Routledge Handbook of Physical Education Pedagogies

Catherine D. Ennis

Equity and inequity amidst curriculum reform

Publication details
Shaun D. Wilkinson
Published online on: 15 Aug 2016

How to cite :- Shaun D. Wilkinson. 15 Aug 2016, Equity and inequity amidst curriculum reform from: Routledge Handbook of Physical Education Pedagogies Routledge
Accessed on: 31 Oct 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Equity and inequity have long been a focus of attention in physical education (PE) and are matters often at the fore in discussions about curriculum reform (e.g., Australian Government, 2014; Daipi, 2004; Department for Education [DfE], 2014). Inequities in education, sport, health and/or wider society may all underpin calls for curriculum reforms in education as a whole, or in PE specifically. In parallel, curriculum reforms continue to be critiqued in terms of their direct and indirect consequences for equity (e.g., Curtner-Smith, 1999; Penney & Evans, 1999). Talk of developing and enacting PE curriculum in ways that will advance and support greater equity is, therefore, not new. Such talk remains, however, characterised by the use of a variety of terms that have different meanings in international educational policy discourse, and that highlight that equity is not straightforward to address. This chapter therefore opens by examining key terms and constructs. Discussing equity, equality and inclusion reaffirms the need to interrogate the particular understandings of terms, and the social and political agendas that are reflected in curriculum reforms and curriculum research in PE.

As Penney discusses in Chapter 9, curriculum reform is always to some extent a product of history, but also something that is fundamental in shaping the future of PE. The second section of this chapter therefore connects historical insights with some of the contemporary issues and curriculum reform agendas that are being pursued internationally in PE. I examine a number of ‘landmark reforms’ in education and PE to illustrate particular trends, shifting foci and changing understandings of equity being expressed in different contexts. Discussion reflects a concern to move beyond rhetoric in considering equity in PE, and critically engage with the direct and subtle ways in which the interface between policy texts and contexts play out in practice to variously support or inhibit equity in PE. Attention then turns to theoretical resources and perspectives that have variously informed approaches to equity research in the field over time, their respective merits, apparent limitations and the advances in understanding that they have provided. I discuss the different contributions that social constructivist, socio-cultural, feminist, post-structural and socio-critical scholarship in PE have provided to understandings of equity. This provides a basis from which to critically review current trends and issues pertaining to equity and inequities amidst curriculum reforms in PE. I reaffirm that how equity is conceptualised in curriculum developments, and similarly, in research, is key to understanding what aspects of practice will be challenged or in contrast, left untouched – and, as a consequence, continue to be legitimated. I apply findings
and conclusions from this review to consider implications for evidence-based policy development and professional practice in PE. The final sections of the chapter address potential directions for future research and practice that will support further advances in equity, and recall key findings.

Restrictions of space mean that I address selected issues, developments and perspectives. Throughout, I endeavour to illustrate the cross-cultural and international relevance of the various topics, equity-driven reforms and research insights that are explored. At the same time, I stress that particular cultural, social and policy contexts are always important to consider. Hence, I encourage readers to critically reflect on the specificities of their context from professional, social, cultural, political and historical perspectives, as they attempt to relate to the findings reported.

Equality, equity and inclusion: contested terms and social constructs

This section examines three key constructs that feature in policy and curriculum developments in PE internationally: equality, equity and inclusion. Distinguishing and defining the terms is a challenging undertaking, and one that, arguably, we cannot expect agreement upon. Indeed, while the concepts enjoy considerable currency in the PE literature and explicitly feature in a raft of educational policy reforms bearing on PE worldwide, they also have a long and contested history. This spans political, policy, professional and research arenas that pertain to PE and reflects differing interests in and perspectives on inclusion, equality and/or equity. Over 20 years ago, Evans and Davies (1993, p. 12) highlighted that, “their meanings are conveniently transient and depend upon the specifics of social, political or fiscal interests which dominate political or educational contexts of the day. Because they derive their agendas from and are used in such contexts they are inevitably contested.” Accordingly, this chapter emphasises the need to appreciate the subtleties, nuances and distinctions between the terms as used over time and within any specific context of educational policy-making, professional practice, and research internationally.

