject structure and the mastery of technical skills; however, others place more emphasis on students' personal growth, emotional development and interests. The tension reflects the deeper cultural divide over the function of education in general, perhaps highlighted by the current new curriculum reform at schools.

Dong Cao, a traditionally-minded teacher educator at University B, strongly aligns with long-standing practices that prioritise discipline and technical mastery in physical education. He believed that the physical education classroom is more than just a space for exercise; it is a place where students shape order, respect, and performance. As he said:

Firstly, students must assemble neatly and maintain discipline...The second aspect is the teacher's indoctrination of sport knowledge...The third, the teacher needs to focus on the student's performance in practice.

(Teacher educator F, 15 December 2023)

Dong Cao's insights reflect a deeply rooted tradition in physical education that values obedience and technical mastery. His emphasis on *discipline*, *indoctrination*, and *performance* indicates a vision of the classroom as a highly structured environment, with the teacher as the central authority guiding students through methodical drills. From an analytical standpoint, this approach contrasts with contemporary educational values that prioritise holistic student development. As Kirk (2004) observes, reliance on traditional, standardised

methods may contribute to a crisis in school physical education, suggesting that such approaches may be increasingly out of step with modern cultural expectations.

Yue Qian, a physical education teacher at Qiu Zhi School, shared similar views with Dong Cao about discipline. She described herself as a “strict teacher” who relied on discipline to create a productive learning environment. As she explained:

In my classroom, students must assemble quickly, quietly, and uniformly. There can be no disorder...

For Yue Qian, discipline functions as a practical tool to manage the classroom efficiently rather than as an exercise of control for its own sake. Her emphasis on routines stems from her experience with younger students, particularly sixth graders, whom she described as “mischievous and active.” As she further added:

Once the students have established the rules, future lessons proceed much more smoothly... I think without these preset rules, it is very challenging to hold the attention of students.

(Teacher H, 14 December 2023)

From Yue Qian’s perspective, her approach illustrates how structured discipline in physical education supports both classroom management and student engagement. Her reliance on clear routines demonstrates a balance between maintaining order and responding to the developmental needs of her students, showing that discipline can be both culturally informed and pedagogically.

However, not all physical educators agreed with this traditional emphasis on strict discipline. Zhan Bai, a lecturer at the University C, advocated for a different approach, one that challenges the rigid discipline often seen in classrooms. He argued that such “military-style” discipline is harmful to students’ social and emotional development. As Zhan Bai described:

The teacher emphasises students standing in military posture and obeying commands... students are afraid to speak, laugh, or express themselves freely. Such PE lessons are terrible...

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

For Zhan Bai, physical education should be a space for personal development, communication, and emotional resilience, not just physical skill mastery. He argued that strict discipline stifles creativity, self-expression, and engagement, leading to negative experiences that ultimately diminish students' enjoyment of physical education.

Beyond the formalised routines and discipline in the physical education classroom, tensions can be seen to play themselves out in how teachers view their relationships with students. Although many teachers may claim that their relationships with students are equal, it is clear that their practices are often inconsistent with this because they are deeply rooted in cultural values. In a conversation, Hong Yu, a teacher at Shu Ren School, reflected on her relationship with her students. As she noted:

I think teachers and students are equal...but when it is time for them to behave properly, they must do so. When assembling in formation, students have to obey and listen to the teacher's command.

(Teacher F, 14 December 2023)

Hui Wang, a teacher at De Yuan School, echoed a similar viewpoint, but with a slightly different emphasis. As he explained:

Teachers and students should be equal, but in the classroom, we have different roles... I think without certain deterrence or expectations, the class is hard to control, and students wouldn't respect the teacher.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

Peng Liu, a physical education teacher at Ying Cai School, took a more hierarchical stance. As he stated, “I don’t think we’re completely equal...”, distinguishing his relationships with students from those with the school administration. He believed that similar to his interactions with the administration, his role required a degree of formality and authority to maintain classroom order. According to Peng Liu, maintaining authority is essential, and excessive familiarity could disrupt classroom order. As he explained:

If I am too friendly with the students, it may be chaotic discipline in the classroom, and I will not be able to achieve the aims of the lesson.

(Teacher A, 13 December 2023)

From these accounts, it is evident that while teachers may endorse equality with students in principle, their classroom practices often reflect hierarchical relationships. Teachers regulate student behaviour to maintain order, showing that ideals of equality are constrained by practical classroom realities. For example, Peng Liu’s comparison of his relationship with students to his relationship with the school highlights the formal, authority-based dimension of teacher-student interactions. These findings indicate that traditional cultural values, including respect for authority and obedience, continue to shape physical education classrooms, even as contemporary approaches emphasise holistic development.

8.2.2 The spoon-feeding approach in physical education

In China, classrooms have long been dominated by traditional teaching models, with teachers taking centre stage and guiding students in what is commonly known as *spoon-feeding*. This model, as Dong Cao described above, is a form of indoctrination in which the teacher acts as the authority figure, indoctrinating knowledge to students. The *spoon-feeding* method is particularly prevalent in physical education, where repetitive drills and rote training take precedence over fostering student engagement, creativity, and interaction (Raelin, 2009; Dehler & Welsh, 2014). Despite criticism of this model, the traditional

indoctrination approach continues to influence the beliefs of many physical educators. As mentioned above, Dong Cao strongly believed in the value of the teacher-led approach to teaching motor skills. For him, this structured, teacher-led approach remains central to his philosophy of physical education. Nevertheless, some teacher educators, such as Bo Hu, provided different views. Bo Hu argued that the teacher-led approach often results in repetitive training. He pointed out:

While there is a move toward integrating student interests and diversifying lessons, spoon-feeding persists, leaving physical education classes rather dull.

(Teacher educator E, 16 December 2023)

Bo Hu believed that this persistent emphasis on rote instruction misses opportunities for students to explore, play, and develop an engagement within classroom practice. Likewise, Ping Wei offered further insight into the systemic and cultural factors that make the spoon-feeding approach so entrenched in China's educational system. As he explained:

We're aware of the issues with spoon-feeding; we've been advocating for quality-oriented, student-centred education, but a fundamental shift has yet to occur.

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

In addition, Ping Wei attributed the persistence of spoon-feeding to the structure of China's national education system, which prioritises teacher authority and directive teaching, and to cultural values that emphasise obedience, discipline, and respect for authority.

Although teacher educators such as Bo Hu and Ping Wei recognise the limitations of spoon-feeding and support more student-centred, engaging approaches, the traditional model remains deeply entrenched. This persistence reflects broader systemic and cultural factors that continue to support teacher-led, directive methods in physical education. The ongoing tension between reform and tradition highlights the challenges of transforming teaching practices, as the spoon-feeding model remains resilient despite calls for change.

8.2.3 The sheep-herding approach in physical education

In contrast to the spoon-feeding rigid structure, in the sheep-herding method, teachers do not have special teaching content and objectives, allowing students to engage in free play. This new curriculum document about the improvement of teaching methods highlights that teachers are designing comprehensive learning activities and discarding the traditional physical education class of sheep-herding or cautious safety-first approach (MoE, 2022). However, some teachers argued that the mode of the sheep-herding classroom is a motivator to enhance students' participation in physical education lessons. As the dialogues with teachers:

Jing: How do you motivate and engage students in your teaching experience?

Peng Liu: I think I'm similar to other PE teachers. If the students have achieved the class goals, then I may give them the freedom to practice on their own. For example, in this lesson, students complete a 1000-meter run, and for the rest of the time, students are free to play. Letting students play freely is a way to stimulate their interest.

Jing: What you're saying about the sheep-herding style of teaching, isn't it?

Peng Liu: Yeah, but I need to remind them to be safe.

Jing: If a lesson is 40 minutes, roughly how long is the student's free play time?

Peng Liu: Umm...Usually, about 15-20 minutes.

(Teacher A, 12 December 2023)

From Peng Liu's viewpoint, the sheep-herding method of classroom instruction allows students more autonomy and free play once they have completed the designated tasks or goals for the class. It is worth noting that in the teacher's classroom planning, nearly half of the time is spent on students' free time play. This teaching method is contrary to the structured approach advocated in the PEH curriculum standard.

Nevertheless, Peng Liu is not a single case in my research. Other teachers, such as Feng Xu, also adopt a similar sheep-herding approach in their teaching practices. Feng Xu shared how he structured his lessons:

Feng Xu: Two minutes for formation and warm-up, usually 5-8 minutes. The basic teaching content is about 25-30 minutes. The next relaxation and summary is about 5 minutes.

Jing: Do you offer free play time to students?

Feng Xu: Definitely.

Jing: Why didn't you mention that?

Feng Xu: This is a regular lesson written into the lesson plan.

Jing: In reality, your teaching practice differs from the lesson plan, right?

Feng Xu: Yes. For example, in primary schools, students have five lessons a week. I would allocate one lesson period for them to have free play. I would take them to assembly, warm up, talk about discipline and safety instructions, and then let them play for the whole lesson time.

Jing: Is free-play time a way to promote student participation in the PE classroom?

Feng Xu: Of course, free-play time is the students' favourite part. I would tell the students that if they do well in class and complete the task, they will be given more free play time.

(Teacher G, 13 December 2023)

There are three key points in Ping Liu and Feng Xu's dialogues: First, from Feng Xu's statement, there is a significant disparity between actual teaching practice and the teachers' lesson plans. While teachers are required to have detailed lesson plans outlining content and teaching objectives, in reality, their teaching practice often deviates from lesson design. Additionally, both teachers emphasised the importance of providing necessary safety

reminders before free play time, highlighting that ensuring students' safety is paramount in physical education lessons. This underscores the transformation of the teacher's role in the sheep-herding classroom from an educator to a caretaker or shepherd. Students are granted the freedom to move around and play safely under the teacher's supervision.

Moreover, on the surface, teachers perceive free play time as a motivator for student participation in physical education. In reality, however, it often functions as a reward contingent upon students completing tasks or exhibiting good behaviour in the classroom (e.g., being disciplined). This reveals that teachers utilise free play time as a mechanism to control the classroom environment and reinforce normative expectations. Hence, in this finding, free play time in the physical education classroom holds a double meaning: it is both part of the null curriculum and a mechanism.

8.2.4 What is quality physical education?

The new PEH curriculum emphasises the importance of moving away from the traditional model of physical education lessons (sheep-herding and non-sweating styles) and advocates for a quality physical education lesson. However, what is a quality physical education lesson, and how does it make sense to teachers? In the interviews, teachers reflected on this question based on their own practical experience. At De Yuan School, Hui Wang, a veteran physical education teacher, shared his perspective on the new curriculum's expectations. As he noted:

A quality of physical education is to ensure that students engage in a sufficient amount of physical activity to exercise their bodies.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

For Hui Wang, the primary measure of quality is whether students achieve a level of exercise that promotes physical fitness. Song Chen, another veteran teacher at De Yuan School, shared

a similar view but emphasised both physical challenge and meaningful learning. He explained:

From my perspective, a quality PE lesson is one where students gain something substantial... If students engage in physical activities that cause them to sweat, it serves the purpose of exercising their bodies, and, meanwhile, they are learning sports skills during the lesson.

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

From Hui Wang and Song Chen's perspectives, they reflect valuable traditional priorities in physical education, namely, physical fitness and sport skill mastery, but may be somewhat limited by focusing primarily on these aspects. These perspectives, however, likely represent the prevailing views of many physical education teachers. In interviews, another first-level professional title of physical education teachers also shared similar understandings of what constitutes a quality physical education. For instance, Peng Liu stated:

If 38 out of 40 students in a class can master the skills planned for the lesson, the class can be considered successful and high-quality.

(Teacher A, 13 December 2023)

Yue Qian also emphasised skill mastery:

A quality lesson is well-designed, where students can learn the skills. For example, if a class focuses on teaching a three-step layup in basketball, but only half or less than a third of the students can, then the lesson is unsuccessful.

(Teacher H, 14 December 2023)

Based on the perspectives of two teachers, Peng Liu and Yue Qian, significant emphasis was placed on students' ability to meet the teacher's expectations for skill mastery, suggesting that success is measured by how many students can perform the skills being taught. In

contrast, Ying Lu offered a different perspective, emphasising student engagement and the affective domain:

I think that if the students participated and were engaged most of the time, and felt they enjoyed the class, then the lesson was very successful...If we just teach a skill and require students to complete it according to a specific standard, we ignore that each student has different levels of physical fitness.

(Teacher E, 14 December 2023)

For Ying Lu, a quality lesson is one where students feel engaged, motivated, and enjoy the process, not just one where they meet a specific skill or achieve physical outcomes.

Overall, teachers' perspectives reveal both convergences and limitations. Most emphasise physical fitness, skill mastery, and goal achievement as markers of a successful lesson, reflecting traditional priorities in physical education. Interestingly, they perceived that the "quality lessons = successful lessons" emphasised the achievement of specific objectives within each lesson. This view ties quality lessons to measurable outcomes, providing a clear and concrete way to assess teaching practice. However, this focus on outcomes may limit the broader, more holistic definition of quality physical education that the curriculum reform aims to promote. Ying Lu's perspective represents a minority view that aligns more closely with the curriculum's vision of student-centred, affective learning.

8.3 Conflicts between high-stakes testing and curriculum principles

Examination-oriented education has been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society for decades (Dello-Iacovo, 2009), and it significantly impacts school physical education. In the context of compulsory education, physical education testing is considered a high-stakes assessment, particularly through its inclusion in Zhongkao. Initially, fitness testing did not stand out as a primary focus of my research. However, as I conducted

interviews, physical educators consistently drew a direct line between fitness testing and the broader new curriculum reform.

This section explores the critical reflections of physical educators regarding the profound impact of high-stakes testing on their teaching practices and the overall educational landscape. On the one hand, fitness testing has elevated the status of physical education, compelling schools and society to pay more attention to students' fitness levels. Yet, this emphasis on performance and test outcomes has fostered tension within the educational system, as it narrows the scope of physical education to a performance-driven model. This focus on fitness testing, while important for student health, conflicts with the more holistic goals of the new PEH curriculum, which aims to foster broader student development and innovative teaching practices.

Through the insights of physical educators, this section uncovers the ongoing conflicts between the requirement of high-stakes testing and the aspirational goals of the new curriculum. These tensions not only shape the daily realities of teachers but also reflect deeper exam-oriented systemic challenges in balancing academic achievement with the holistic development of students.

8.3.1 Physical education testing in the Zhongkao as a double-edged sword

For many physical educators in China, the fitness testing in Zhongkao holds a pivotal role in shaping the importance of physical education both within schools and in society at large. This has had far-reaching consequences not only for the students' levels of fitness but also for what school priorities and parents pay attention to with physical education. Some teacher educators holding diverging thoughts on the nature of fitness testing in Zhongkao share the following ideas about the issues. Xiao Zhou, who is particularly well-engaged with the issue, described the purpose and impact of the Zhongkao fitness tests:

The PE test in Zhongkao was intended to raise the importance of physical education and to make schools and parents pay more attention to it... Once students move into senior high school, where the fitness tests are not required as high-stakes, their fitness levels often drop off dramatically.

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

Xiao Zhou highlighted that while the Zhongkao encourages physical activity in junior high, the lack of equivalent requirements in the Gaokao contributes to a decline in students' physical fitness as they progress academically. Another teacher educator, Hao Miao, extended this point by describing the Zhongkao fitness testing as a kind of catalyst that guides students' focus.

Exams are like catalysts... While the Zhongkao includes physical education testing, the Gaokao does not... Most students reach their peak physical fitness in Year 9 or Year 10. After that, we see a gradual decline, following an inverted U-shape pattern...

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

As Hao Miao argued, the absence of fitness testing in the Gaokao shifts priorities away from physical health, leading students to neglect physical fitness in favour of academic preparation.

While Zhongkao has undoubtedly been a driving force in promoting physical education in schools, the reflections of these teacher educators also raise concerns about the broader implications of relying so heavily on fitness testing as a metric. Zhan Bai, another teacher educator, expressed concern about the narrow focus of the current assessment system. As he indicated:

The biggest problem now is that the assessment system focuses solely on whether students' physical fitness and motor skills meet certain standards, without considering whether these skills contribute to their holistic development...

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

Zhan Bai argued that prioritising physical fitness and motor skills alone overlooks the broader goals of physical education, including fostering overall well-being and personal growth. Meanwhile, Ping Wei also highlighted the tension between core academic subjects and the function of physical education:

Most schools pay more attention to the core subjects' scores and the admittance into key high schools and prestigious universities... Many students now have high academic scores but lack practical abilities... High scores, low abilities...

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

Based on Ping Wei's statement, he believed that students have become test machines, using only rote memorisation to succeed, while abandoning other important dimensions of development. More importantly, there are many more deeply educational systemic issues with which teacher educators in China criticise the education system. The present emphasis on test-driven practices and the focus on core subjects has relegated holistic development to second place in the face of high scores and admission rates. As Ping Wei critiqued, "high scores, low abilities" points out the problem in the most striking way: the system is training students to pass exams, rather than cultivating them for critical thinking, creativity, or problem-solving in practice. As such, while academic achievement may seem successful, it neither builds the necessary competencies for holistic growth nor prepares students for meaningful, practical engagement in their personal and professional lives.

8.3.2 Contradictions between curriculum ideals and high-stakes assessments

The teachers, on the ground in the physical education classroom practice, stand at a fork in the road, divided by two major driving forces: the ideals of progressive education as framed by the new curriculum and the culture of examinations instilled in physical education testing. In turn, the result is one of dislocation that teachers operate within day-to-day, their

lives a constant juggling of curriculum goals versus high-stakes assessment preparation. This has, over time, increasingly become an overriding characteristic defining professional life for many physical educators. Ming Gao, a teacher-researcher at Teacher Education Institution B, summarised this conflict:

With the introduction of the new PEH curriculum standard, we find that the PE test in the Zhongkao somewhat contradicts several of the advocated concepts within the new curriculum... The physical education test in the Zhongkao, however, focuses primarily on repetitive movements and physical fitness, leaving little room for creativity and broader objectives championed by the new curriculum.

(Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

From Ming Gao perspectives, the curriculum promotes holistic development, including core competencies and systematic learning, while the Zhongkao test emphasises rote repetition and physical performance, revealing a fundamental challenge in reconciling curriculum ideals with exam demands. Additionally, teacher educator Zhan Bai expressed similar concerns, particularly around the phenomenon of “teaching to the test.” As he stated:

In the two or three months leading up to the exam, every class becomes a repetitive training session. Students drill specific movements and focus exclusively on test items...

(Teacher educator H, 15 December 2023)

Based on Zhan Bai’ statement, this phenomenon is deeply disturbing. He worried that this focus on test scores would not only inhibit students from participating in physical activities more broadly but also discourage their lasting interest in physical education. To him, this approach may have lasting negative effects, not only on students’ willingness to engage in physical activities in the future.

This trend toward test-driven physical education practice has progressively placed teachers in the challenging situation of feeling torn between curriculum aspirations and the implacable pressures of Zhongkao preparation. This is pointed out in the classrooms of Year 9 students, where ideally, physical lessons that should cover or accommodate at least the needs of the curriculum or textbooks have, in practical terms, focused exclusively on training students for a single-minded goal of preparing the items contained within the fitness testing.

As two teachers noted:

Peng Liu: Especially in Year 9, basically all the content taught is centred around the mandatory items for the PE test...

(Teacher A, 13 December 2023)

Ying Lu: During Year 9, we focused most on those items appearing on the physical education test in Zhongkao.

(Teacher E, 14 December 2023)

The exam-oriented approach, with its rigid confining of teaching content to only what is on the test, inevitably reduces the scope of students' learning experiences and their access to knowledge. This became particularly clear in my interview question about whether they would cover theoretical knowledge as part of their physical education curriculum. The responses of many physical education teachers highlighted the inherent limitations of this approach most clearly: "Teaching to the test," as reflected in the dialogue with Bin Zhao:

Jing: Have you taught theoretical knowledge in your classroom?

Bin Zhao: Not too much. Since much of the theoretical knowledge related to health aspects is not included in the scope of PE tests in Zhongkao, when I discuss these topics with students, they often overlook these aspects as well. Schools may also overlook many of these aspects because leaders are more concerned about scores. If

this content is not a mandatory item on the PE test in Zhongkao, we might teach it more simply.

(Teacher B, 13 December 2023)

This practical, test-focused approach, according to Bin Zhao's statements, deprives students of vital knowledge they could use for lifelong health. However, the system's pressure extends beyond the classroom, affecting parents as well, who are anxious about their children's test performance and prospects. As Song Chen noted:

Parents are particularly concerned about children's performance. Both teachers and students feel the pressures...

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

Indeed, many teachers feel caught between two opposing forces: the desire to teach a comprehensive physical education curriculum and the demands of an exam-oriented system.

As Hui Wang said:

If there were no pressure from the PE test in Zhongkao, I would design the lessons to be much more engaging...

Similarly, Peng Liu, like other teachers, regards this challenge everyday practice, as he prepares his students to achieve high scores on the exam.

If students follow my instructions, they will all perform well on the test. But this approach may not provide a positive emotional experience in classrooms, and students require intensive training to complete the tasks.

(Teacher A, 13 December 2023)

These physical educators' perspectives reveal one of the most significant challenges facing the education system: the discrepancy between the broader, more holistic ambitions of the new curriculum and the narrow demands of high-stakes testing. Such pressure to develop the students all inclusively and at the same time make them meet inflexible fitness

examination requirements puts teachers on a balancing act. The pressures of “teaching to the test” may risk depriving physical education of the potential to nurture creativity, lifelong health commitment, and personal growth. Instead, it becomes a performance-driven exercise in which success is measured solely by exam results. This dissonance between the idealistic curriculum and its practical enactment serves as evidence of the urgent need for systemic reform.

8.4 Physical education teachers in precarious situations: marginalisation and uncertainty

Physical education teachers operate within school systems characterised by uncertainty, precariousness, and systemic marginalisation, leading to significant challenges in their teaching practices (Kirk, 2020). This section critically examines the multifaceted challenges faced by physical education teachers, shedding light on the ways their professional voices are stifled within the broader educational context.

The first sub-theme explores the persistent socio-cultural and structural barriers that continue to undermine the status of physical education, despite national policies aimed at enhancing its importance. Physical education remains undervalued, often overshadowed by traditional academic subjects like language, literacy and mathematics, which are prioritised in the educational system. The second sub-theme shifts to systemic inequities, revealing how pay disparities and limited opportunities for career promotion further contribute to the low status of physical education teachers, leaving them marginalised and frustrated. Lastly, the third sub-theme addresses the daily uncertainties physical education teachers face, particularly regarding safety concerns. Despite taking all necessary precautions, teachers are often held accountable and face public scrutiny when accidents occur, creating a climate of fear and professional instability. This section, thus, critically examines how these cultural,

institutional, and safety-related challenges form a cycle of marginalisation, leaving physical education teachers grappling with both professional and personal precarity.

8.4.1 Sociocultural and structural barriers in physical education

From a macro sociocultural perspective, many physical educators believe that despite national policy changes and efforts to pay attention to physical education, the subject remains marginalised within the broader educational system in China. Hao Miao highlighted this persistent challenge, linking it to traditional cultural values: “Physical education is still relatively marginalised in China...” He explained that the long-standing cultural emphasis on valuing literature over physical or martial arts (重文轻武) continues to influence attitudes toward physical education, despite policy reforms.

Xiao Zhou, another teacher educator at University A, added to this perspective by pointing out the stark regional differences in how physical education is valued:

In Shanghai, the situation is relatively better. However, in other provinces and regions, including remote areas, physical education is considered a marginalised subject in other regions...

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

From Xiao Zhou’s perspective, China’s vast cultural and economic diversity leads to significant variation in the perceived importance of physical education. In more prosperous and urbanised areas, such as Shanghai, physical education receives greater emphasis, whereas in less developed regions, it often takes a back seat to academically prioritised subjects.

Despite these regional differences, the national educational policy acknowledges the importance of physical education, yet structural barriers continue to hinder its full recognition. Tao Hua, another teacher educator at University A, explained structural issues that contribute to the marginalisation of the subject. He further explained:

PE is an exam subject in Zhongkao, but it's not included in the Gaokao... When we evaluate schools, we focus on Gaokao admission rates, including how many students are admitted to the top universities. This system does not prioritise PE, making it a marginalised subject in the evaluation process.

(Teacher educator A, 12 December 2023)

According to Tao Hua, under the intense pressure of the Gaokao, schools are primarily judged by students' performance in core academic subjects such as Chinese, Mathematics, and English, leaving physical education undervalued despite its recognition in policy documents.

These perspectives illustrate how sociocultural norms and structural policies intersect to limit the status of physical education in China. Cultural values favouring academic subjects and systemic evaluation practices that prioritise Gaokao performance reinforce the marginalisation of physical education. While regional disparities and policy recognition offer some opportunities for improvement, structural and cultural barriers remain significant obstacles to integrating physical education fully into the educational system.

8.4.2 Systemic inequities and institutional biases

The marginalisation of physical education within the Chinese educational system extends beyond policy and culture, profoundly affecting the professional lives of physical education teachers. Interviews with physical educators reveal systemic inequities that influence their social standing, professional recognition, and career progression. Teachers like Peng Liu and Song Chen in the Puotuo district expressed frustration with the realities they face in schools, highlighting how the undervaluation of physical education manifests in pay discrepancies, professional recognition and social status. Peng Liu, a physical education teacher at Ying Cai School, explained that, despite national policies emphasising physical education, the practical situation remains challenging:

The status of PE teachers is very low... Our salary is much lower compared to core subject teachers...

For Peng Liu, salary differences are not merely financial; they reflect broader societal attitudes that view physical education as a subsidiary discipline compared to core academic subjects such as Chinese, Math, and English. He further highlighted inequities in performance appraisals, noting that physical education teachers consistently rank at the bottom when bonuses are distributed:

The bonus of PE teachers is the lowest, and this situation is almost the same in both private and public schools, though it may be more severe in my school...

(Teacher A, 13 December 2023)

Similarly, Song Chen, a physical education teacher at De Yuan School, echoed concerns regarding institutional bias:

PE is certainly not on the same level as core subjects... PE teachers at my school earn a lower hourly rate compared to teachers of other subjects... At least in terms of salary, I believed that PE teachers are treated unfairly...

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

Yue Qian and Feng Xu, physical education teachers from Qiu Zhi School in the Jiading district, highlighted that low pay and professional marginalisation extend beyond financial remuneration to social recognition and influence within schools. Yue Qian expressed:

Compared with other subjects, PE is less important... Although the country emphasises the importance of PE, it is not reflected in the hourly rate for physical education teachers... Yeah, I think PE teachers are unfair, but everyone is used to it. Whether it is annual bonuses or performance appraisals, PE teachers are the worst...

(Teacher H, 14 December 2023)

Meanwhile, Feng Xu believed that the issue was larger than pay and that it was part of the larger marginalisation of physical education in the educational system. Decades of experience had shown Feng Xu how deeply physical education was undervalued; as he referred to it, a secondary subject in school. As he noted:

Feng Xu: Personally speaking, society doesn't value PE, and it's marginalised in schools. Everyone can see it, but no one dares to say anything. Schools still focus on grades, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Jing: Do you think physical education teachers need a discourse in the school?

Feng Xu: In schools, PE teachers don't have a discourse... We just have to follow. Is it useful for us to make suggestions? It's useless.

(Teacher G, 14 December 2023)

Through the experiences of Yue Qian and Feng Xu, the challenges faced by physical education teachers come into sharp focus. Their accounts reveal a layered struggle: beyond wage disparities and bonuses, there is a lack of acknowledgement and respect for the role they play in school settings. For both teachers, the call for equitable treatment is not solely about money; it's about recognition, respect, and an educational culture that sees their contributions as equally vital to those of other subject teachers.

While the physical education teachers acknowledge such inequities, the fact that these inequities are considered "normal" perhaps signals a resignation due to years of inequity within the system. Most of the teacher educators, like Dong Cao, Ping Wei, and Hao Miao, offered further perspectives on this inequity. Dong Cao, a teacher educator at University B, spoke about the broader social issues facing physical education teachers.

At the societal level, the social status of PE teachers is not high... Changing the status of the subject and improving the social status of PE teachers may take time.

(Teacher educator E, 15 December 2023)

Meanwhile, Ping Wei emphasised structural inequities in professional evaluations:

It is relatively common for core subject teachers to be evaluated as a senior or professional senior, but it is not easy for PE teachers to achieve this title of evaluation...

(Teacher educator C, 16 December 2023)

As Ping Wei's statement illustrates, the issue of recognition not only limits the career development of physical education teachers but also reinforces their marginalised position within the school hierarchy. The lack of a clear, fair path to professional advancement only deepens the feeling of being undervalued.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most illustrative of the disparity between policy intentions and real-life practices came from my conversation with Hao Miao, another teacher educator at University A. He described the disconnect between national policies, which theoretically ensure physical education teachers receive equal treatment, and the reality of implementation within schools. As he explained:

Hao Miao: In fact, the state has issued special documents, such as the "PE Law of the People's Republic of China and the Regulations on School PE Work", which contain a provision to ensure that PE teachers are treated on an equal footing with teachers of other subjects. However, due to mechanism problems, the specific implementation of these policies is often impossible.

Jing: Why can't this change happen?

Hao Miao: Principals are concerned about the promotion rate of their schools. The district appraisal of principals is based on the promotion rate, and teachers are also appraised on the promotion rate. Since PE has little to do with the promotion rate, it is marginalised, which is also a result of inadequate mechanism safeguards.

(Teacher educator D, 18 December 2023)

The disconnect between national policy and local school practices is clear, as it highlights how educational leaders prioritise metrics that directly impact their career progression, such as Gaokao scores, over the holistic development of students, which physical education embodies. While the majority of teacher educators and physical education teachers see these challenges as systemic, both teacher-researchers, Ming Gao and Lan Li, offered counterpoints. As they stated:

I have a different opinion. The hourly rate for physical education teachers is a little lower now, but their total monthly income is not low. They can increase their income through a lot of efforts, such as doing some administrative positions in the school, etc.

(Ming Gao, Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

At present, in Shanghai, the hourly rate for physical education teachers may be slightly lower than that for teachers of main subjects... However, in addition to regular PE lessons, leading every morning radio exercises or training after-school PA are all counted as part of their teaching hours, ensuring that their overall salary is not lower than that of teachers in core subjects.

(Lan Li, Teacher-researcher A, 19 December 2023)

The two teacher-researchers offered an alternative perspective, noting that although the hourly wage for physical education teachers is lower than that of other subjects, total monthly income could be comparable if teachers take on additional duties.

Overall, the findings reveal a complex web of challenges facing physical education teachers in China, encompassing pay disparities, limited professional recognition, low social status, and structural barriers to career progression. Systemic inequities are reinforced by societal attitudes, institutional evaluation mechanisms, and policy-practice gaps, demonstrating that the marginalisation of physical education is both a cultural and structural phenomenon. Even where policies exist to promote equity, inadequate implementation and

structural incentives sustain disparities, indicating a need for targeted reforms that address recognition, compensation, and professional development in tandem.

8.4.3 Safety concerns and accountability in daily practice

In the daily lives of physical education teachers, one issue consistently stands out as their greatest concern: student safety. Both Song Chen and Bin Zhao experienced physical education teachers, shared their perspectives on the immense pressure they face to ensure their students' safety first in the classroom, often in the face of circumstances beyond their control. Song Chen at De Yuan School explained how safety is the foremost priority in his classroom. He recalled an incident where a colleague's student was injured, leading to parents questioning the teacher's role in the accident. Song Chen reflected on the broader implications of such incidents, expressing frustration with how the public automatically blames teachers when students are injured. As he said:

There are many restrictions in daily teaching practice... As long as students are injured in school, the parents assume that the school and teachers are at fault...

(Teacher C, 13 December 2023)

He explained that even when accidents occur beyond teachers' control, public opinion and parental expectations default to blaming the school and, more specifically, the physical education teacher. For Song Chen, this constant fear of liability has created a climate of caution that limits what teachers feel able to do in class. Similarly, Bin Zhao at Ying Cai School spoke about the pressures he faced after a student was injured during a physical fitness test last year. The student had been running a 50-meter race when he tripped and broke both of his knees. Bin Zhao had taken all the necessary precautions; he had conducted safety instructions and warm-up activities before the test, but despite his efforts, the accident occurred. As he described:

It was something we never wanted to happen... Everyone knows that during a 50-metre run, the teacher cannot physically protect them. Yet the parents still blamed me...

(Teacher B, 13 December 2023)

The accident brought such stress that Bin Zhao grew frustrated when he recalled this experience. He believed that the school did not provide much support or protection for the teacher when handling this matter, and instead gave him harsh criticism and a financial penalty. This incident, therefore, created long-lasting challenges in Bin Zhao's teaching practice. The pressure to ensure safety led him to lower his expectations and requirements for more difficult techniques, shifting his focus primarily to reducing risk and protecting students. This change in teaching methods highlights the profound impact of the accident, where safety became the primary factor influencing his approach to classes.

These experiences by the physical education teachers show the great difficulties they face, especially concerning the safety of the students and the consequences related to accidents. These stories demonstrate the heavy responsibility that teachers have for the students' physical safety, even when they apply all possible preventive measures. This situation becomes even more unjust for teachers, as they are often blamed by parents when their children are injured, which in turn shifts the blame to the school. The lack of institutional support, combined with the high societal expectations placed on physical education teachers, amplifies the pressures they face in ensuring the safety of their students.

8.5 Reimagining the future of physical education in China

Physical educators, perhaps more than educators in other subjects and disciplines, have a history of passionate advocacy for their specialism. Indeed, this characteristic would be one of the things that they have in common, across nations, cultures, gender and time.

(Kirk, 2010, p. 2)

As David Kirk notes, physical educators in China, like their counterparts around the world, are deeply passionate advocates for their field. This passion underlines their commitment to developing the role of physical education in schools, despite the challenges they face. This section explores the hopes and recommendations of physical educators, exploring both their collective vision and individual goals for the future of the field.

8.5.1 Collaborative efforts to transform school physical education

The future of school physical education in China holds great promise, yet its full potential can only be realised through the concerted efforts of various stakeholders, including not just physical education teachers, but also teacher educators, researchers, and administrators. As Sheng Yan, a teacher educator, stated:

If the new PEH curriculum standard can be fully implemented, it would be a significant step forward for the development of school physical education in China.

(Teacher educator G, 15 December 2023)

Yet, as Sheng Yan emphasised, successful implementation requires more than knowledge of the curriculum itself; it demands collective action across the entire educational system.

Dong Cao emphasised that the future development of school physical education must focus on two key aspects: first, raising public consciousness about the importance of physical education, and second, optimising the education system itself. According to Dong Cao, these elements are essential for the long-term transformation of physical education in schools. As he added:

While the government currently places great emphasis on school physical education, I believe that relevant institutions need to continually improve management mechanisms and provide professional support for frontline teachers, including enhancing their welfare and treatment.

(Teacher educator F, 15 December 2023)

Undoubtedly, as Dong Cao indicated, governmental support plays a fundamental role in the development of physical education in schools.

Lan Li, a teacher-researcher, remains optimistic about the future, recognising the government's strong commitment to this cause. "Both at the national level and the Shanghai Municipal Education Bureau, school PE have received a lot of attention," Lan Li noted. As she has pointed out, the focus is not just on providing funding but also on the top-level design from institutions such as Teacher Education Institution A. Additionally, she believed that their work, which combines teaching practice and research with professional training and is committed to improving teachers' professional development, lays the foundation. Lan Li added:

When teachers' concepts and professional capacities are genuinely enhanced, and various districts and schools provide resources for implementation, this will greatly contribute to the development of school physical education.

(Teacher-research A, 19 December 2023)

As Ming Gao, another teacher-researcher noted, however, there was still much work to be done, particularly when it came to the mindset and awareness of teachers themselves. He pointed out:

Looking ahead to the future of physical education, our young teachers are the backbone of this era, and I hope they will practice according to the principles set out in the new curriculum standard... However, the biggest issue we face during the training of in-service teachers is teachers' mindset and educational philosophy, which is the most important factor.

(Teacher-researcher B, 18 December 2023)

Xiao Zhou, a teacher educator, echoed this sentiment, offering an analogy that captures the essence of a teacher's role in future physical education. As he explained:

I hope that physical education teachers can be more dedicated to their work, as they are the enactors of the curriculum...It's like when a recipe is designed, the chef is the one who makes the dish. If the chef doesn't carefully add the right seasonings, the dish won't turn out well.

(Teacher educator B, 12 December 2023)

The new curriculum, according to Xiao Zhou, is akin to a recipe, laying out the new concepts, but it is the physical education teacher who must bring it to life. The perspectives from these teacher educators make it clear that the future of school physical education in China hinges on the combined efforts of all involved. They strongly highlighted teachers' professional capacities, government support, schools and community involvement.