In education and PE, equality has typically referred to all people being treated the same, with equality therefore tending to be defined as a technical concern with the distribution of opportunities amongst different social groups (Evans & Davies, 1986, 1993). This pretence of ‘equal treatment’ has been contested, with attention directed to the limits of claimed equality in relation to both ‘access’ and ‘opportunity’. The emphasis is that a focus on uniformity fails to recognise that not all students are equally disposed or resourced to relate to, for example, the curriculum on offer. Nor are they equally able to take advantage of ostensibly egalitarian education or PE environments. In simple terms, talk of equality that is framed in terms of ensuring that all students have access to a particular set of PE curriculum and/or co-curricular experiences fails to engage with the differentiated nature of students’ individual engagement with, and experiences of, curriculum. Contemporary educational rhetoric has begun to acknowledge the shortcomings of technical definitions of, and approaches to, ‘equality’ and ‘equal opportunity’. For example, the recent Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling in Australia (Gonski et al., 2011) noted that promoting greater educational equality of opportunity does not imply that all students should be treated in the same way, but rather, that students need to be treated differently to equalise educational opportunities. Similarly, the Equality Act in England noted that some people may need extra help to get equal chances (DfE, 2014). From an equity perspective, the significant feature of both these recent developments is that positive engagement with difference is recognised as fundamental to creating situations in which all students have equal chances and/or opportunities in education. The discourse employed has a qualitative dimension
and positions a notion of fairness aligned with social justice as at the heart of *equity* as a construct (Evans & Davies, 1986, 1993).

Once again, I stress that perspectives on equity vary and, accordingly, so too do definitions of it, and approaches to it. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's [OECD] (2012) stance on equity is, however, a significant international reference point. Notably, the OECD also draws links between equity, fairness and inclusion, in stating that: “Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)” (p. 9). This stance challenges us to critically reflect on the obstacles that curriculum reforms associated with PE have focused attention on, with what effect, and to also consider what should be recognised as a basic minimum level of skill in PE.

In the PE field, Stidder and Hayes (2013, p. 9) have summarised equity in education in terms of “fairness and respect for all pupils where forms of oppression and discrimination are removed from the classroom setting”. Sections below pursue the forms of oppression and discrimination that have been acknowledged in curriculum reforms in PE and that feature in contemporary debates, and critically examine the role of curriculum reform in seeking their ‘removal’ from PE lessons. The many issues associated with trying to ‘deliver’ both fairness and inclusion either through or amidst curriculum reform in PE are very evident. In relation to inclusion, a focus on “ensuring a minimum standard of education for all” (Gonski et al., 2011, p. 105) differs markedly to the use of inclusion (particularly in the US) centring on disabled children, and others identified as having ‘special educational needs’ [SEN] in mainstream educational contexts. Inclusion interpreted more broadly has extended this vision to “those regarded as being at educational risk due to marginalisation as a result of minority group status” (Forlin, 2004, p. 187), and increasingly to the aim of maximising educational opportunities for ‘all’ students. For example, the Ministry of Education in New Zealand [MoE-NZ] explicitly identified the revised curriculum as inclusive in the sense that it “is non-sexist, non-racist, and non-discriminatory” and “it ensures that students’ identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed” (MoE-NZ, 2007, p. 9). Developments elsewhere, including, for example, Singapore (e.g. Daipi, 2004), England (e.g. DfE, 2013), Australia (e.g. Australian Government, 2014) and Canada (e.g. MoE-C, 2014), similarly foreground a desire to ensure that ‘all’ students, irrespective of their background, ability or circumstances, have the opportunity to learn and succeed in education. Subsequent sections therefore adopt this broad stance on inclusion. Amidst enduring political demands for inclusion, equity and equality of access and/or opportunity in education systems worldwide, discussion first provides a historical perspective, looking at selected developments in PE curriculum from an equity perspective.