8.5.2 Teachers' dedication to the future of physical education

While all physical education teachers share the same vision regarding the future of school physical education, each of them brings to their roles a unique hope and aspiration. Among them, Hong Yu, as a transformative physical education teacher, held a clear and determined vision for her work. She is deeply committed to the idea that physical education will continue to grow in importance and impact within the school. Her current focus is to integrate martial arts into the core of the school's curriculum. She believed in martial arts not only as a sport but as a bridge to Chinese culture, envisioning a time when students across her district and even the city of Shanghai would practice and honour these traditional forms. She explained:

My current goal is to establish martial arts as a distinctive part of the school curriculum, expanding it throughout the district and even across Shanghai to promote traditional sports and the national cultural heritage in physical education.

(Teacher F, 14 December 2023)

Hong Yu's advocacy for integrating martial arts into the curriculum is framed not just as an individual pedagogical preference but as part of a broader commitment to promoting traditional Chinese culture within education. While this initiative appears to be an independent, teacher-led endeavour, it is linked to state narratives that emphasise national identity and cultural heritage.

The interplay between personal agency and structural power is similarly reflected in Hui Wang's vision of physical education as a lifelong learning experience, a perspective that aligns seamlessly with governmental discourses that position education as a means of producing disciplined, health-conscious citizens. Hui Wang's goal was to ensure that students not only participate in physical education but also acquire skills that will serve them for a lifetime. The new curriculum standards emphasise lifelong learning, a direction he wholeheartedly supports. Hui Wang envisioned students mastering one or two sports skills during their 12 years of education, skills they can carry with them throughout life. As he explained:

If each student can achieve proficiency in one or two sports, it would lay a strong foundation for a lifetime of physical activity...I believed that these sports skills would empower students well beyond the school years.

(Teacher D, 13 December 2023)

It is worth noting that all the teachers expressed that they loved their jobs. Peng Liu shares a similar commitment, although he acknowledged the challenges. As he explained:

Although I sometimes feel frustrated or have negative attitudes, I still have a deep passion for my work and never allow my struggles to affect my students.

For him, the support shown by the government toward physical education renews his commitment to his role. As he added:

It's essential to have a clear plan for personal professional development. Whether it's for me or other teachers, we need to continue learning and improving our professional skills.

(Teacher A, 13 December 2023)

Reflecting on these findings indicates that though each teacher has their distinct desires and hopes, they shared a common bond: a love for their work and a deep commitment to improving the future of physical education. Their insights reflected their identity as educators, their passion and dedication to the future of school physical education, and their vision for the field as transformative intellectuals.

8.6 Discussion

In this final chapter of findings, I examined how deeply entrenched traditional pedagogies, socio-cultural structures, and the uncertainties faced by physical educators create significant barriers to the transformation of physical education. Despite discussion and calls for action in the field around these issues by Kirk (2010; 2020; Penney, 2013; Tinning, 2012), the challenges remain deeply embedded and continue to threaten transformation in China's educational landscape. To critically discuss these issues, I draw on perspectives from critical and poststructuralist theories, particularly the work of Paulo Freire (2000) and Foucault's work (1979, 1988).

The first key findings (see section 8.2) highlight the deep-rooted contradictions between traditional pedagogical methods and contemporary curriculum reforms. The findings reveal that physical education classrooms remain dominated by *disciplinary*, *spoon-feeding*, and *sheep-herding* teaching approaches, reinforcing rigid, authoritarian structures rather than fostering student-centred learning. These findings echo international research showing the resilience of teacher-directed practices in physical education, despite policy-level reforms advocating innovation (Dyson, 2014). Similar to the recent large-scale exploration (Landi,

2019) in New Zealand, the findings in section 8.2.1 revealed that physical education continues to be widely regarded as a highly disciplined subject in schools. Within this context, modernist practices position physical education as a mechanism for regulating and disciplining children's bodies, thereby reproducing what Kirk (2004) and Tinning (2004) describe as pedagogies of body regulation.

Yet, many teachers and even some teacher educators remain unaware of this crisis and instead reinforce rigid, highly structured teaching methods as the norm. For example, Dong Cao, a young career teacher educator, emphasised that students must assemble neatly and maintain strict discipline during physical education lessons. This perspective reflects the enduring influence of militaristic traditions in Chinese education (Yan et al., 2021; Ding et al., 2014; Liang & Hong, 2012), where physical education has historically been framed as a form of military training (Tsai & Zhou, 2017). These practices emphasise body regulation and compliance over participatory learning, exemplifying what Kirk (1996) characterises as “heavy, ponderous, meticulous, and constant” forms of material power. In this context, teachers' authority is reinforced within a wider system of power relations, positioning them as controllers of order rather than facilitators of learning (Kirk, 1994). As Foucault (1980) argues, discipline “makes” the individual, constructing students as both objects and instruments of control. Thus, while curriculum reforms advocate student-centred learning, classroom practices continue to reconstitute students as regulated subjects of authority.

The consequences of these practices are evident in classroom experiences. As a teacher educator, Zhan Bai described the terrible phenomenon of physical education classes: “students are afraid to speak, laugh, or express themselves freely.” In such a learning environment, where teachers and students lack social interaction, students unconsciously internalise obedience as the norm, which is a manifestation of compliance with class discipline (Jung & Linder, 2018; Kirk, 1992b). These dynamics also function as a hidden

curriculum (Johnson, 1968), transmitting implicit values of submission and conformity through everyday classroom interactions (Giroux, 1983). In this setting, students' capacity for critical engagement, independent thought, and self-expression is severely limited (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993). Additionally, while teachers regarded discipline as central to classroom management, it also reinforced inequality and obedience in the teacher-student relationship. However, the so-called "equality" that some teachers claimed to uphold depends on students being unable to challenge authority. These perspectives reflect a broader cultural context deeply rooted in Confucian traditions of hierarchy and respect for authority (Yin, 2013; Yu, 2008; Zhang, 2015a). Within this context, the power that shapes the teacher-student relationship stifles critical engagement and positions teachers as unquestioned authorities.

Likewise, teacher educators in this study expressed concerns (see section 8.2.2) that the persistence of the "spoon-feeding" approach is a key barrier to curriculum reform. This method reflects a deeply entrenched teaching model that has dominated pedagogy within China's educational context. In such classrooms, teachers remain the primary authority figures, dispensing knowledge to passive students. This approach mirrors the concept of *banking education* described by Paulo Freire (2000), where students are regarded as *machines* to be filled with information. In this top-down teaching model, students are regarded as mere recipients of knowledge (Giroux, 1983) who uncritically adopt the learning processes presented in physical education classes. In practice, spoon-feeding often manifests in repetitive exercise routines, drills, and rote practice that emphasise physical performance while largely neglecting cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of learning (Landi et al., 2021; Ennis, 1999). This approach reinforces collective, narrow, and stereotypical ideals of physical ability, body shape, and "correct" attitudes (Casey & Kirk, 2021). Thus, such methods tend to be experienced negatively by students (Yang et al., 2025) to the extent that they call the subject "All Physical, No Education" (Landi, 2019; Landi, 2025). These

critiques resonate with recent research in England, which indicates that teacher-directed approaches marginalise student voice (Littlefair, Jopling, & Kelly, 2025) and limit the transformative potential of physical education.

In contrast to the rigid structures of traditional pedagogy, the sheep-herding approach in physical education appears to offer students greater autonomy by allowing free play after completing assigned tasks. However, this apparent freedom does not signify a progressive shift away from authoritarian teaching. Rather, it reinforces existing power dynamics through subtler means, reflecting Foucault's (1979) notion of disciplinary power, where control is exercised not only through overt authority but also through the regulation of space, time, and behaviour. While the new curriculum explicitly discourages sheep-herding practices, educators such as Peng Liu and Feng Xu continue to use free play primarily as a motivational tool, illustrating how power relations persist.

The findings reveal two fundamental contradictions in this approach. First, while Feng Xu designs his lesson plans to include structured, goal-oriented content, his dialogue indicated a stark disparity between the lesson plan and practice. In reality, his lesson plans often function as mere formalities, bearing little relevance to real classroom activities. Thus, the teacher consciously ignores specific teaching content, thereby reducing classroom teaching time, which is a null curriculum (Eisner, 1979). Second, the role of teachers in this process is fundamentally redefined from that of educator to that of caretaker. In Feng Xu and Peng Liu's classrooms, teachers passively manage classrooms while maintaining the appearance of student engagement. Instead of actively facilitating learning, the primary responsibility of teachers shifts to monitoring and ensuring student safety. Thus, sheep-herding pedagogy undermines the value of physical education, reducing it to supervised play time rather than a subject that promotes the overall development of students.

The findings in the first section, 8.2.1, 8.2.2 and 8.2.3, suggested that the prevalence of traditional pedagogical methods poses a significant challenge to curriculum reform. Within this traditional framework, teachers unconsciously reinforce entrenched norms, resulting in hidden and null curriculum practices. This educational model aligns with critical theorists' arguments that education functions not as a tool for empowerment but as a mechanism for reproducing existing social hierarchies rather than challenging them (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1983). Given the dominance of traditional pedagogical methods in this educational environment, it is unsurprising that teachers' educational philosophies and beliefs are less progressive. Notably, as the findings showed in section 8.2.4, teachers tended to reduce the notion of quality physical education to class efficiency and skill learning. For example, teachers such as Peng Liu and Yue Qian believed that a physical education class is only successful if the majority of students demonstrate proficiency in specific motor skills. This narrow, outcome-driven interpretation not only overlooks broader educational goals such as student experiences and meaningful learning (Yang et al., 2015) but also reinforces traditional, authoritarian pedagogical approaches (Rink, 2013). More importantly, when teachers unconsciously adhere to traditional teaching models and regard them as *common practices*, they inadvertently reinforce outdated methods. Therefore, this signals a dangerous trend; it means that the vision of physical education reform is increasingly out of reach.

Building on the first main section of findings, the analysis of high-stakes assessment in physical education further illuminates systemic issues within China's exam-oriented educational landscape (see section 8.3). In particular, the physical education test in Zhongkao presents a paradoxical scenario: while it increases the status of physical education by compelling schools, students, and parents to engage with fitness testing (Yang et al., 2025), it simultaneously reduces physical education to a performance-driven, quantifiable outcome. As a teacher educator, Xiao Zhou observed in section 8.3.1 that physical education testing led

to a short-term boost in students' physical fitness. However, when these assessments are no longer deemed high-stakes, students' physical fitness levels decline, reflecting the instrumental approach to physical education within China's exam-oriented education system. This finding aligns with previous research (e.g., Aarskog, 2021; Yang et al., 2025; Jaakkola et al., 2013), which suggests that assessment functions as a temporary motivator rather than fostering sustainable engagement in physical activity.

As many scholars have commented (Yan, 2015; Wu, 2015), the phenomenon of "teaching to the test" is inevitable in exam-oriented educational contexts and thus cannot satisfy all the curriculum requirements. Similar to previous research (Keating & Silverman, 2009; Yang et al., 2025), the findings demonstrate how exam-driven pedagogical practices narrow the scope of physical education and constrain students' emotional engagement. As a teacher, Peng Liu argued that students' daily focus on achieving high scores may not offer them positive or enjoyable emotional experiences. This phenomenon reveals a deeper structural issue: rather than cultivating students' holistic development, high-stakes assessments tend to reinforce the perception of physical education as a tool for discipline and measurement, while simultaneously contributing to students' learning experiences (Alfrey & Gard, 2014; Yang et al., 2025). By prioritising test scores, the system perpetuates a narrow, fitness-centric view of physical education that sidelines its broader aims, such as enjoyment, personal growth, and affective development (Alfrey & Gard, 2014; Alfrey & Landi, 2022; Quennerstedt, Landi & Casey, 2024). Yet, I believe that these issues cannot be attributed solely to teachers. As the teachers noted, they too are subjected to systemic pressures that prioritise exam performance.

Moreover, under the influence of the exam-oriented education system, Chinese students and teachers have developed an extraordinary ability to address the challenges triggered by the exams (Niu, 2007). The teacher educator, Ping Wei, criticised the resulting

social phenomenon of “high scores, low abilities”, wherein students excel in test performance but lack critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills. This official pedagogical matrix epitomises Paulo Freire’s concept of *banking education*, a reductionist pedagogical form centred on behaviouristic approaches and deeply subjugated to the yoke of learning theories. An education that is focused on learning theories and behaviourist approaches dehumanises both students and teachers and de-intellectualises the educational process. I would claim that the purpose of education is not to ‘train’ students and teachers to become examination machines but to educate individuals in a holistic way (Dewey, 1916).

More critically, the findings reveal a fundamental flaw in the system: the goals of the new curriculum are misaligned with the content being assessed. While the curriculum advocates a holistic approach, emphasising core competencies and systematic learning processes, as the teacher-researcher argued, the assessment in Zhongkao remains restricted to measuring students’ physical fitness and isolated technical movements. This disconnect puts teachers in a dilemma: they can either adhere to the curriculum’s broader educational vision or focus on training students to perform well on standardised fitness testing. Obviously, this finding showed that most teachers choose the latter, reinforcing a test-centric culture that further undermines the transformative goals of curriculum reform. Penney et al. (2009) argue that high-quality physical education requires interconnections in three dimensions: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. However, when assessment content conflicts with curriculum goals, teachers’ pedagogical approaches are inevitably affected. In this study, I argue that while promoting comprehensive curriculum reform, assessment reform needs to be prioritised and integrated with the broader goals of physical education. I assert that without significant changes in assessment practices that align with the overall vision of the curriculum, both teachers and students will be trapped in an endless cycle of exam-driven

teaching and learning. This would undermine the transformative potential of physical education.

The most significant finding in this chapter is presented in section 8.4, which highlights the systemic challenges and uncertainties facing physical education within the sociocultural context of China. Teacher educators in section 8.4.1 reflected on the persistent marginalisation of physical education, which cannot be attributed solely to systemic neglect but must be understood as the product of entrenched ideological structures embedded in Chinese society (Yu, 2008; Zhang, 2015b). As Kirk & Tinning (1990) note, the far-reaching influence of social norms, values, and culture in shaping the historically marginalised position of physical education within the broader educational framework. The findings support their argument, particularly as the previous chapter (see section 7.5) discussed the entrenched cultural preference for *valuing literature over martial arts*, which reinforces the perception of physical education as a non-academic subject. As a result, sociocultural biases continue to favour “intellectual” subjects, such as languages, mathematics, and science, over “physical” subjects (Zhang, 2015b). This narrow framing of physical education as a “physical” or “body” has led to the unequal distribution and reproduction of material capital in educational settings (Shilling, 1991). Despite many scholars (Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015; Green, 2008) opposing the classification of physical education as non-academic and highlighting its multidimensional value, it continues to struggle for recognition in Chinese schools. As the findings showed, when exam scores and enrolment rates are the dominant indicators of an educational system, physical education becomes a secondary subject. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for physical education to establish a strong position in the school hierarchy (Welk, Eisenmann & Dollman, 2006).

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Richards et al., 2018; Johns & Dimmock, 1999), the findings in section 8.4.1 reveal the ongoing marginalisation of school physical

education teachers and the systemic undervaluation of their profession. While much of the existing literature (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015; Richards et al., 2018; Ferry & Westerlund, 2023; Sakallı & Şenel, 2025) has primarily examined the social identities of teachers and their marginalisation within broader societal frameworks, this study extends these discussions by providing evidence of entrenched institutional inequities. Crucially, these inequities are not merely attitudinal but manifest in tangible material disparities, such as unequal pay and restricted career advancement opportunities. The finding showed that while national policy apparently promotes equal treatment, implementation in schools tells a very different story. The structural issues faced by physical education teachers are not accidental but result from deep-rooted institutional priorities and sociocultural biases that privilege subjects aligned with academic performance indicators. Through Foucault's (1979) concept of disciplinary power, we can see how physical education teachers are subject to institutional control that determines not only their material conditions but also their self-consciousness. Schools are sites of normalisation where hierarchies of knowledge and power are systematically reproduced (Apple, 1986). Within this context, subjects are classified according to dominant educational values, and physical education is relegated to a lower status. As a result, physical education teachers are not only marginalised professionally but also structurally isolated, with limited opportunities for career promotion, especially in competitive academic environments.

The findings on structural wage inequality are based on the perspectives of physical educators interviewed in this study (see section 8.4.2). While all participants recognised wage disparities as a problem, two teacher-researchers emphasised a viewpoint that places responsibility on individual teachers. They suggested that physical education teachers could supplement their income through administrative duties or extracurricular activities. From a Foucauldian perspective, this expectation illustrates how institutional power operates through

subtle forms of regulation: rather than addressing systemic inequities, the system disciplines teachers to internalise and manage their own marginalisation. By framing additional responsibilities as a solution to wage disparities, the burden is shifted onto individual teachers, reinforcing the devaluation of their core professional role and normalising the perception that physical education is inherently less valuable than academic subjects.

According to Miller (1990), normalisation is the process by which institutional power and prevailing social institutions not only categorise people but also regulate and shape them. In this context, teachers internalise this discourse and accept their marginalisation as “normal” rather than resisting it. This passive compliance exemplifies how the power structure functions, not merely by external force but through internalisation (Foucault, 1982; 1988). Although these findings are based on a limited number of participants, they provide valuable insights into how disciplinary mechanisms maintain systemic inequalities and reproduce broader social injustice within educational contexts. Furthermore, the findings provided some new empirical insights into Kirk’s (2020) concept of *precarity*, which was instability and uncertainty with concomitant marginalisation of the physical education teacher within the system of education. I believe that the first step toward breaking this deep-rooted hierarchy within schools is to ensure equal pay for equal work within China’s education system. Without basic adjustments in hourly wage regulation, the status of physical education will continue to be marginalised, reflecting and perpetuating broader inequities within the teaching profession.

Another key finding in section 8.4.3 demonstrated that physical education teachers occupy a vulnerable position in their day-to-day practice under the legal system of the “safety first” discourse, a trend also observed in previous research (Meng et al., 2023). This discourse functions as a regulatory mechanism that not only governs the actions of physical education teachers but also shapes their professional self-perception (Foucault, 1979, 1991). By

positioning safety as the primary concern, the framework places severe limits on faculty's instructional autonomy, reinforcing a culture of over-accountability in which faculty bear a disproportionate amount of responsibility for students' safety and often for situations beyond their control. The insights of the two teachers in this study revealed the profound uncertainty they experienced in navigating this discourse. In Bin Zhao's case, for instance, despite having the warm-up and safety education in the classroom, he remained highly vulnerable to blame in the accident of student injuries. This issue illustrates how institutional power operates through mechanisms of surveillance and disciplinary accountability (Foucault, 1979; 1982). This vulnerability is exacerbated by the ambiguity of school accountability structures, which fail to provide teachers with adequate social protections (Meng et al., 2023). When sports-related injuries occur, institutional responsibility is often deflected onto individual teachers, who become primary targets of parental blame and legal scrutiny. In extreme cases, they may even face the risk of dismissal (Lan & Li, 2019). The "safety first" discourse, therefore, functions less as a protective measure and more as a disciplinary tool that sustains teachers' precarious status within the accountability mechanism. By establishing "normal" expectations for behaviour and decision-making, it shapes how teachers think and act in practice (Meng et al., 2023).

While Lawson (2018) argues that in the USA, physical education teachers are marginalised primarily due to a lack of clear accountability mechanisms, the Chinese context presents a different dynamic. Despite the existence of accountability measures, through high-stakes assessments and safety regulations, the findings in sections 8.3 and 8.4 indicate that these mechanisms have not enhanced the professional status of physical education teachers. Instead, they function as instruments of surveillance and control, compelling teachers to internalise risk management and self-regulate their behaviour in line with institutional expectations (Foucault, 1979, 1982). Under the "safety first" regulation, the findings show

that teachers are often forced into a *tick-box* approach to teaching practice, particularly when it comes to complex and difficult technical movements. When a single teacher is responsible for more than 40 students, no matter how extraordinary their capacities may be (Casey & Kirk, 2021), it becomes nearly impossible to provide individual guidance while simultaneously ensuring complete safety. Consequently, teachers are forced to prioritise safety over pedagogical objectives, often simplifying or omitting advanced technical content to minimise risk. Given these constraints, I argue that curriculum reform is impossible without a fundamental overhaul of the underlying systems and mechanisms. If safety regulations remain inadequate, teachers would be stripped of their educational authority and forced into the role of mere safety caretakers rather than educators. This may undermine both their professional roles and the quality of physical education itself.

The final findings of this chapter (section 8.5) indicated that although the teachers faced many difficulties in negotiating through the complexities brought by the new curriculum reform, they were deeply committed to the advancement of physical education in schools. In this section, the physical educators reflected on the new curriculum reform but offered recommendations for its future enactment. As discussed in previous chapters, the Chinese government's strong emphasis on school physical education, as seen in curriculum reforms, teachers' professional learning, and public awareness campaigns, reflects the form of governance. In this context, teacher educators recognise the importance of policy-driven reform, emphasising that curriculum enactment depends not only on curriculum design but also on the collaboration of schools and institutional stakeholders.

The state's role in setting educational priorities (Law, 2017) ensures that physical education is not just a "marginal" subject, but one that is aligned with broader national concerns, such as health and wellbeing. The curriculum reforms, implemented through decentralisation to local institutions and schools, were intended to foster student-centred

teaching and offer teachers greater flexibility (Meng et al., 2023). However, the findings in section 8.5.1 also highlighted significant issues with the management structures in schools, particularly the hierarchical systems that limit true autonomy. As a teacher educator, Dong Cao advocated that curriculum reform should prioritise adequate support for frontline teachers, focusing on enhanced management mechanisms and improved welfare and benefits.

Consistent with other scholars (Alfrey, O'Connor, & Jeanes, 2017; Lambert & Penney, 2019), the findings emphasised the crucial role of teachers as actors in curriculum practice. As discussed earlier in Chapter 5.4, however, teacher educators argued that a significant challenge lies in teachers' beliefs and agency. The finding suggested that while curriculum reforms establish a framework for change, real transformation depends on teachers internalising and adapting these changes within the context of their professional practices. Teacher educator Xiao Zhou likened teachers to chefs following pre-designed recipes, offering a critical perspective on the structured autonomy teachers experience: the curriculum offers ideas and directions, but the substantive enactment depends on teachers' interpretation and translation into classroom practice.

As Foucault (1988) reminds us, it is not through overt oppression alone that power functions but through the normalisation of behaviour, with individuals being encouraged to conform to norms, often without realising that such norms are imposed from elsewhere. The results in section 8.5.2 illustrate how teachers' visions for the future of physical education are simultaneously personal and shaped by broader discourses of discipline, national ideology, and lifelong learning. As Kirk (2010) notes, physical education teachers are particularly motivated to advocate for their subject, even in the face of systemic constraints. For example, Peng Liu acknowledged professional frustrations and limitations but remained committed to self-improvement, viewing continuous professional learning as both a personal goal and a response to institutional expectations. Consequently, these findings reveal a critical tension:

teachers' passion and dedication are evident, yet their professional agency is circumscribed by policy guidelines, institutional structures, and ideological narratives. While teachers play an important role in shaping curriculum practice, their engagement is often framed within boundaries that ensure alignment with governmental priorities and entrenched societal values. This raises crucial questions about the extent to which teacher autonomy can genuinely influence reform, highlighting the interplay between individual agency and structural governance in the enactment of the PEH curriculum.

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter critically examined the primary challenges facing curriculum reform within China's complex socio-cultural context, focusing on traditional pedagogy, the exam-oriented education system, and the institutional mechanisms. The findings indicated that despite the curriculum reform that has advocated for a more holistic, student-centred approach, deeply entrenched traditional pedagogical approaches persist. These practices reinforce authoritarian teacher-student relationships and maintain a narrow, performance-driven view of physical education. In addition, this chapter highlighted the role of high-stakes assessments in physical education and their impact on student fitness. While the high-stakes testing exposes the phenomenon of "teaching to the test," it also reveals contradictions within the goals of the new curriculum and its assessment components. Therefore, this study suggests that the assessment system must be revisited and more closely aligned with the broader goals of curriculum reform to promote high-quality physical education.

More significantly, this chapter revealed deep-rooted socio-cultural values and systemic mechanisms that relegate physical education to the marginalisation of the school curriculum. Physical education teachers are treated unequally within a web of socio-cultural biases and system constraints, in particular, "unequal pay for equal work" and an accountability system that prioritises "safety first". These systemic issues not only expose the

inadequacies of existing physical education teacher protections but also reinforce broader social inequalities within educational landscapes. Consequently, physical education teachers face increasing professional instabilities and uncertainties, further diminishing their professional roles and status within the education system. In light of this chapter, it is clear that meaningful reform is needed not just in policy but also in the cultural and institutional values that underpin the education system. Without addressing these structural inequities, curriculum reform remains superficial, failing to challenge the entrenched hierarchy that positions physical education as a secondary subject.

Chapter 9: Epilogue

9.1 Why am I here?

As I approach the epilogue of this thesis, I find myself returning to a question that has followed me throughout this journey: *Why am I here?* The answer, I know, is not fixed but one that is constantly shifting and unfolding with where I come from, who I am, and how I interpret both the world around me and my place within it. I am a former physical education teacher, a mother of two daughters, and a Chinese researcher, yet I am conducting my research in English at a Scottish university, focusing on China's curriculum reform. These intersecting positionalities not only inform who I am but also shape the very foundation of this research. In many ways, this journey has been as much a personal exploration as it has been a scholarly one, an ongoing process of transformation, adaptation, and growth. As Penney (2006) describes the curriculum as an "unfinished project," the completion of this research marks not an end, but the beginning of a continuous disposition to question, explore, and challenge prevailing narratives.

This study is motivated by the fact that, in 2022, China was in the middle of its third large-scale curriculum reform since the 2000s. Reflecting on my involvement in the second curriculum reform in 2011, during my time as a physical education teacher in Shanghai, I now recognise that I was not actively engaged in this process. I felt more like a passive recipient of top-down mandates rather than an active participant in the reform (Penney & Evans, 2005). While my personal experience influenced the direction of this study, it also opened up a broader inquiry into how physical educators, as embodied subjects, engage with, enact and reflect on the complex curriculum reform process. I realise that curriculum reform, as Macdonald (2003) notes, is not a linear process and cannot be understood solely in terms of compliance or resistance. It is a complex, fragmented, and contested process, continuously in the act of being constructed and deconstructed. From this perspective, the "new"

curriculum is not merely a set of directives to be implemented (Priestley & Philippou, 2018); it is a fluid, evolving project that is constantly open to interpretation, resistance, and transformation.

Throughout this thesis, I have engaged with three core concepts that have shaped my inquiry, each revealing significant insights into the nature of curriculum reform. In December 2023, I collaborated with three distinct professional groups of physical educators, each with its own unique insights and experience. As discussed in Chapter 5, their engagement with the reform process was shaped by a combination of personal, professional, institutional, and contextual factors. Chapters 6 and 7 further explore how physical educators' teaching practices were influenced by their interpretations, adaptations, and negotiations of the new curriculum. At times, they resisted certain aspects of the reform, questioning its applicability in their specific contexts. Chapter 8 has further highlighted the constraints posed by deeply rooted traditional teaching methods, as well as the socio-cultural influences and broader issues of education and social equity that shape the curriculum reform process.

This thesis represents a journey to understand the dynamics of curriculum reform in China, not merely in terms of policy content but through the viewpoint of the physical educators who are the main enactors of the curriculum. By situating the complexity of curriculum reform, the findings reveal the broader challenges posed by social justice, institutional structures, and the various factors that shape the reform process. I contend that this thesis provides moments in the ongoing discussion about the future of physical education and health and prompts a wide range of policymakers, researchers and physical educators to continue to explore, question, challenge and reimagine.

9.2 Key findings of this thesis

This study explored how physical educators engage with and enact of the new PEH curriculum and reflect on their experiences that occur within the sociocultural context of

China. In this regard, the study sought to address three research questions, which were explored through four chapters. The findings related to the first research question were presented in Chapter 5, while those addressing the second research question were discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. Finally, the findings in response to the third research question were reported in Chapter 8.

9.2.1 Research question 1: How do physical educators engage with the new PEH curriculum?

The findings demonstrated that teacher educators, teacher-researchers, and in-service physical education teachers were variously engaged with the PEH curriculum reform, which was influenced by their professional roles, institutional positioning, broader ideological forces, and institutional structures that govern educational discourse in China.

Teacher educators, in this study, played a central role in the curriculum reform process, actively engaging as curriculum developers, actors and policymakers. Their perspectives provided valuable insights into the complexities of curriculum reform, particularly how it evolves in response to shifting social values and ideological imperatives. Meanwhile, teacher educators deeply discussed the new curriculum as a process of decolonisation, not a wholesale rejection of Western educational concepts but a selective integration of these ideas within Chinese socio-cultural values. This finding reflects a broader desire to redefine China's role in global education as a selective force that integrates into Western educational philosophies while also shaping its educational trajectory following socio-cultural values. Yet, although teacher educators provided valuable insights as curriculum developers, I argue that they acted as "official experts" and policymakers in the reform process. The finding indicated that they consistently upheld the authority of official texts and took pride in believing that the new curriculum was both cutting-edge and flawless.

This uncritical endorsement reinforced the legitimacy of the state's educational discourse, aligning with the broader ideological project of cultural confidence promoted by the CPC.

Further findings highlighted the active participation of the two municipal and district-level teacher-researchers in the reform process, particularly in the development of textbooks, supplementary materials, and teacher training programs. However, their perceptions of the new curriculum mirrored those of teacher educators, emphasising the authority of the official curriculum. This supports Ball et al.'s (2012) claim that engagement is not a neutral act but rather a value-laden decision with consequences for educators. This finding suggested that their participation and contribution are essential but inextricably entangled in the greater ideologies and institutional drives within which they operate.

In contrast, the findings revealed that within the traditional 'fidelity' perspective, teachers were positioned as passive recipients of policy, expected to implement the curriculum exactly as it is presented. However, they inevitably interact with the curriculum policy through the lens of their own experience, expertise, and the specific context of their work environment. The finding demonstrated that despite teachers' embrace of the new curriculum, their understanding of it remained superficial, and they tended to defend the official text rather than critically engage with the curriculum. The findings also highlighted the role of professional learning in disseminating the curriculum. At the macro level, Shanghai leads in curriculum reforms by systematising professional learning opportunities for teachers and integrating them into a structured framework. This reflects Foucault's concept of governmentality, where the state mechanisms regulate teacher engagement through organised institutional programs. At the micro level, nevertheless, teacher participation varied significantly due to multiple factors such as the school environment, leadership support, and individual beliefs. Particularly, the findings, however, reveal marked disparities between public and private schools in fostering physical education teachers' professional learning

opportunities. These disparities reflect broader discussions concerning the allocation of resources, governance structures, and the hierarchical classification of knowledge, which have contributed to the marginalisation of physical education within the broader educational landscape. Thus, the findings implied that this structural limitation restricts their scope to engage in professional learning opportunities, which, in turn, affects how the curriculum is enacted.

9.2.2 Research question 2: How do physical educators enact of the curriculum in their day-to-day practices?

Physical educators in Shanghai enacted the new PEH curriculum in a dynamic and multifaceted manner, navigating a landscape of interpretation, adaptation, negotiation, and, at times, resistance. Their enactment of the curriculum is not a straightforward process (Priestley & Philippou, 2018) but rather a continuous negotiation between policy expectations and the realities of classroom practice. Three groups of physical educators reinterpreted and recontextualised PE and PA across macro, meso, and micro levels of practice, viewing them as co-constitutive forces that continually produce and transform one another within school settings. Given their re-interpretations and contextual sensitivities, the findings indicated a potential shift toward a more integrated approach that could be termed PEA. The emergence of PEA as a conceptual approach moves beyond traditional binary thinking, recognising the interconnectedness of PE and PA as mutually reinforcing elements of student development. Additionally, the integration of health education within the new curriculum reflects a broader healthism discourse, shaped by the Healthy China policy. Teacher educators largely interpreted this shift towards health education as a response to national priorities emphasising student health and wellbeing. Yet, despite its formal inclusion in the curriculum, health education remains a persistent challenge in daily teaching practice. The finding revealed that

systemic barriers, time constraints, and insufficient professional support have made it difficult, leading teachers to deprioritise health education in their teaching practice.

Furthermore, while many teachers attempted to integrate new pedagogical concepts into their teaching, they frequently encountered practical constraints, such as large class sizes and limited instructional time. More significantly, the study revealed a phenomenon of superficial compliance, where teachers formally adhere to the new curriculum but, in reality, expressed scepticism and resistance. This phenomenon was most evident in the performative nature of open classes. While these open classes are intended as spaces for pedagogical innovation and professional development, in essence, they often become highly scripted performances designed to meet external expectations. As a result, teachers believed that while open classes showcased the content and concepts of the new curriculum, daily classroom practice remained unchanged.

Finally, this study provided valuable insights into how curriculum reform influences teacher education, particularly in the context of PETE programs in higher education. Drawing on Deleuze & Guattari's (1983, 1987) theories, the study demonstrated how curriculum reform catalyses a dynamic process of identity transformation among pre-service teachers. The findings showed how PETE programs at universities A and B adapted to align with the new curriculum, aiming for consistent language and expectations between schools and universities (Ovens et al., 2018). This alignment facilitated a gradual transition for pre-service teachers, supporting them in developing the competencies necessary to navigate evolving curriculum demands. Nonetheless, the findings also highlighted the persistence of deeply ingrained social stereotypes and social equity issues, which continue to influence the development of pre-service teachers. Teacher educators emphasised the importance of addressing these issues and encouraged future teachers to challenge traditional stereotypes. They also advocated for the continuous development of professional competencies,

encouraging pre-service teachers to embrace multiple professional identities to adapt to the changing landscape of physical education.

9.2.3 Research question 3: How do physical educators reflect on their experiences while engaging with and enacting PEH curriculum reform in the Chinese socio-cultural context?

The third research question identified traditional norms and the socio-cultural context as significant barriers to curriculum reform. The findings revealed tensions, conflicts, and challenges that hinder the realisation of the reform's progressive ideals. Despite the curriculum reform promoting more holistic and student-centred teaching approaches, the reality in practice remains predominantly teacher-centred (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). The three traditional teaching methods, disciplinary structure, spoon-feeding and sheep-herding approaches reflect Paulo Freire's (2000) concept of the unequal power dynamics in the classroom, where students are positioned as the oppressed. These persistent traditional practices hinder the enactment of the reform's progressive ideals, reinforcing a teacher-dominated classroom environment that limits opportunities for student engagement.

The key conflict in this study was the tension between the curriculum's vision and the context of exam-oriented education. The findings highlighted that high-stakes assessment, while raising the status of physical education within a wider educational context, raised a conflict between performance-based assessment and the broader aims of the new curriculum. Indeed, in this regard, the teacher-researchers did note a complete lack of alignment between curriculum intent and what was assessed. This put teachers in an increasingly difficult position of having to choose between following the curriculum's broader educational vision and training students to perform well on high-stakes fitness testing. The findings suggest that teachers more often choose the latter, which reinforces the exam-oriented culture and limits the transformative possibilities of curriculum reform.

More critically, the findings revealed that physical education teachers faced significant systemic marginalisation within the broader educational system. The findings from this study suggested that physical education teachers experienced professional instability due to inequalities in pay, career promotion opportunities, and safety accountability. This marginalisation resulted in the diminished professional status of physical educators, leading to inequity within the school hierarchy. These systemic issues create an unstable professional environment, reinforcing the secondary status and vulnerability of physical education teachers within the education system. Despite these entrenched inequities, however, teachers have internalised the situation and come to regard it as “normal,” thus further reproducing the cycle of marginalisation.

The findings also suggested that physical educators remain committed to developing school physical education even though they face many challenges and uncertainties. While the Chinese government supports physical education through curriculum reform, professional learning, and public consciousness, teacher educators emphasise that curriculum reform requires collaboration between schools, institutions and institutional stakeholders. In schools, hierarchical structures limit teachers’ autonomy to make meaningful changes, and support mechanisms are insufficient. In turn, teacher educators advocate for improved management systems and enhanced welfare support for frontline teachers. The finding indicated that while policy-driven reforms establish a framework for change, real transformation depends on teachers internalising and enacting changes through practice.

9.3 Reflection on this research

In this section, I reflect on the research journey, highlight the key messages and contributions, discuss the challenges I faced, and outline directions for future research.

9.3.1 What are key messages and contributions?

Before embarking on this research project, I conducted an in-depth analysis of the new PEH curriculum document and introduced the principles and content to my supervisors, David and Dillon, both of whom have a strong interest in China's new curriculum. During our discussions, they raised critical questions that challenged me to reflect more deeply on the official text, not only on its content but also on how and why it was constructed as an official framework. As our conversations evolved, a fundamental question emerged: How does such a comprehensive curriculum reshape the physical education and health in schools?