**The historical context: curriculum and equity-driven reforms in physical education**

Over time, numerous reforms have aimed at ensuring equality and/or equitable experiences for students in PE internationally. I focus on specific policy developments that can be regarded as ‘landmarks’ for PE in curriculum terms, and that illustrate complexity and ongoing uncertainty in relation to the meanings being given to equity in PE. The examples that follow affirm that equality, equity and inclusion are fluid concepts and contested issues. They illustrate that curriculum reforms are at times clear responses to broader social and political shifts in thinking about equity and that, in other instances, the impact of reforms prompt fresh thinking and renewed debate about equity in PE.
Title IX
In 1972, amidst feminist activism, the United States [US] Congress passed Title IX of the Educational Amendments [herein Title IX] to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Its passage brought about the first US federal law to mandate gender equality in all areas of public education, including PE. Title IX stated that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (United States Department of Labor, 2007). Title IX can be understood as a liberal feminist initiative, underpinned by an assumption that equality for girls and women could be achieved through legal means and social reform, with a prime focus on changing existing structures and institutional policies so that opportunities and resources may be shared more equally between girls/women and boys/men. Hence, for PE in many US middle and high schools, a direct implication of Title IX was a legal requirement to restructure the provision of curriculum from gender-segregated classes to mixed-sex groups, except in relation to contact sports. As I discuss further below, this consequence of Title IX cannot be assumed as universally positive for girls or boys with various levels of ability in PE. Title IX also denied cultural differences, with it assumed that once girls experienced equal opportunity with respect to curriculum, instruction and expectations for performance in gender-integrated PE classes, an increase in opportunities to learn and develop their skills would follow (Nilges, 1998; Vertinsky, 1992). More recent theoretical and empirical work in PE (e.g. Azzarito, 2012; Evans & Bairner, 2013; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Paechter, 2003) highlights that this position failed to take into account the marginalisation and disadvantage that some students will experience amidst dominant ideologies of masculinity and femininity. It similarly overlooked that resources, abilities and previous experiences are all distributed differently among individuals within any social or cultural group, as well as between groups – and all of these factors can impact opportunities and experiences. Hence, although mixed-sex grouping was deemed fundamental to the provision of a gender-equitable PE program, as Scraton (1986, p. 89) trenchantly observed, “not only is equal access problematic for girls, while stereotypes of masculinity and femininity prevail, but there is a danger that these stereotypes will be reinforced by giving equal access to an unequal situation”. Vertinsky (1992) reported that coeducational PE classes proved to be no panacea and were to a large extent an invitation to girls to participate in ‘the PE of boys’. Indeed, amidst ‘reform’ a focus on performance in ‘traditional’ team sports as a basis of the PE curriculum was not challenged by Title IX. This characteristic in itself has been associated with disadvantage for girls amidst demands for fairness based on equality, and as the next example highlights, has been challenged internationally from an equity perspective (see below).

The National Curriculum for Physical Education in England and Wales
In England and Wales, the development of a National Curriculum, arising from the Education Reform Act [ERA] in 1988, was heralded as a significant step towards providing equality of opportunity for all children in government funded education (Penney, 2002). The ERA established access to a National Curriculum that would include PE as a constituent of the core curriculum, as a statutory entitlement for all students in government funded schools in England and Wales. In this sense, it was a landmark reform. The introduction of a National Curriculum for PE [NCPE] in 1992 (DfE/Welsh Office, 1992) officially and forcefully established the principle of an equal opportunity for students to access a ‘broad and balanced’ PE curriculum, encompassing varied areas of activity. Yet, research informed by education policy

190
Equity and inequity amidst curriculum reform

sociology (see below) revealed the NCPE and its definition of ‘breadth and balance’ in curriculum as reflecting central government’s view of PE as synonymous with particular forms of sport and, more specifically, as continuing to legitimate the primacy of ‘traditional’ games in PE curriculum (Graham with Tytler, 1993; Penney & Evans, 1999; Williams & Woodhouse, 1996). This orientation towards a ‘sport-based’ PE curriculum remains prominent. A feature of the most recent NCPE, introduced by the coalition government in September 2014, is a continued emphasis, amongst other things, on developing physical competence and excellence in competitive team sports/games in schools (DfE, 2013).