This question became the driving force behind my inquiry. Motivated to find answers, I returned to Shanghai and started on my research journey. What I realised, however, was that the answers were not as simple as a definitive “yes” or “no”. Instead, the deeper challenge lay in understanding how reform unfolds in practice and why teachers respond in particular ways. While the new curriculum seeks to provide a unified framework, its enactment is shaped by longstanding pedagogical traditions, the dominance of the examination system, and wider socio-cultural influences. These dynamics constrain teachers' practices and limit the transformative potential of reform. Moreover, physical education teachers often operate under conditions of uncertainty and marginalisation, facing professional inequities such as limited recognition, reduced influence in schools, and systemic disadvantages (Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015). A key message of this thesis, therefore, is that policy alone cannot drive meaningful change: without structural support and professional empowerment, reform risks remaining an aspirational document rather than a lived reality.

Additionally, to capture these complexities, I understood that no single theoretical perspective sufficiently captures their depth. Curriculum theories (Young, 1972; Eisner, 1979) illuminated the knowledge structures underpinning reform, while critical approaches emphasised the importance of addressing social inequalities and empowering teachers as

active agents of change. Poststructuralist perspectives, particularly those of Foucault (1982, 1991) and Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), challenged universal truths and highlighted how knowledge, power, and discourse shape subjectivities. These perspectives also offered a lens for exploring how new ways of thinking can open possibilities for transformation. In doing so, these diverse theoretical positions allowed a more nuanced analysis of curriculum policy and practice and demonstrated that reform is an evolving process bound by contexts.

The research makes several contributions. First, it advances understanding of the curriculum development process in China. Chapter 4 shows that curriculum development is far from straightforward; rather, it is a complex and contested process often assumed to be linear. This finding challenges prevailing assumptions, even among educators within the system, and provides valuable insights for national and international audiences, including policymakers, researchers, and teacher educators, about the intricacies of curriculum development across different contexts.

Second, Chapter 5 identifies a critical gap in the literature on health education. Despite alignment with national strategies such as Healthy China, many teachers remain unfamiliar with health education content. Although health literacy is recognised as legitimate knowledge and a core curricular component, it is frequently overlooked in practice. This connects directly to Chapter 6, which examines the performative nature of open classes. While previous literature frames open classes as spaces for collective learning and professional development, my findings suggest that the pressure to perform often undermines their intended purpose. This challenges dominant narratives and offers new perspectives on how curriculum reforms are experienced by teachers.

Third, this study makes an empirical contribution by extending David Kirk's concept of precarity in physical education and health, showing how systemic inequalities, particularly unequal pay and entrenched marginalisation, affect physical education teachers in China. I

argue that equal pay for equal work is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for meaningful reform initiatives. If physical education teachers continue to feel marginalised and silenced, the transformative potential of reform will remain constrained. This finding contributes to broader discussions on school structures, teacher support, and social justice in education.

Finally, this thesis offers a reconceptualisation of the relationship between physical education and physical activity. I propose the PEA framework, which highlights the interconnected and co-constructive nature of PE and PA in both policy and school practice. The framework challenges binary distinctions and Western-centric models, offering a more inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of how PE and PA work together to promote young people's health and well-being. While situated in the Chinese context, it also recognises potential challenges and limitations in application.

9.3.2 What challenges did I face?

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, I encountered some challenges throughout my research journey. Although I initially regarded this research as an alternative plan, I soon found it to be a much more complex and intricate endeavour. This thesis seems to open a Pandora's box, uncovering deeper structural issues, tensions, and unforeseen complexities within China's education system. It is impossible to deny that the research is far from perfect due to some unavoidable limitations that make a difference both in breadth and depth.

The first major challenge stemmed from the limited availability of prior research on China's new PEH curriculum reform, constraining both the theoretical foundation and the scope for comparative analysis. To address this challenge, this thesis drew on the work of global scholars in broad anglophone contexts, such as the USA, UK, and Australia, to provide a broader conceptual framework and situate the findings within the broader discussion of curriculum reform and physical education. Second, although this study involved three groups

of professional physical educators, the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to broader contexts. In particular, conclusions drawn regarding private schools are based on a single case study (Ying Cai School), meaning that observed patterns of professional learning access and curriculum engagement may not represent experiences in other private school contexts in China.

Finally, due to time constraints, the research relied solely on in-depth individual interviews and did not incorporate multiple research tools, such as classroom observations. This limitation restricts the ability to capture the nuanced realities of curriculum enactment in practice, as detailed in Chapters 6 and 7. Direct observation of classroom interactions could have provided richer, more detailed insights into the pedagogical approaches and challenges faced by teachers, helping to better understand how the new curriculum is translated into practice on the ground.

9.3.3 What are the directions for future research?

Despite the challenges outlined above, this study has established a solid foundation for further exploration of national PEH curriculum reform within Shanghai's educational context. The findings provide strong evidence of the complexities involved in policy engagement and enactment, as well as the multifaceted challenges faced by physical educators. Centred on the PEH curriculum reform, the findings identified key areas including curriculum development, professional learning, health education, PETE in higher education, assessment in physical education, and the teachers' precarity. These findings open up several potential directions for future research, particularly across diverse educational contexts throughout China.

As discussed in Chapter 5, while Shanghai's education system provides rich professional learning opportunities, concerns remain for economically disadvantaged regions beyond the city. The rural-urban disparity in education persists as a significant social issue in

China (Zhou & Zhu, 2019), and disparities in access to professional learning further reinforce broader systemic inequities. The findings suggest that knowledge about curriculum reform is not universally accessible but is shaped by geographical and socio-economic factors.

Therefore, future studies should focus on economically deprived and rural areas in China to find out how physical education teachers could be supported.

Moreover, this research contributed to the discussion of health education in the reform process and provided an important basis within the literature (Chapter 6). Future studies, thus, should further investigate how health education is enacted by teachers in other regions, as well as its broader implications for educational practices and health outcomes. Understanding how health education is integrated into the curriculum and the factors that shape its enactment could provide valuable insights for future policy development.

Finally, I recommend that future research employ a broader range of qualitative research instruments and adopt an expanded scope of investigation in various educational contexts in China. This could include methods such as classroom observations, focus group interviews, as well as participatory action research to gain a more nuanced understanding of both the processes and effects of curriculum reform. By incorporating diverse research tools and methodologies, future studies would be better equipped to capture the complexities of curriculum enactment, teacher practices, and student experiences about physical education and health.

9.4 Final thought: Where am I going?

The plan(e) is infinite; you can start it in a thousand different ways; you will always find something that comes too late or too early, forcing you to recompose all of your relations of speed and slowness, all of your affects, and to rearrange the overall assemblage. An infinite undertaking...

Deleuze & Guattari (1987, p. 259)

As I was writing the closing epilogue of this thesis, as I usually did, it was during the Chinese New Year, a festival traditionally associated with renewal and new beginnings. I was reminded that this journey, like the infinite plan(e) Deleuze & Guattari speak of, does not end. It is like this inquiry, of this process, to be constantly rethinking, rearranging, repositioning and reacting to understand and be understood.

Where I am going is as significant as where I am now. This thesis is like a “baby” to me, and the future will be infinite. Just like identity, it is not fixed but constantly changing over time. I believe that desire produces transformation and becomes infinite possibilities. Just like a decade ago, I could not imagine that I would live in Scotland, let alone that I would be completing my PhD thesis. All of this happened, not as easily as one might imagine, but it was transformative. I learned that transformation is not a linear process but a series of interdependent moments, each linked to the next.

Similarly, the goals of physical education and health are ever-changing, shifting with changing societal priorities, and the professionalism of physical educators often changes in response to these evolving needs (O'Sullivan, 2004). China's new curriculum reform has just begun, and physical educators need to constantly break boundaries and adapt to the goals of the new curriculum, which may require changes that happen quickly or slowly. Though many obstacles and boundaries were uncovered in this study, some possibilities also emerged. I firmly believe that, however, as Henry Giroux (2018) notes, teachers are transformative intellectuals.

This thesis has taught me that there is no final endpoint of the research but rather a series of beginnings, each of which holds the potential for further exploration. The completion of this work marks the end of one phase, but also a shift in perspective, a new stage in the ongoing dialogue of ideas and topics in which I am engaged. As I move forward, I remain open to new possibilities, new questions, and new ways of seeing the world and the

work I do. As I know, there is no universal truth. The infinite journey continues, and with it, the opportunity to reshape and redefine the paths ahead.

References

- Aarskog, E. (2021). 'No assessment, no learning': Exploring student participation in assessment in Norwegian physical education (PE). *Sport, education and society*, 26(8), 875-888.
- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. *Handbook of practical program evaluation*, 492-505.
- Aldous, D., Evans, V., & Penney, D. (2022). Curriculum reform in Wales: Physical education teacher educators' negotiation of policy positions. *The Curriculum Journal*, 33(3), 495-514.
- Alfrey, L., & Brown, T. D. (2013). Health literacy and the Australian Curriculum for Health and Physical Education: a marriage of convenience or a process of empowerment?. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 4(2), 159-173.
- Alfrey, L., & Gard, M. (2014). A crack where the light gets in: a study of Health and Physical Education teachers' perspectives on fitness testing as a context for learning about health. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 5(1), 3-18.
- Alfrey, L., & Gard, M. (2019). Figuring out the prevalence of fitness testing in physical education: A figural analysis. *European Physical Education Review*, 25(1), 187–202.
- Alfrey, L., & Landi, D. (2022). Fitness testing as a debated and contested PE-for-health practice. In *Physical Education Pedagogies for Health* (pp. 33-47). Routledge.
- Alfrey, L., & O'Connor, J. (2020). Critical pedagogy and curriculum transformation in Secondary Health and Physical Education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 25(3), 288-302.

- Alfrey, L., & O'Connor, J. (2024). Transforming physical education: an analysis of context and resources that support curriculum transformation and enactment. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 29(1), 1-17.
- Alfrey, L., O'Connor, J., & Jeanes, R. (2017). Teachers as policy actors: Co-creating and enacting critical inquiry in secondary health and physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 22(2), 107-120.
- Alsubaie, M. A. (2015). Hidden curriculum as one of the current issue of the curriculum. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(33), 125-128.
- Anderson, B., & McFarlane, C. (2011). Assemblage and geography. *Area*, 43(2), 124-127.
- Andreotti, V. (2011). *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Apple, M. W. (1981). Curricular form and the logic of technical control. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 2(3), 293-319.
- Apple, M. W. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (1993). The politics of official knowledge: Does a national curriculum make sense?. *Teachers College Record*, 95(2), 222-241.
- Apple, M. W., & King, N. R. (1977). What do schools teach?. *Curriculum inquiry*, 6(4), 341-358.
- Apple, M. W., & Oliver, A. (1996). Becoming right: Education and the formation of conservative movements. *Teachers College Record*, 97(3), 419-445.
- Apple, M. W., & Teitelbaum, K. (1986). Are teachers losing control of their skills and curriculum?. *J. Curriculum Studies*, 18(2), 177-184.
- Apple, M. W., & Weis, L. (1986). Seeing education relationally: The stratification of culture and people in the sociology of school knowledge. *Journal of Education*, 168(1), 7-34.

- Armour, K. M. (1997). Developing a personal philosophy on the nature and purpose of physical education: Life history reflections. *European Physical Education Review*, 3(1), 68–82.
- Armour, K. M. (2010). The physical education profession and its professional responsibility... or... why ‘12 weeks paid holiday’ will never be enough. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 15(1), 1–13.
- Armour, K., Makopoulou, K., & Chambers, F. (2012). Progression in physical education teachers’ career-long professional learning: Conceptual and practical concerns. *European Physical Education Review*, 18(1), 62–77.
- Atencio, M., Jess, M., & Dewar, K. (2012). ‘It is a case of changing your thought processes, the way you actually teach’: Implementing a complex professional learning agenda in Scottish physical education. *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 17(2), 127–144.
- Azzarito, L. (2009). The panopticon of physical education: Pretty, active and ideally white. *Physical education and sport pedagogy*, 14(1), 19–39.
- Azzarito, L., & Solmon, M. (2009). An investigation of students embodied discourses in physical education: A gender project. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 28(2), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.28.2.173>
- Azzarito, L., Solmon, M. A., & Harrison Jr., L. (2006). “...If I had a choice, I would....” Afeminist poststructuralist perspective on girls in physical education. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 77(2), 222–239.
- Bain, L. (1990). A critical analysis of the hidden curriculum in physical education. *Physical education, curriculum and culture: Critical issues in the contemporary crisis*, 23–42.
- Bairner, A. (2014). Urban walking and the pedagogies of the street. In *New directions in social theory, education and embodiment* (pp. 109–122). Routledge.

- Bakker, A. B., & Bal, M. P. (2010). Weekly work engagement and performance: A study among starting teachers. *Journal of occupational and organizational psychology*, 83(1), 189-206.
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of education policy*, 18(2), 215-228.
- Ball, S. J. (2013). *Foucault and education: Disciplines and knowledge*. Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. (2015). What is policy? 21 years later: Reflections on the possibilities of policy research. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 36(3), 306-313.
- Ball, S. J., & Bowe, R. (1992). Subject departments and the 'implementation' of National Curriculum policy: an overview of the issues. *Journal of curriculum studies*, 24(2), 97-115.
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy [internet resource] policy enactments in secondary schools*. Routledge.
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., Braun, A., & Hoskins, K. (2011a). Policy actors: Doing policy work in schools. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 32(4), 625-639.
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., Braun, A., & Hoskins, K. (2011b). Policy subjects and policy actors in schools: Some necessary but insufficient analyses. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), 611–624. doi:10.1080/01596306.2011. 601564
- Bazeley, P., & Jackson, K. (2013) *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo (2nd ed.)*. London: Sage.
- Beddoes, Z., Prusak, K. A., & Hall, A. (2014). Overcoming marginalization of physical education in America's schools with professional learning communities. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 85(4), 21-27.
- Ben-Peretz, M. (1990). *The teacher-curriculum encounter: Freeing teachers from the tyranny of texts*. Suny Press.

- Beni, S., Fletcher, T., & Ní Chróinín, D. (2017). Meaningful experiences in physical education and youth sport: A review of the literature. *Quest*, 69(3), 291-312.
- Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010) *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Best, S., & Kellner, D. (1991). *Postmodern theory: Critical interrogations*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Best, U. (2018). Gnawing at the edges of the state: Deleuze and Guattari and border studies. In *Routing borders between territories, discourses and practices* (pp. 177-190). Routledge.
- Beyer, L. E., & Apple, M. W. (1998). Values and politics in the curriculum. *The curriculum: Problems, politics, and possibilities*, 3-11.
- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability (formerly: Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education)*, 21, 33-46.
- Biesta, G. (2015). On the two cultures of educational research, and how we might move ahead: Reconsidering the ontology, axiology and praxeology of education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 14(1), 11-22.
- Bouckaert, M., & Kools, Q. (2018). Teacher educators as curriculum developers: exploration of a professional role. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(1), 32-49.
- Braun, A., Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Hoskins, K. (2011). Taking context seriously: Towards explaining policy enactments in the secondary school. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 32(4), 585-596.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.

- Brennan, M. (2011). National curriculum: A political-educational tangle. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3), 259-280.
- Brinkmann, S. (2020). Conversational knowledge and gifts of chance: On the state of the method. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406920939426.
- Brooks, P. (1984). *Reading for the plot: Design and intention in narrative*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Cale, L., & Harris, J. (2009). Fitness testing in physical education—a misdirected effort in promoting healthy lifestyles and physical activity?. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 14(1), 89-108.
- Cale, L., Harris, J., & Chen, M. H. (2014). Monitoring health, activity and fitness in physical education: its current and future state of health. *Sport, Education and Society*, 19(4), 376-397.
- Carl, A. E. (2009). *Teacher empowerment through curriculum development: Theory into practice*. Juta and company Ltd.
- Casey, A., & Kirk, D. (2021). *Models-based practice in physical education*. Routledge.
- Castro-García, M., Barquero-Ruiz, C., & López-Villar, C. (2024). Are Gender Stereotypes Still Prevalent in Physical Education? Spanish Teachers' and Students' Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Gender Equity. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 1(aop), 1-12.
- Chen, J., & Brown, G. T. (2013). High-stakes examination preparation that controls teaching: Chinese prospective teachers' conceptions of excellent teaching and assessment. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 39(5), 541-556.
- Chen, S. (2023). The culturalisation of politics in contemporary Chinese citizenship education. *Comparative Education* (ahead-of-print), 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2023.2209396>

- Chen, S. T., Tang, Y., Chen, P. J., & Liu, Y. (2020). The development of Chinese assessment and evaluation of physical literacy (CAEPL): a study using Delphi method. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(8), 2720.
- Chen, S.T.; Liu, Y.; Tang, Y.; Chen, A. (2017). Understanding the concept of ti yu su yang in China—On the perspective of interpretation to physical literacy. *J. China Sport*, (37), 41–51.
- China Education Center. (2021). *Education in China*.
<https://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/cedu.php>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Clandinin, D. J., Pushor, D., & Orr, A. M. (2007). Navigating sites for narrative inquiry. *Journal of teacher education*, 58(1), 21-35.
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Successful qualitative research.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Demers, K. E. (2008). Teacher education as a bridge? Unpacking curriculum controversies. F. Connelly, M. Fang He & J. Phillion (Eds) *The Sage Handbook of Curriculum and Instruction*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 261-281.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (eight edition). Â Routledge.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2012). Narrative inquiry. *In Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477-487). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.

- Cuban, L. (1998). How schools change reforms: Redefining reform success and failure. *Teachers college record*, 99(3), 453-477.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., & Stobart, G. (2007). *Teachers matter: Connecting work, lives and effectiveness*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Dehler, G. E., & Welsh, M. A. (2014). Against spoon-feeding. For learning. Reflections on students' claims to knowledge. *Journal of Management Education*, 38(6), 875-893.
- DeLanda, M. (2016). *Assemblage theory*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Foucault*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H. R. Lane, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dello-Iacovo, B. (2009). Curriculum reform and 'quality education' in China: An overview. *International journal of educational development*, 29(3), 241-249.
- Deng, J., Fitzpatrick, K., & Powell, D. (2025). Problematising young people's bodies: a critical discourse analysis of China's national physical education and health curriculum policies. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-12.
- Deng, M., & Zhao, Z. (2014). The education system in Shanghai: Negotiating the nature of education. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 23, 805-812.
- Deng, Z. (2011). Confucianism, modernization and Chinese pedagogy: An introduction. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(5), 561-568.
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkinds University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1978). *Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences* (A. Bass, Trans.). In *Writing and difference* (pp. 278–293). University of Chicago Press
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education by John Dewey*. Project Gutenberg.

- Ding, B. (2023). From 'Didactics' to 'Curriculum-and-Didactics' and Beyond: A Non-affirmative Approach to the Analysis of the Changes in Didactics in Mainland China. In *Non-affirmative Theory of Education and Bildung* (pp. 339-354). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Ding, H., Li, Y., & Wu, X. (2014). A review of scholarly and research work in physical education in China during the first decade of the 21st century. *Quest*, 66(1), 117-133.
- Du Preez, P., Simmonds, S., & le Grange, L. (2022). Re/thinking curriculum inquiry in the posthuman condition: A critical posthumanist stance. *Education as Change*, 26(1), 1-20.
- Dyson, B. (2014). Quality physical education: A commentary on effective physical education teaching. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 85(2), 144-152.
- Eisner, E. (1979). *The educational imagination: On the design & evaluation of school programs*. Collier-Macmillan.
- Ellingson, L. L. (2009). *Engaging crystallization in qualitative research: An introduction*. Sage.
- Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis: A focus on trustworthiness. *SAGE open*, 4(1), 2158244014522633.
- Ennis, C. D. (1999). Creating a culturally relevant curriculum for disengaged girls. *Sport, education and society*, 4(1), 31-49.
- Evans, J., & Davies, B. (2004). 14 Endnote: the embodiment of consciousness Bernstein, health and schooling. *Body knowledge and control: Studies in the sociology of physical education and health*, 207.
- Evans, J., & Rich, E. (2011). Body policies and body pedagogies: every child matters in totally pedagogised schools?. *Journal of Education Policy*, 26(3), 361-379.

- Evans, J., Rich, E., & Davies, B. (2004). The emperor's new clothes: Fat, thin, and overweight. The social fabrication of risk and ill health. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 23(4), 372-391.
- Fan, X., & Cao, Z. B. (2017). Physical activity among Chinese school-aged children: national prevalence estimates from the 2016 Physical Activity and Fitness in China—The Youth Study. *Journal of sport and health science*, 6(4), 388-394.
- Fernandez-Balboa, J. M. (1993). Sociocultural characteristics of the hidden curriculum in physical education. *Quest*, 45(2), 230-254.
- Ferry, M., & Westerlund, R. (2023). Professional networks, collegial support, and school leaders: How physical education teachers manage reality shock, marginalization, and isolation in a decentralized school system. *European Physical Education Review*, 29(1), 74-90.
- Fitzpatrick, K., & Allen, J. M. (2019). What does critical health education in schools look like? Two ethnographic narratives of critical practice. *Health Education Journal*, 78(6), 647-661.
- Fitzpatrick, K., & Burrows, L. (2017). Critical health education in aotearoa New Zealand. *Sport, Education and Society*, 22(5), 552-568.
- Fitzpatrick, K., & Santamaría, L. J. (2015). Disrupting racialization: Considering critical leadership in the field of physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 20(5), 532-546.
- Flinders, D. J., Noddings, N., & Thornton, S. J. (1986). The null curriculum: Its theoretical basis and practical implications. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 16(1), 33-42.
- Flintoff, A., & Dowling, F. (2019). 'I just treat them all the same, really': Teachers, whiteness and (anti) racism in physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 24(2), 121-133.

- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian & New Zealand journal of psychiatry*, 36(6), 717-732.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish*. New York: Vintage books.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical inquiry*, 8(4), 777-795.
- Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment. In. Rabinow, P. (ed.) *The Foucault reader*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Technologies of the Self*. in L.H. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton (eds) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction*, volume I. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1991). *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary*. Continuum.
- Fuchs, E., & Bock, A. (2018). *The Palgrave handbook of textbook studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fullan, M. (2000). The return of large-scale reform. *Journal of educational Change*, 1(1), 5-27.
- Fullan, M. (2012). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. London: Routledge.
- Gaudreault, K. L., Richards, K. A. R., & Mays Woods, A. (2018). Understanding the perceived mattering of physical education teachers. *Sport, Education and Society*, 23(6), 578-590.

- Giroux, H. (1983). *Theory & resistance in education : A pedagogy for the opposition*. Heinemann.
- Giroux, H. A. (2018). Teachers as transformative intellectuals. In *Thinking about schools* (pp. 183-189). Routledge.
- Giroux, H. A., & Penna, A. N. (1979). Social education in the classroom: The dynamics of the hidden curriculum. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 7(1), 21-42.
- Goodson, I. (2005). *Learning, curriculum and life politics: The selected works of Ivor F. Goodson*. Psychology Press.
- Goodson, I. F. (1990). Studying curriculum: Towards a social constructionist perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 22(4), 299-312.
- Gong, Y., Young, A. M., & MacPhail, A. (2023). The complexity of professional identity: Chinese university teachers teaching in physical education teacher education (PETE) programmes. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(4), 707-726.
- Gordon, C. (1991). Governmental rationality: An introduction. *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*, 1(3), 1-52.
- Gordon, D. (1982). The concept of the hidden curriculum. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 16(2), 187-98.
- Gray, S., Hardley, S., Bryant, A. S., Hooper, O., Stirrup, J., Sandford, R., ... & Carse, N. (2023). Exploring physical education teachers' conceptualisations of health and wellbeing discourse across the four nations of the UK. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*, 1-23.
- Gray, S., MacLean, J., & Mulholland, R. (2012). Physical education within the Scottish context: A matter of policy. *European Physical Education Review*, 18(2), 258-272.
- Gray, S., Stirrup, J., Hooper, O., Bryant, A. S., Sandford, R., Carse, N., & Hardley, S. (2025). A critical endeavour? Supporting teachers' journeys towards critical engagement with

- curriculum in physical education through cross-border dialogue. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*, 16(2), 205-221.
- Green, K. (2000). Exploring the everyday' philosophies' of physical education teachers from a sociological perspective. *Sport, Education and Society*, 5(2), 109-129.
- Green, K. (2002). Physical education teachers in their figurations: A sociological analysis of everyday 'philosophies.' *Sport, Education and Society*, 7(1), 65–83.
- Green, K. (2008). *Understanding Physical Education*. SAGE.
- Green, K. (2020). Physical education and school sport: Is there a wider social role? In S. Capel & R. Blair (Eds.), *Debates in physical education* (2nd ed., pp. 18–35). Routledge.
- Grimmett, P. P., & Chinnery, A. (2009). Bridging policy and professional pedagogy in teaching and teacher education: Buffering learning by educating teachers as curriculum makers. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 39(1), 125-143.
- Gu, Q., Sammons, P., & Chen, J. (2018). How principals of successful schools enact education policy: Perceptions and accounts from senior and middle leaders. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 17(3), 373-390.
- Guo, L. (2013). New curriculum reform in China and its impact on teachers. *Comparative and International Education*, 41(2).
- Guo, M. (2018). Cultural confidence and China's international discourse power. In *2018 2nd International Conference on Education Science and Economic Management* (ICESEM 2018) (pp. 490-495). Atlantis Press.
- Ha, A. S., Wong, A. C., Sum, R. K., & Chan, D. W. (2008). Understanding teachers' will and capacity to accomplish physical education curriculum reform: The implications for teacher development. *Sport, Education and Society*, 13(1), 77-95.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge.

- Hansen, D. T. (2008). Values and purpose in teacher education. In M. Cochran Smith, S. Feimen-Nemser, & D. J. McIntyre (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education. Enduring questions in changing contexts* (3rd ed., pp. 10–26). London: Routledge.
- Hardman, K. (2011). Global issues in the situation of physical education in schools. *Contemporary Issues in Physical Education*, 11–29.
- Harris-Hart, C. (2009). Performing curriculum: exploring the role of teachers and teacher educators. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 39(1), 111-123.
- Harris, J., Cale, L., & Hooper, O. (2021). The promoting active lifestyles (PAL) project: A principle-based approach to pedagogical change. *The Curriculum Journal*, 32(1), 87-102.
- Harris, R., & Graham, S. (2019). Engaging with curriculum reform: Insights from English history teachers' willingness to support curriculum change. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51(1), 43-61.
- Hay, P., & Penney, D. (2012). *Assessment in physical education: A sociocultural perspective*. Routledge.
- Hayhoe, R. (1989). China's universities and Western academic models. *Higher Education*, 18(1), 49-85.
- He, J., Yu, H., Jiang, M., & Szumilewicz, A. (2023). Physical activity programs in Shanxi Province schools in China: effects of in-school and after-school delivery on students' motivational and social outcomes. *Sustainability*, 15(10), 8080.
- Hills, A. P., Dengel, D. R., & Lubans, D. R. (2015). Supporting public health priorities: recommendations for physical education and physical activity promotion in schools. *Progress in cardiovascular diseases*, 57(4), 368-374.

- Holland, E. W. (2013). *Deleuze and Guattari's 'A thousand plateaus': A reader's guide*. A&C Black.
- Hong, F., & Hua, T. (2002). Sport in China: Conflict between tradition and modernity, 1840s to 1930s. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 19(2-3), 189-212.
- hooks, b. (1996). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Journal of Leisure Research, 28(4), 316.
- Hooper, O., Sandford, R., & Jarvis, H. (2020). Thinking and feeling within/through physical education: What place for social and emotional learning? In F. Chambers, A. Bryant, & D. Aldous (Eds.), *Redesigning physical education for 21st century children and young people*. Routledge.
- Horrell, A. B. (2016). Pragmatic innovation in curriculum development: A study of physical education teachers' interpretation and enactment of a new curriculum framework. (Doctoral thesis)
- Horrell, A., Sproule, J., & Gray, S. (2012). Health and wellbeing: a policy context for physical education in Scotland. *Sport, Education and Society*, 17(2), 163-180.
- Houlihan, B., & Green, M. (2006). The changing status of school sport and physical education: explaining policy change. *Sport, education and society*, 11(1), 73-92.
- Howell, K. E. (2016). *An introduction to the philosophy of methodology / [internet resource]*. SAGE.
- Hoydalsvik, T. E. L. (2017). Co-Operation is Not Enough: Teacher Educators as Curriculum Developers in Times of Change. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 76-87.
- Impellizzeri, J., Savinsky, D. M., King, J. A., & Leitch-Alford, L. (2017). Conceptual mapping task: An effective verification tool for qualitative counseling research. *Counseling outcome research and evaluation*, 8(1), 31-47.

- Jaakkola, T. T., Sääkslahti, A., Yli-Piipari, S., Manninen, M., Watt, A., & Liukkonen, J. (2013). Student motivation associated with fitness testing in the physical education context. *Journal of teaching in physical education*, 32(3), 270-286.
- Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. Teachers College Press.
- James, A. R., Griffin, L. L., & Dodds, P. (2008). The relationship between instructional alignment and the ecology of physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 27(3), 308–326.
- Jiang, Z., & Jiang, W. (2021). Health education in the Healthy China Initiative 2019–2030. *China CDC Weekly*, 3(4), 78.
- Jin, A. (2013). Physical education curriculum reform in China: a perspective from physical education teachers. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 18(1), 15-27.
- Johns, D. P. (2005). Recontextualizing and delivering the biomedical model as a physical education curriculum. *Sport, Education and Society*, 10(1), 69-84.
- Johns, D. P., & Dimmock IV, C. (1999). The marginalization of physical education: impoverished curriculum policy and practice in Hong Kong. *Journal of Education Policy*, 14(4), 363-384.
- Johnson, S., Gray, S., & Horrell, A. (2013). ‘I want to look like that’: Healthism, the ideal body and physical education in a Scottish secondary school. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(3), 457–473
- Jones, R. (1999). Sport in China. In Riordan, J. & Jones, R. (Eds.) *Sport and physical education in China* (pp. 1-20). Routledge.
- Jung, J., Ressler, J., & Linder, A. (2018). Exploring the hidden curriculum in physical education. *Advances in Physical Education*, 8(02), 253.

- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 72(12), 2954-2965.
- Keating, X., Liu, X., Stephenson, R., Guan, J., & Hodges, M. (2020). Student health-related fitness testing in school-based physical education: Strategies for student self-testing using technology. *European Physical Education Review*, 26(2), 552-570.
- Keating, X. D., & Silverman, S. (2009). Determinants of teacher implementation of youth fitness tests in school-based physical education programs. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 14(2), 209-225.
- Kim, I., Lee, Y. S., Ward, P., & Li, W. (2015). A critical examination of movement content knowledge courses in physical education teacher education programs. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 34(1), 59-75.
- Kimpston, R. D. (1985). Curriculum fidelity and the implementation tasks employed by teachers: A research study. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 17(2), 185–195.
- Kirk, D. (1988). Physical education & curriculum study. Croom Helm.
- Kirk, D. (1990). School knowledge and the-curriculum package-as-text. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 22(5), 409-425.
- Kirk, D. (1992a) *Defining Physical Education. The Social Construction of a School Subject in Post-War Britain*. London: Falmer Press.
- Kirk, D. (1992b). Physical education, discourse, and ideology: Bringing the hidden curriculum into view. *Quest*, 44(1), 35-56.
- Kirk, D. (1994). Physical education and regimes of the body. *The Australian and New Zealand journal of sociology*, 30(2), 165-177.

- Kirk, D. (1996). Foucault and the limits of corporeal regulation: the emergence, consolidation and decline of school medical inspection and physical training in Australia, 1909–30. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 13(2), 114-131.
- Kirk, D. (2004). Towards a critical history of the body, identity and health: corporeal power and school practice. In J. Evans, B. Davies, & J. Wright (Eds.), *Body knowledge and control: Studies in the sociology of physical education and health* (pp. 52–67). London: Routledge.
- Kirk, D. (2010). *Physical education futures*. Routledge.
- Kirk, D. (2013). Educational value and models-based practice in physical education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 45(9), 973-986.
- Kirk, D. (2014). Making a career in PESP in the corporatized university: Reflections on hegemony, resistance, collegiality and scholarship. *Sport, Education and Society*, 19(3), 320-332.
- Kirk, D. (2020). *Precarity, critical pedagogy and physical education*. Routledge.
- Kirk, D., & Colquhoun, D. (1989). Healthism and physical education. *British journal of Sociology of Education*, 10(4), 417-434.
- Kirk, D., & MacDonald, D. (2001). The social construction of PETE in higher education: Toward a research agenda. *Quest*, 53(4), 440–456.
- Kirk, D., & Tinning, R. (1990). *Physical education, curriculum & culture: Critical issues in the contemporary crisis*. Falmer.
- Kirk, D., & Twigg, K. (1994). Regulating the Australian body: eugenics, anthropometrics
- Kirk, D., Bardid, F., Lamb, C. A., Millar, J. D., & Teraoka, E. (2018). Redesigning physical education in Scotland. In *Redesigning Physical Education* (pp. 145-155). Routledge.

- Klassen, R. M., Aldhafri, S., Mansfield, C. F., Purwanto, E., Siu, A. F., Wong, M. W., & Woods-McConney, A. (2012). Teachers' engagement at work: An international validation study. *The journal of experimental education*, 80(4), 317-337.
- Kokko, S., Martin, L., Geidne, S., Van Hoya, A., Lane, A., Meganck, J., ... & Koski, P. (2019). Does sports club participation contribute to physical activity among children and adolescents? A comparison across six European countries. *Scandinavian journal of public health*, 47(8), 851-858.
- Kougioumtzis, K., Patriksson, G., & Stråhlman, O. (2011). Physical education teachers' professionalization: A review of occupational power and professional control. *European physical education review*, 17(1), 111-129.
- Lambert, K., & Penney, D. (2019). Curriculum interpretation and policy enactment in health and physical education: Researching teacher educators as policy actors. *Sport, Education and Society*, 25(4) 378-394.
- Lambert, K., Alfrey, L., O'Connor, J., & Penney, D. (2021). Artefacts and influence in curriculum policy enactment: Processes, products and policy work in curriculum reform. *European Physical Education Review*, 27(2), 258-277.
- Lan, Q., & Li, X. (2019). Liability determination of school sports injury accidents: an analysis framework based on evolutionary game. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(18), 3403.
- Landi, D. (2018). Toward a queer inclusive physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 23(1), 1-15.
- Landi, D. (2019). *LGBTQ youth, physical education, and sexuality education: Affect, curriculum, and (new) materialism* (Doctoral dissertation, ResearchSpace@Auckland).

- Landi, D. (2024). Thinking qualitatively: Paradigms and design in qualitative research. *Qualitative research and evaluation in physical education and sport pedagogy*, 31-47.
- Landi, D. (2025). All physical and no education?—Gender, sexuality and the ‘affective atmosphere’ in physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 1-18.
- Landi, D., Walton-Fisette, J. L., & Sutherland, S. (2021). Physical education policy research in the United States: Setting a new orientation. *Quest*, 73(1), 45-62.
- Law, W (2017) Citizenship education. In W. J. Morgan, Q. Gu, & F. Li (2017). *Handbook of education in China [internet resource]* (pp. 241-236). Edward Elgar Pub.
- Law, W. W. (2014). Understanding China’s curriculum reform for the 21st century. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46(3), 332-360.
- Lawson, H. (2018). *Redesigning physical education: An equity agenda in which every child matters* (Routledge studies in physical education and youth sport).
- Lawson, H. A. (1988). Occupational socialization, cultural studies, and the physical education curriculum. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 7(4), 265-288.
- Lawson, H. A. (1991). Future Research on Physical Education Teacher Education Professors. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 10(3).
- Leat, D., Livingston, K., & Priestley, M. (2013). Curriculum deregulation in England and Scotland – Different directions of travel? In W. Kuiper & J. Berkvens (Eds.), *Balancing curriculum regulation and freedom across Europe*, CIDREE Yearbook (pp. 229–248). Netherlands.
- Leavy, P. (2017). *Research Design*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Li, H., & Du, X. Y. (2013). Confronting cultural challenges when reconstructing the teacher-student relationship in a Chinese context. *In Teaching and learning culture* (pp. 79-94). Brill.