Penney and Evans’ (1999) research clearly evidenced that as a curriculum frame, the NCPE was openly designed to accommodate notable differences in PE curriculum provision both within and between schools. Seemingly sound arguments underpin such flexibility in curriculum requirements associated with reforms on this scale, not least that schools and teachers must be able to align curriculum with varied contexts and needs. Yet, research focusing on the NCPE (e.g. Curtner-Smith, 1999; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Kenway, Willis, Blackmore, & Rennie, 1998; Penney & Evans, 1999; Williams & Bedward, 2001) highlighted that flexibility amidst reform also meant that inequities in breadth and quality of experience and long-standing practices of sex-differentiated PE, could continue, as could the privileging of a school curriculum that had greater relevance to boys than to girls and which reflected a particular and Eurocentric version of physical activity.

In revisions to the NCPE (e.g. DfE, 1995; Department for Education and Employment/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [DfEE/QCA], 1999; QCA, 2007), successive texts have featured stronger and broader positioning of notions of equality of opportunity and inclusion, that acknowledge multiple categories of oppression such as gender and disability while recognising their overlap and inter-connectedness. The 1999 and 2007 orders, for example, included both general and subject specific inclusion statements reflecting a desire to meet the specific needs of students from an intersection of marginalised groups.

Amidst National Curriculum ‘reforms’ and broader United Kingdom [UK] government policy statements of a commitment to social inclusion, however, evidence of widespread change in the curriculum and pedagogies of PE has remained elusive. Stidder (2013, p. 26) asserts that the introduction of the NCPE “was an opportunity for PE teachers to move beyond conventional approaches and re-define the way in which boys and girls experienced their PE lessons in schools”. Yet, in the overwhelming majority of schools in England and Wales, competitive sports and team games continue to dominate the PE curriculum (Quick, Simon & Thornton, 2010), and traditionally gender-demarcated patterns of provision remain largely unaltered in many contemporary secondary school contexts (Green, 2008). Curtner-Smith (1999) and Penney and Evans’s (1999) research specifically highlighted that the flexibility inherent in official curriculum policy enabled ‘new curriculum’ to be adapted and accommodated within established practice and ideologies. In some instances, therefore, ‘implementation’ of the NCPE saw a continuation of boys and girls being given access to a separate and different PE curriculum, each reflecting traditional stereotypical perceptions of gender. According to Green, Smith, Thurston and Lamb (2007, p. 68), this outcome “is unsurprising given that contemporary PE is built on a history of sex segregation”, with traditions becoming embedded as legitimate practice: “distinct male and female traditions expressed in quasi separate girls’ and boys’ departments, teaching differing activities to sex-specific teaching groups and holding, by degrees, differing perceptions regarding suitable content and teaching methods”. The history that Green et al. (2007) refer to can similarly be viewed as limiting in relation to concerns for PE curriculum to reflect and respond to cultural and ethnic diversity. In this regard, the NCPE curriculum requirements largely reaffirmed a historical vision of PE curriculum that was culturally narrow – or certainly,
left things open enough for monocultural interpretation to prevail (Figueroa, 1993). Like Title IX, the NCPE thus reaffirms history as critical to understanding the advances and limits to equity that are associated with any official curriculum reform. Figueroa’s (1993, p. 100) observation that for those teachers “committed to multicultural, antiracist, and equal opportunities education”, “ambiguities” in official curriculum texts “provide some openings”, is an important reminder of the central role that teachers play in curriculum reform and in relation to equity in PE (see also Chapter 12 by Petrie).

Reforming physical education and school sport: PESSCL and PESSYP

The Physical Education and School Sport Club Links [PESSCL] and Physical Education and Sport Strategy for Young People [PESSYP] in England and Wales, strictly speaking, are not ‘curriculum’ reforms. However, they are notable examples of policy developments that have had clear implications for PE curriculum, and that have impacted on the context in which National Curriculum policy is understood and enacted. Discussion thus reaffirms that curriculum reform in PE needs to always be located in relation to broad policy contexts and political agendas that extend beyond education. It also supports the proposition developed in more depth in Chapter 11 (Penney & Mitchell), that curriculum reform in PE is being driven to an important extent from ‘the outside in’.