- Li, J., Shi, Z., & Xue, E. (2020). The problems, needs and strategies of rural teacher development at deep poverty areas in China: Rural schooling stakeholder perspectives. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 99, 101496.
- Li, J., Xue, E., Li, J., & Xue, E. (2021). Compulsory Education Policy in China: From the Perspective of Teachers' Titles/Ranks Policy. *Compulsory Education Policy in China: Concept and Practice*, 93-108.
- Li, T. (2017). Financial decentralization and geographical stratification of access to higher education in China: The case of Shanghai. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 49(3), 212-238.
- Li, W., & Yang, D. T. (2005). The great leap forward: Anatomy of a central planning disaster. *Journal of Political Economy*, 113(4), 840-877.
- Li, X. (2001). The influences of the soviet educational model on the education of PR China. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 2, 106-113.
- Li, X. (2021). The realistic dilemma and path exploration of the construction of physical education teaching MOOCs platform in colleges and universities. *International Journal of New Developments in Education*, 3(4), 9-13.
- Liamputtong, P. (2019). *Qualitative research methods*. [internet resource] (Fifth edition / Pranee Liamputtong.
- Liang, S. (2011). Open class: An important component of teachers' in-service training in China. *Education*, 1(1), 1-5.
- Liang, S., & Hong, F. (2012). Historical Review of State Policy for Physical Education in the People's Republic of China. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29(4), 583-600.

- Liang, X., Kidwai, H., Zhang, M., & Zhang, Y. (2016). *How Shanghai does it: Insights and lessons from the highest-ranking education system in the world*. World Bank Publications.
- Lieberman, A., & Pointer Mace, D. H. (2008). Teacher learning: The key to educational reform. *Journal of teacher education*, 59(3), 226-234.
- Lincoln, S. Y., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lingard, B. (2016). Rationales for and reception of the OECD's PISA. *Educação & Sociedade*, 37, 609-627.
- Lingard, B. (2021). National curriculum making as more or less expressions of and responses to globalization. In *Curriculum making in Europe: Policy and practice within and across diverse contexts*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Littlefair, D., Jopling, M., & Kelly, N. (2025). Pupil voice in physical education and the desire for (in) visibility. *Sport, Education and Society*, 30(6), 728-741.
- Liu, L., & Li, F. (2023). The vision of ideological culture in contemporary Chinese education: preserving society and state. *Cultural Education*, 35(3), 774–815.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/11356405.2023.2206300>
- Liu, X., Li, Y., & Chen, C. (2024). The professional development of rural teachers in China based on their relationship with “left-behind” children. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(1), 64-81.
- Liu, Z., & Zhang, X. (2023). Journey to the west: research on the Chinese studying physical education in the United States during the Republic of China (1912–1949). *Asian Journal of Sport History & Culture*, 2(1), 86-105.
- Livingston, K. (2014). Teacher educators: Hidden professionals? *European Journal of Education*, 49(2), 218–232.

- Looney, A. (2001). Curriculum as policy: Some implications of contemporary policy studies for the analysis of curriculum policy, with particular reference to post-primary curriculum policy in the Republic of Ireland. *Curriculum Journal*, 12(2), 149-162.
- López-Pastor, V. M., Kirk, D., Lorente-Catalán, E., MacPhail, A., & Macdonald, D. (2013). Alternative assessment in physical education: a review of international literature. *Sport, Education and Society*, 18(1), 57-76.
- Lu, C. (2021). Xi Jin-ping's Inheritance and Development of Mao Zedong's Thought on Youth Education. *The Frontiers of Society, Science and Technology*, 3(5), 46-50.
- Lu, Z. (2016). Sport and politics: The Cultural Revolution in the Chinese sports ministry, 1966–1976. *The international journal of the history of sport*, 33(5), 569-585.
- Lux, K., & McCullick, B. A. (2011). How one exceptional teacher navigated her working environment as the teacher of a marginal subject. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 30(4), 358-374.
- Lynch, T. (2019). *Physical education and wellbeing: Global and holistic approaches to child health*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Vol. 10). U of Minnesota Press.
- Macdonald, D. (2003). Curriculum change and the post-modern world: Is the school curriculum-reform movement an anachronism? *Journal of curriculum studies*, 35(2), 139-149.
- Macdonald, D., & Kirk, D. (1996). Private lives, public lives: Surveillance, identity and self in the work of beginning physical education teachers. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1(1), 59-75.

- MacLean, J., Mulholland, R., Gray, S., & Horrell, A. (2015). Enabling curriculum change in physical education: The interplay between policy constructors and practitioners. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 20(1), 79-96.
- Maher, A. J., Quarmby, T., Hooper, O., Wells, V., & Slavin, L. (2025). The physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools in England: A Gramscian critique. *The Curriculum Journal*. 1-20.
- Maher, A. J., Quarmby, T., Hooper, O., Wells, V., & Slavin, L. (2024). Culture, power, and ideology: the purpose and value of physical education (PE) in alternative provision schools in England. *Educational Review*, 1-18.
- Markula-Denison, P., & Pringle, R. (2007). *Foucault, sport and exercise: Power, knowledge and transforming the self*. Routledge.
- Marsh, C. J. (2009). Key concepts for understanding curriculum. Routledge.
- Marsh, C., & Huberman, M. (1984). Disseminating curricula: A look from the top down. *J. Curriculum Studies*, 16(1), 53-66.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2014). *Designing qualitative research*. Sage publications.
- Martin, J. R. (1976). What should we do with a hidden curriculum when we find one?. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6(2), 135-151.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Sage publications.
- McCuaig , L. , Coore , S. , Carroll , K. , Macdonald , D. , Rossi , T. , Bush , R. , ... Johnson , R. (2012). *Developing health literacy through school based Health Education: Can reality match rhetoric?* Brisbane : University of Queensland .
- McEvoy, E., Heikinaro-Johansson, P., & MacPhail, A. (2017). Physical education teacher educators' views regarding the purpose (s) of school physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 22(7), 812-824.

- McKenzie, T. L., & Lounsbery, M. A. (2009). School physical education: The pill not taken. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 3(3), 219-225.
- McLaren, P. (2015). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Routledge.
- Meng, X., Horrell, A., & McMillan, P. (2023). ‘Health first, safety first’: an analysis of the legal system and professional ethics for curriculum enactment in China. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-15.
- Meng, X., Horrell, A., McMillan, P., & Chai, G. (2021). ‘Health First’ and curriculum reform in China: The experiences of physical education teachers in one city. *European Physical Education Review*, 27(3), 595-612.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*, 1(1), 1-17.
- Meyer, U., Roth, R., Zahner, L., Gerber, M., Puder, J. J., Hebestreit, H., & Kriemler, S. (2013). Contribution of physical education to overall physical activity. *Scandinavian journal of medicine & science in sports*, 23(5), 600-606.
- Michael Connelly, F. (1972). The functions of curriculum development. *Interchange*, 3(2), 161-177.
- Michael, F. (1972). The functions of curriculum development. *Interchange*, 3(2), 161-177.
- Miller, J. L. (1990). *Creating spaces and finding voices: Teachers collaborating for empowerment*. Suny Press.
- Ministry of Education of China (2018). *Enhance teachers’ professional quality and abilities*. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_2082/zl_2018n/2018_zl13/201802/t20180205_326635.html

- Ministry of Education of China (2021). *Notice from the Office of the Ministry of Education on the Establishment of Comprehensive Reform Pilot Zones for Basic Education by the Ministry of Education*.
- Ministry of Education of of China (1990) *Regulations on School Physical Education*.
http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A02/s5911/moe_621/201511/t20151119_220041.html
- Ministry of Education of China (2001) *Outline of the Curriculum Reform for Compulsory Education (Trial)*. Beijing, China: Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Education of China (2018) *Education, moving in the same direction as economic and social development*.
http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_2082/zl_2018n/2018_03/201801/t20180116_324672.html
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021) *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Readers* (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary). Beijing: People's Education Press.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2022) *Compulsory Education Curriculum Guideline and Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)*
http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/202204/t20220421_620068.html
- Ministry of Education, China (2022) *New Era - New Curriculum - New Teacher*.
http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2022/54382/zjwz/202204/t20220421_620106.html
- Morgan, C. F., Beighle, A., & Pangrazi, R. P. (2007). What are the contributory and compensatory relationships between physical education and physical activity in children?. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and sport*, 78(5), 407-412.
- Muller, J., & Young, M. (2019). Knowledge, power and powerful knowledge re-visited. *The curriculum journal*, 30(2), 196-214.

- Murray, J. (2002). *Between the Chalkface and the Ivory Towers? A Study of the Professionalism of Teacher Educators Working on Primary Initial Teacher Education Courses in the English University Sector*. PhD thesis, Institute of Education, University of London.
- Murray, J., & Male, T. (2005). Becoming a teacher educator: Evidence from the field. *Teaching and teacher education*, 21(2), 125-142.
- Nail, T. (2017). What is an Assemblage?. *SubStance*, 46(1), 21-37.
- Ngok, K. (2007). Chinese education policy in the context of decentralization and marketization: Evolution and implications. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 8, 142-157.
- Niu, W. (2007). Western influences on Chinese educational testing. *Comparative Education*, 43(1), 71-91.
- Nyberg, G., & Larsson, H. (2014). Exploring ‘what learn in physical education. *Physical education and sport pedagogy*, 19(2), 123-135.
- O’Sullivan, M. (2004). Possibilities and pitfalls of a public health agenda for physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 23(4), 392–404.
- O’Sullivan, M., Calderón, A., & Moody, B. (2019). Can I teach what I want? Teacher autonomy in enacting a physical education curriculum. In *Debates in physical education* (pp. 206-219). Routledge.
- OECD (2005). *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*. OECD, Paris.
- OECD (2016). *Education in China*. <https://www.oecd.org/china/Education-in-China-a-snapshot.pdf>

- Öhman, M., & Quennerstedt, M. (2008). Feel good—be good: subject content and governing processes in physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 13(4), 365-379.
- Ovens, A., Flory, S. B., Sutherland, S., Philpot, R., Walton-Fisette, J. L., Hill, J., ... & Flemons, M. (2018). How PETE comes to matter in the performance of social justice education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 23(5), 484-496.
- Paraskeva, J. M. (2016). Curriculum epistemicide: Towards an itinerant curriculum theory. Routledge.
- Paraskeva, J. M. (2021). *Conflicts in curriculum theory: Challenging hegemonic epistemologies*. Springer Nature.
- Paraskeva, J. M. (2025). Itinerant curriculum theory: People's theory against the field's epistemicidal ethos. *The Curriculum Journal*, 1-16.
- Parker, G., & Leat, D. (2021). The Case of Curriculum Development in England: Oases in a Curriculum Desert?. In *Curriculum making in Europe: Policy and practice within and across diverse contexts* (pp. 151-174). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Pate, R. R., O'Neill, J. R., & McIver, K. L. (2011). Physical activity and health: Does physical education matter?. *Quest*, 63(1), 19-35.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative social work*, 1(3), 261-283.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage publications.
- Peng, W. J., McNess, E., Thomas, S., Wu, X. R., Zhang, C., Li, J. Z., & Tian, H. S. (2014). Emerging perceptions of teacher quality and teacher development in China. *International journal of educational development*, 34, 77-89.

- Penney, D. (2006). *Curriculum construction and change*. SAGE Publications Ltd,
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608009>
- Penney, D. (2008). Playing a political game and playing for position: Policy and curriculum development in health and physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, 14(1), 33-49.
- Penney, D. (2010). Health and Physical Education in Australia: A defining time?. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 1(1), 5-12.
- Penney, D. (2013). Points of tension and possibility: Boundaries in and of physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 18(1), 6–20.
- Penney, D., & Alfrey, L. (2022). Reading curriculum policy and (re) shaping practices: The possibilities and limits of enactment. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*, 13(3), 214–222.
- Penney, D., & Chandler, T. (2000). Physical education: What future (s)?. *Sport, education and society*, 5(1), 71-87.
- Penney, D., & Evans, J. (2005). Policy, power and politics in physical education. *Physical education: Essential issues*, 21-38.
- Penney, D., Brooker, R., Hay, P., & Gillespie, L. (2009). Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment: Three message systems of schooling and dimensions of quality physical education. *Sport, education and society*, 14(4), 421-442.
- Peralta, L. R., & Rowling, L. (2018). Implementation of school health literacy in Australia: A systematic review. *Health Education Journal*, 77(3), 363-376.
- Perryman, J., Ball, S. J., Braun, A., & Maguire, M. (2017). Translating policy: Governmentality and the reflective teacher. *Journal of Education Policy*, 32(6), 745-756.

- Petrie, K. (2016). Curriculum reform where it counts. In C. D. Ennis (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of physical education pedagogies* (pp. 173-186). Routledge.
- Petrie, K., & Lisahunter. (2011). Primary teachers, policy, and physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, 17(3), 325-329.
- Phillips, M. J. (2023). Towards a social constructionist, criticalist, Foucauldian-informed qualitative research approach: Opportunities and challenges. *SN Social Sciences*, 3(10), 175-200.
- Phoenix, C., & Bell, S. L. (2019). Beyond “move more”: feeling the rhythms of physical activity in mid and later-life. *Social Science & Medicine*, 231, 47-54.
- Piggin, J. (2019). *The Politics of Physical Activity*. London: Routledge.
- Piggin, J. (2020). What is physical activity? A holistic definition for teachers, researchers and policy makers. *Frontiers in sports and active living*, 2, 72.
- Piletic, C. K., & Davis, R. (2010). A Profile of the Introduction to Adapted Physical Education Course within Undergraduate Physical Education Teacher Education Programs. *ICHPER-SD Journal of Research*, 5(2), 26-32.
- Pinar, W. (2000). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. New York: P. Lang.
- Pinar, W. F., Reynolds, W. M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (1995). *Understanding curriculum*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Posselt, G., & Seitz, S. (2019). Relativism and poststructuralism. In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Relativism* (pp. 133-143). Routledge.
- Preece, S., & Bullingham, R. (2022). Gender stereotypes: The impact upon perceived roles and practice of in-service teachers in physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 27(3), 259-271.

- Price, R. F. (2017). Convergence or copying: China and the Soviet Union. *In China's Education and the Industrialised World* (pp. 158-322). Routledge.
- Priestley, M., & Biesta, G. (Eds.). (2013). *Reinventing the curriculum: New trends in curriculum policy and practice*. A&C Black.
- Priestley, M., Edwards, R., Priestley, A., & Miller, K. (2012). Teacher agency in curriculum making: Agents of change and spaces for manoeuvre. *Curriculum inquiry*, 42(2), 191-214.
- Priestley, M., & Philippou, S. (2018). Curriculum making as social practice: Complex webs of enactment. *The Curriculum Journal*, 29(2), 151-158.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G. J. J., Philippou, S., & Robinson, S. (2015). The teacher and the curriculum: Exploring teacher agency. *The SAGE handbook of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*, 187-201.
- Pringle, R., & Landi, D. (2017). Re-reading Deleuze and Guattari's A thousand plateaus. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 20 (1), 117-122.
- Punch, K. (2014). *Introduction to Research Methods in Education* / Keith F Punch (Second Edition.). SAGE LTD.
- Qian, H., & Walker, A. (2013). How principals promote and understand teacher development under curriculum reform in China. *Asia-pacific journal of teacher education*, 41(3), 304-315.
- Qiu, C. (2015). *The professional development of teacher educators in Shanghai* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Glasgow).
- Quennerstedt, M., Barker, D., Johansson, A., & Korp, P. (2021). The relation between teaching physical education and discourses on body weight—An integrative review of research. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*, 12(3), 287–305.

- Quennerstedt, M., Landi, D., & Casey, A. (2024). Busier, Happier, and Good (er)—40 Years on from ‘Busy, Happy, and Good’ as Success in Teaching Physical Education. *Quest*, 1-21.
- Raelin, J. A. (2009). The practice turn-away: Forty years of spoon-feeding in management education. *Management Learning*, 40(4), 401-410.
- Remillard, J. T. (2005). Examining key concepts in research on teachers’ use of mathematics curricula. *Review of educational research*, 75(2), 211-246.
- Revel, J. (2009). Identity, nature, life: Three biopolitical deconstructions. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(6), 45–54.
- Rich, E., & Evans, J. (2012). Performative health in schools: Welfare policy, neoliberalism and social regulation? In *Biopolitics and the 'obesity epidemic'* (pp. 165–179). Routledge.
- Richards, K. A. R. (2015). Role socialization theory: The sociopolitical realities of teaching physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, 21(3), 379-393.
- Richards, K. A. R., Gaudreault, K. L., & Woods, A. M. (2017). Understanding physical educators' perceptions of mattering: Validation of the Perceived Mattering Questionnaire-Physical Education. *European Physical Education Review*, 23(1), 73-90.
- Richards, K. A. R., Gaudreault, K. L., Starck, J. R., & Mays Woods, A. (2018). Physical education teachers’ perceptions of perceived mattering and marginalization. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 23(4), 445-459.
- Richards, K. A. R., Woods, A. M., Wei, M., & Kim, J. (2022). Workplace experiences of physical educators with and without National Board Certification. *European Physical Education Review*, 28(2), 397-413.
- Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516–529). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Richmond, W. (1975). *Education and schooling*. Methuen.
- Rink, J. E. (2013). Measuring teacher effectiveness in physical education. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 84(4), 407-418.
- Sakallı, D., & Şenel, E. (2025). The role of marginalisation and role stressors in physical education teachers' perceived mattering. *European Physical Education Review*, 31(1), 3-17.
- Saldana, J. (2015). *Thinking qualitatively: Methods of mind*. SAGE publications.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE.
- Sandford, R., Quarmby, T., & Hooper, O. (2024). Theorising the potential of physical education and school sport to support the educational engagement, transitions and outcomes of care-experienced young people. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(2), 580-598.
- Sellar, S., & Lingard, B. (2013). Looking East: Shanghai, PISA 2009 and the reconstitution of reference societies in the global education policy field. *Comparative Education*, 49(4), 464-485.
- Shanghai Municipal People's Government. (2022). *Shanghai's resident population*.
<https://english.shanghai.gov.cn/enOverview/20231207/a0323b4c7b034212b00dc4171ea90915.html?>
- Sharma, M. (2021). *Theoretical foundations of health education and health promotion*. Jones & Bartlett Learning.
- Shilling, C. (1991). Educating the body: Physical capital and the production of social inequalities. *Sociology*, 25(4), 653-672.
- Simmons, J., & MacLean, J. (2018). Physical Education Teachers' Perceptions of Factors That Inhibit and Facilitate the Enactment of Curriculum Change in a High-Stakes Exam Climate. *Sport, Education and Society*, 23(2), 186–202.