The national PESSCL (Department for Education and Skills/Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DfES/DCMS], 2003) and PESSYP (Youth Sport Trust, 2009) strategies represented unprecedented UK government investment in provision of PE and sport for young people. Centring on investment in ‘partnership-based’ models of provision of PE and school sport [PESS], the initiatives openly spanned the education and sport policy boundaries, but also directly connected with the UK government’s wider policy of social inclusion. The explicit intent was to encourage more young people to participate in structured sport and physical activity opportunities, particularly those from groups who have previously been under-represented (Flintoff, 2003). Research (e.g. Flintoff, 2008; Green, 2008; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014) has, however, called into question whether such provision serves to challenge or reaffirm discourses and practices that legitimate and contribute to the ongoing perpetuation of inequities in PE, physical activity and sport. Indeed, notwithstanding the underlying emphasis on social inclusion within PESSCL and PESSYP, Flintoff’s (2008) research centring on school sport partnerships drew attention to the significance of pedagogy in relation to the prospect that coaching sessions for schoolchildren would express discourses of inclusion. Green (2008) and Wilkinson and Penney (2014) have also noted that discourses of sporting excellence and/or competitive sport tend to provide the dominant frame for commercial sports coaches’ involvement in provision of physical activity opportunities in schools, and may act to deflect educational priorities and concerns to extend equity.

Green (2008), Flintoff (2008) and Wilkinson and Penney’s (2014) research highlights that it cannot be assumed that new initiatives centring on ‘partnership-based’ development of PE and/or sport in schools, will signal a move towards greater inclusivity and/or equity. More specifically, the reforms appear to have done little to challenge a long-established discourse of ‘more of the same for the more able’ associated with the organisation and delivery of extra-curricular PE and sport (e.g. Penney & Harris, 1997). As I discuss further below, narrow conceptualisations of ‘ability’ in PE remain an important source of inequity. In this regard, it is notable that the PESSCL strategy included a distinct ‘Gifted and Talented’ work strand, explicitly aimed at recognising, supporting and developing talented young “sports people” (DfES/DCMS, 2003, p. 1). As Penney and Evans (2013) have highlighted, critical issues to consider amidst such
Equity and inequity amidst curriculum reform developments are who is identified as ‘gifted and talented’ in contexts of PE and/or school sport, and what, specifically, the initiatives advocate for in relation to provision for ‘gifted and talented’ students.

Theoretical perspectives and shifting views on equity and curriculum reform

Previous sections have reflected that over time, various theoretical perspectives have informed research addressing curriculum reform and equity in PE. This section points to some of the shifts in theoretical thinking over time and the issues that these have brought to the fore. The above discussion of research insights associated with Title IX and the NCPE to some extent reflected the prominence of feminist scholarship in the field, placing relations and differences between women/girls and men/boys at the centre of analysis, and positioning gender as a key dimension of overall identity and a determinant of behaviour. Messner and Sabo (1990, p. 1) remind us, however, that “there is no single feminist school of thought but rather a multifaceted mosaic of feminist visions and practices”. The ‘mosaic’ is clearly evident in research in PE that has used various feminist perspectives and concepts to consider, for example, how PE and sport discourses shape and regulate how girls experience their bodies (e.g. Oliver & Lalik, 2001, 2004a), the hidden curriculum as a ‘gender’ issue (e.g. Bain, 1986; Varpalotai, 1987) and students’ constructions of masculinity and femininity (e.g. Nilges, 1998; Paechter, 2003). As a central focus in wider feminist research in PE and critical analysis of curriculum reform, the hidden curriculum directs attention to implicit, unconscious ways in which students come to learn knowledge, attitudes, values, norms and assumptions (Nutt & Clarke, 2002). It is a theoretical construct that focuses on implicit messages conveyed in and through the daily routines and rituals of PE teachers’ pedagogic practice, and grounded in the structure and content of curriculum. From an equity perspective, it gives visibility to ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions, educational processes and practices that continue to generate and legitimate inequity in PE. Research by Varpalotai (1987) in Canada and Bain (1986) in the US, for example, highlighted how the hidden curriculum, embedded in curricula and practice, transmits powerful implicit gender-related messages to girls and boys about participation, behaviour, capabilities, masculinity and femininity. Other, more recent studies (e.g. Azzarito, 2012; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014) have similarly documented how the hidden curriculum expressed in and through the gender-differentiated patterns of provision in PE curriculum perpetuate inequities by maintaining girls’/boys’ marginal engagement with stereotypically masculine/feminine team games in the curriculum. Accordingly, we see that gender-based distinctions in PE curriculum may discourage and ultimately suppress boys and girls from opportunities to explore and reconstruct alternative expressions of physical and gender identity – identities which step outside of and cross traditional stereotypical polarities and boundaries of masculinity and femininity. In essence, as Wilkinson and Penney (2014, p. 5) have noted,”participation in activities that continue to have an underlying association with culturally dominant versions of femininity or masculinity is far from value free”.