- Sinnema, C., Nieveen, N., & Priestley, M. (2020). Successful futures, successful curriculum: What can Wales learn from international curriculum reforms?. *The Curriculum Journal*, 31(2), 181-201.
- Sit, V. F. (1995). Shanghai's role in China's modernization: A historical review. *Asian Geographer*, 14(1), 14-27.
- Smith, A., & Parr, M. (2007). Young people's views on the nature and purposes of physical education: a sociological analysis. *Sport, Education and Society*, 12(1), 37-58.
- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2009). Narrative analysis and sport and exercise psychology: Understanding lives in diverse ways. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 10(2), 279-288.
- Smith, J. A. (1995). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In Smith, J. A., Langenhove, L. V., & Harre, R. (1995). *Rethinking methods in psychology*, 1-224.
- Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Son, J. W., & Kim, O. K. (2016). Curriculum enactment patterns and associated factors from teachers' perspectives. *Mathematics Education Research Journal*, 28, 585-614.
- Speak, M. (1999). China in the modern world. In Riordan, J. & Jones, R. (Eds.) *Sport and physical education in China* (pp. 1-20). Routledge.
- Sprake, A., & Walker, S. (2015). 'Blurred lines' The duty of physical education to establish a unified rationale. *European Physical Education Review*, 21(3), 394-406.
- Standal, Ø. F., & Moe, V. F. (2013). Reflective practice in physical education and physical education teacher education: A review of the literature since 1995. *Quest*, 65(2), 220-240.

- State Council of the People's Republic of China (State Council). (1999). *The decisions on deepening educational reform and promoting quality-orientated education*. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/6/2/Document/1003546/1003546.htm>.
- State Council of the People's Republic of China (2007). Suggestions on Strengthening the Physical Fitness of Youth.
http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2022/54382/zjwz/202204/t20220421_620106.html
- State Council of the People's Republic of China (2016) (State Council). *Healthy China 2030 Planning Outline*. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-10/25/content_5124174.htm
- Stenhouse, L. (1975). An introduction to curriculum research and development. London: Heinemann.
- Stenhouse, L. (1971). Cultures and education. Nelson.
- Stirrup, J., Aldous, D., Gray, S., Sandford, R., Hooper, O., Hardley, S., ... & Carse, N. R. (2024). Exploring the re-legitimisation of messages for health and physical education within contemporary English and Welsh curricula reform. *Sport, Education and Society*, 29(8), 939-951.
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of management review*, 20(3), 571-610.
- Supovitz, J. (2008). Melding internal and external support for school improvement: How the district role changes when working closely with external instructional support providers. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 83(3), 459-478.
- Tan, C. (2012). The culture of education policy making: Curriculum reform in Shanghai. *Critical Studies in Education*, 53(2), 153-167.
- Tan, C., & Chua, C. S. (2015). Education policy borrowing in China: has the West wind overpowered the East wind?. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 45(5), 686-704.

- Teraoka, E., Ferreira, H. J., Kirk, D., & Bardid, F. (2020). Affective learning in physical education: A systematic review. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 40(3), 460-473.
- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, 2(25), 17-37.
- Thorburn, M., Carse, N., Jess, M., & Atencio, M. (2011). Translating change into improved practice: Analysis of teachers' attempts to generate a new emerging pedagogy in Scotland. *European Physical Education Review*, 17(3), 313-324.
- Thorburn, M., Gray, S., & O'Connor, J. (2019). Creating thriving and sustainable futures in physical education, health and sport. *Sport, Education and Society*.
- Tinning, R. (2004). Rethinking the preparation of HPE teachers: Ruminations on knowledge, identity, and ways of thinking. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 241-253.
- Tinning, R. (2012). The idea of physical education: A memetic perspective. *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 17(2), 115-126.
- Tsai, C. T. L., & Zhou, L. (2017). The history of sports and physical education in China. *World leisure journal*, 59(4), 326-337.
- Vieira, R. A. G., Bonetto, P. X. R., & Borges, C. C. D. O. (2024). The concept of post-critical curriculum in physical education: A geophilosophical analysis. *Educação em Revista*, 40, e40342.
- Walker, R., Salway, R., House, D., Emm-Collison, L., Breheny, K., Sansum, K., ... & Jago, R. (2023). The status of active after-school clubs among primary school children in England (UK) after the COVID-19 lockdowns: implications for policy and practice. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 20(1), 120.

- Wallace, C. S., & Priestley, M. R. (2017). Secondary science teachers as curriculum makers: Mapping and designing Scotland's new Curriculum for Excellence. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 54(3), 324-349.
- Wang, D., Wang, J., Li, H., & Li, L. (2017). School context and instructional capacity: A comparative study of professional learning communities in rural and urban schools in China. *International journal of educational development*, 52, 1-9.
- Wang, T. (2019). Competence for students' future: Curriculum change and policy redesign in China. *ECNU Review of Education*, 2(2), 234-245.
- Wang, Y., & Phillion, J. (2010). Whose knowledge is valued: A critical study of knowledge in elementary school textbooks in China. *Intercultural Education*, 21(6), 567-580.
- Webb, L., & Quennerstedt, M. (2010). Risky bodies: Health surveillance and teachers' embodiment of health. *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, 23(7), 785-802.
- Webb, P. T. (2006). The choreography of accountability. *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(2), 201-214.
- Welk, G. J., Eisenmann, J. C., & Dollman, J. (2006). Health-related physical activity in children and adolescents: a bio-behavioral perspective. *The handbook of physical education*, 665-684.
- Whitehead, M. (2010). *Physical literacy: Throughout the lifecourse*. Routledge.
- Whitty, G. (1985). *Sociology and school knowledge: curriculum theory, research, and politics*. Methuen.
- Williams, J. (2014). *Understanding poststructuralism*. Routledge.
- Williams, J. F. (1930). Education through the physical. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 1(5), 279-282.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature* (Vol. 392). Oxford Paperbacks.

- Wright, J. (1996). The construction of complementarity in physical education. *Gender and education*, 8(1), 61-80.
- Wright, J. (2006). Physical education research from postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial perspectives. *The handbook of physical education*, 59-75.
- Wright, J., O'Flynn, G., & Welch, R. (2018). In search of the socially critical in health education: Exploring the views of health and physical education preservice teachers in Australia. *Health Education*, 118(2), 117-130.
- Wu, A. (2023). The significance, main problem and promotion strategies of interdisciplinary subject learning of sports and health. *Advances in Physical Education*, 13(3), 164-179.
- Wu, H., & Clarke, A. (2018). The Chinese "Open Class": A conceptual rendering and historical account. *Asia Pacific journal of education*, 38(2), 214-228.
- Wu, S. (2015). Modernizing Confucianism in China: A repackaging of institutionalization to consolidate party leadership. *Asian Perspective*, 39(2), 301-324.
- Wu, Y. (2015). The examination system in China: The case of Zhongkao mathematics. In Selected regular lectures from the 12th International Congress on mathematical education (pp. 897-914). *Springer International Publishing*.
- Xi, J. (2016). *Speech on the 95th Founding Anniversary of the CPC*. State Council.
- Xi, J. (2017) *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*. CPC National Congress.
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf
- Xiang, L., & Stillwell, J. (2023). Rural–urban educational inequalities and their spatial variations in China. *Applied Spatial Analysis and Policy*, 16(2), 873-896.

- Xu, S. (2021). The legitimization of textbook reform: Strategies and challenges in China. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 53(6), 749-764.
- Xu, Y., & Wong, H. (2011). School-based curriculum development in China: Policy analysis, theoretical controversy, and practical exploration. *Chinese Education & Society*, 44(4), 44-63.
- Yan, C. (2015). 'We can't change much unless the exams change': Teachers' dilemmas in the curriculum reform in China. *Improving Schools*, 18(1), 5-19.
- Yan, J., Smith, J., Morgan, P., & Eather, N. (2021). A historical review of physical education in China (1949-2020). *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 9(4), 21-28.
- Yang, J., Bartle, G., Kirk, D., & Landi, D. (2025). Chinese students' experiences of 'high-stakes' assessment: the role of fitness testing. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 1-14.
- Yin, H. B. (2013). Societal culture and teachers' responses to curriculum reform: Experiences from China. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 14, 391-401.
- Yin, H., Lee, J. C. K., & Wang, W. (2014). Dilemmas of leading national curriculum reform in a global era: A Chinese perspective. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(2), 293-311.
- Yin, Z., Sun, M. & Xu, L. (2022a). Differences and Connections between 'Physical Literacy' and 'Core Competencies' of Physical Education and Health Curriculum. *Journal of Chengdu Sport University*, (4). (in Chinese).
- Yin, Z., Sun, M., Meng, H., Tian, H., Guo, Z. & Liu, B. (2022b). Reasons, Demand Mechanism and Promotion Strategies of Core Competencies Orientated PE Curriculum Reform in the New Era. *Journal of Shenyang Sport University*. 41(4), 22-28. <https://doi.org/10.12163/j.ssu.20212342> (in Chinese).

- Young, M. F. D. (1972). *Knowledge and control: new directions for the sociology of education*. Collier-Macmillan.
- Yu, T. (2008). The revival of Confucianism in Chinese schools: A historical-political review. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 28(2), 113-129.
- Zhang, F., & Liu, Y. (2014). A study of secondary school English teachers' beliefs in the context of curriculum reform in China. *Language Teaching Research: LTR*, 18(2), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168813505940>
- Zhang, H. (2015a). Christianity and the Rise of Western Physical Education and Sport in Modern China, 1840–1920s. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32(8), 1121-1126.
- Zhang, H. (2015b). *Missionary schools, the YMCA and the transformation of physical education and sport in modern China (1840-1937)*. (PhD thesis).
- Zhang, J., & Pang, N. S. K. (2016). Exploring the characteristics of professional learning communities in China: A mixed-method study. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 25, 11-21.
- Zhang, M., Ding, X., & Xu, J. (2016). *Developing Shanghai's Teachers. Teacher Quality Systems in Top Performing Countries*. National Center on Education and the Economy.
- Zhang, T. (2023). By the assemblage: physical education teachers' encounters of a state teacher accountability system. *Sport, Education and Society*, 28(2), 117-131.
- Zhang, X. (2022). Innovative Research on Smart Physical Education Teaching in Colleges and Universities Under the Background of Internet+. In 2022 3rd *International Conference on Mental Health, Education and Human Development* (pp. 179-183). Atlantis Press.

- Zhao, W. (2020). Problematizing “epistemicide” in transnational curriculum knowledge production: China’s suyang curriculum reform as an example. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 50(2), 105-125.
- Zhao, Y., & Qiu, W. (2012). Policy changes and educational reforms in China: Decentralization and marketization. *On the Horizon*, 20(4), 313-323.
- Zhou, H., & Zhu, L. (2019). “Two Chinas”: Social Equity, Social Policies, and the Urban-Rural Divide in China. *Social Equity in the Asia-Pacific Region: Conceptualizations and Realities*, 109-136.
- Zhou, Y., Wang, L., Wang, B., & Chen, R. (2022). Physical activity during physical education in elementary school in China: the role of teachers. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 27(4), 409-421.
- Zhu, H. (2010). Curriculum reform and professional development: a case study on Chinese teacher educators. *Professional Development in Education*, 36(1-2), 373–391.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415250903457604>

Appendices

Appendix A: Examples of interview questions (teacher educators and teacher-researchers)

- How do you interpret the 2022 Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standard?
您如何解读 2022 年《体育与健康课程标准》？
- How do you perceive the impact of the new curriculum standards on physical education teaching practices?
您认为在职教师对新课标的变化了解程度如何？
- How do you perceive the impact of the new curriculum standards on physical education teaching practices?
您如何看待新课标对体育教学实践的影响？
- What challenges have you encountered in promoting the new curriculum standards through teacher training? How have you addressed or overcome these challenges?
在通过教师培训推广新课标的过程中，您遇到了哪些挑战？您是如何应对或克服这些挑战的？
- Have in-service teachers received professional training opportunities or support to enact of the new curriculum standard? If so, which aspects have been most beneficial, and what areas require further improvement?
在职教师是否获得了实施新课标的专业培训机会或支持？如果有，哪些方面最有益，哪些方面还需要改进？
- In your opinion, what is the status of physical education within the broader education system?
在您看来，体育在整个教育体系中的地位如何？

Appendix B: Examples of interview questions (teachers)

- How do you think about the *2022 Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standard*?

您如何看待 2022 年《体育与健康课程标准》？

- Have you participated in any professional development programs or received institutional support related to the enactment of the Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standard? If so, what aspects were most beneficial, and which require further improvement?

您是否参与过与实施《体育与健康课程标准》相关的专业发展项目或获得机构支持？如果有，哪些方面最有益，哪些方面还需要改进？

- How do you adopt the new curriculum into your lesson planning and teaching strategies?

您是如何将新课程标准应用到课程设计和教学策略中的？

- What challenges have you encountered in your teaching practice?

在你的教学实践中，您遇到了哪些挑战？

- How do you interpret quality physical education?

您如何解读优质体育教育？

- In Shanghai's context, do you perceive physical education as a marginalised subject within the school curriculum? If so, what factors have contributed to this marginalisation?

在上海的背景下，您是否认为体育是学校课程中的边缘学科？如果是，造成这种边缘化的因素有哪些？

Appendix C: Ethical approval

Re: Ethics Update (Jing Yang)

😊 ↩ ⏪ ⏩



⊗ Jing Yang <j.yang@strath.ac.uk>

Tuesday 14 November 2023 at 11:09

To: ⊗ hass-edu-ethics; Cc: ⊗ David Kirk; ○ Dillon Landi ✓

Cc: David Kirk <david.kirk@strath.ac.uk>, Dillon Landi <dillon.landi@strath.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Ethics Update (Jing Yang)

Thank you, Jing. This looks fine and I have sent it off for signing by the Hol. It is approved.

Kind regards,
Rebekah

Dr Sharon Hunter
Dr Mariya Ivancheva
Dr Rebekah Sims

Please note that this inbox is monitored on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

School of Education Ethics Committee
School of Education
University of Strathclyde | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Email: hass-edu-ethics@strath.ac.uk

From: Jing Yang <j.yang@strath.ac.uk>

Sent: 07 November 2023 11:53

To: [hass-edu-ethics](mailto:hass-edu-ethics@strath.ac.uk) <hass-edu-ethics@strath.ac.uk>

Cc: David Kirk <david.kirk@strath.ac.uk>; Dillon Landi <dillon.landi@strath.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Ethics Update (Jing Yang)

Hi Sharon

Thanks for your email. I have revised my ethics application form and highlight the changes, also I have removed some sections that we don't use, such as (classroom observation part). I also put the PIS (in Chinese) in the appendix.

知情同意书

课题名称: 中国体育课程改革：体育教育者对新《体育与健康》课程的参与、实践与反思

- 我确认我已阅读并理解上述项目的《参与者须知》，研究人员已回答了我的任何疑问。
- 我确认我已阅读并理解研究项目参与者隐私声明，并了解我的个人信息将如何使用以及将如何处理（即如何保存以及保存多长时间）。
- 我知道我的参与是自愿的，我可以随时退出项目，直至项目结束，无需说明理由，也不承担任何后果。
- 我了解我可以要求从研究中撤销某些个人信息，研究人员将尽可能满足我的要求。这包括访谈录音和笔录中的我的个人信息。
- 我知道匿名数据（即不能识别我个人身份的数据）一旦被纳入研究就不能撤回。
- 我了解研究中记录的任何信息都将保密，不会公开任何可识别我身份的信息。
- 我同意成为该项目的参与者。
- 我同意作为项目的一部分接受采访录音。

参与者姓名（签名）	
日期：	

Appendix E: Example of translation checking

Chinese	English
中小学教师面临的主要挑战在于如何使每个单元循序渐进，不重复，螺旋式上升....	The main challenge for primary and secondary school teachers lies in making each unit progressive and non-repetitive, spiralling up....
比如，教会勤练常赛，学练赛评一体化的教学，这种新的思想，新的一种路径。	For example, they are encouraged to adopt a teaching method that integrates diligent practice, frequent competition, learning, practice, competition, and evaluation into a unified approach.
但是随着我们学生体质的下降，应试教育的一种不断的内卷，所以政府也发现了学生体质的一个下降的情况。	However, with the decline in the physical fitness of students and the constant internal competition within exam-oriented education system, government has also seen a decline in the physical fitness of students.
“我们中华民族，万般皆下贫，唯有读书高”。	“In our Chinese nation, all are inferior to poverty, only education is esteemed above all.”

Appendix F: Samples of versus codes

Examples of the initial versus codes found in Tao Hua's dataset, including some data that supported these codes.

Code	Example
Physical education and holistic development	Physical education is integral at the school level, crucially contributing to the holistic development that encompasses moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labour education.

(12) Physical education is integral at the school level, crucially contributing to the holistic development that encompasses moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labour education.

JY Jing Yang ... Physical education and holistic development

Codes	Example
Health education Sub-code: Required module for PETE	Health education is also now a required module for undergraduates, and all physical education majors are required to take this module.

Health education is also now a required module for undergraduates, and all physical education majors are required to take this module.

JY Jing Yang ... Health education

Reply

JY Jing Yang ... Required module for PETE

This example showed that David and I independently coded the same file and achieved consistency.

This is basic procedures... Although it involves numerous preliminary procedures, the majority of educators are unaware of this.... First, the expert group on national curriculum standards includes representatives of teacher educators, teacher-researchers, as well as backbone primary and secondary school teachers. Because it's only more than 10 people in the whole professional group,

Educators unaware of the Procedures

Involved various professional groups

DK David Kirk ... Representatives of various groups had input to new curriculum

DK David Kirk ... Many teachers unaware of this

Appendix G: The sample of codebook

Code 1: Key Changes and the Path of Reform

Subcode (1) The curriculum reform is an ongoing process

Subcode (2) The new curriculum is comprehensive

Subcode (3) Centred with core competencies

Code 2: The new curriculum development is a complex process

Subcode (1) The procedures of curriculum development

Subcode (2) After the curriculum launched: three phases

- Communication
- Piloting
- Textbook development

Subcode (3) Challenges in the curriculum and textbook development

- Develop the evaluation standard
- Editing the health education

According to the codebook, the relevant data was put into a single document to construct the thematic structure of the findings.

Main code: Curriculum reform

Subcodes: The process of curriculum reform

(1) The curriculum reform is an ongoing process

The Curriculum standard is revised every 10 years, 2001, 2011 and normally implemented in 2021. However, due to the COVID-19, the introduction of the new curriculum standard was delayed by one year. (Shen Yan, p. 4)

So now we have a lot of changes in the new curriculum(Ping Wei, p. 4).

In the past, it was the era of the syllabus, which was modelled on the Soviet Union's, telling teachers what to teach in each lesson. The curriculum standard in 2001 was very thin, resulting in many primary and secondary school physical education teachers not knowing how to teach. So, when the curriculum standards were introduced in 2001, many frontline teachers were confused. One of the most important features of the 2001 curriculum is that it devolves the design of the curriculum to the teachers. (Hao Miao, p.1)