Feminist perspectives continue to evolve. Influenced particularly by the critiques of black and disabled feminists (e.g. Lloyd, 1992; Mirza, 1997), the use of the category ‘boy’/’girl’ or other universalistic terms including ‘black’ or ‘disability’ are now recognised as highly problematic, and unitary notions or categories of oppression and, similarly, ‘single issue’ analyses, are increasingly challenged (e.g. Flintoff, Fitzgerald & Scraton, 2008). As Penney and Evans (2002) observed, historically, much of the feminist and critical research on equity and PE has tended to take such an approach, focusing, for example, on gender, race, class and sexuality as essentially discrete social categories. The contrasting position that they advocated for acknowledges the complexities inherent in multiple identities and subjectivities. From this intersectional perspective, students’
gendered identities are understood as intertwined with, and simultaneously mediated by, other intersecting or cross-cutting social identities including class, age, race, ethnicity, ability, disability, sexuality, and other specificities, and gender is conceptualised as a dynamic, fluid and relational category related to other aspects of identity (Azzarito & Solmon, 2005; Flintoff et al., 2008).

Recent work has begun to respond to calls to expand theoretical understandings of ‘difference’ and provide more comprehensive and nuanced perspectives on the ways students’ lived experiences of PE – and, furthermore, curriculum reform efforts, are differentially mediated by their multiple identities. For example, Hay and Macdonald (2010a, 2010b) explored how the interrelated influences of ability, gender and social class impacted on students’ sense of self, potential achievement and learning opportunities within senior secondary PE. Fitzgerald’s (2005) analyses of the embodied experiences of young disabled people within a PESS context revealed how orthodox conceptions of ability in PE run counter to the ways in which dominant notions of disability are recognised and understood. Research by Azzarito (2012) and Oliver and Lalik (2004b) in the US, and Hill (2013) and Kay (2006) in England, has revealed how racialised and cultural aspects of gender relations impact on how boys and girls experience their bodies and Western models of PE and physical activity. Elsewhere, O’Flynn’s (2010) analysis of an elite school and a government school in Australia, points to the ways particular ‘classed’ subjectivities are discursively reproduced and reaffirmed in relation to participation in and provision of sport and physical activity in particular school settings. The challenges that findings such as this present for future research are considered below.

**Equity, inclusion and reform in physical education: trends and issues**

As already illustrated, research shows that notable historical traditions and established ways of thinking about and enacting curriculum invariably prevail in PE, despite, and to some extent because of, curriculum ‘reforms’. From an equity perspective, curriculum stability remains an important ongoing trend in PE and an important issue to engage with.

For all the talk of reform in PE in England and Wales and elsewhere, we can reflect that in important respects very little has changed in the curricula and pedagogies of PE. Notable inequities have been sustained not only in ‘official’ policy documents, but also in their implementation. (Penney & Evans, 1999, p. 138)

As indicated above, flexibility embedded in curriculum reform stands out as enabling the accommodation of new requirements within unchanged and potentially inequitable practice. Preceding discussion has also highlighted the potential for cultural narrowness and gender inequity to continue to be legitimated by curriculum that features and values a limited range of movement contexts, skills and knowledge. Chapter 11 (Penney & Mitchell) discusses a growing body of research that reveals that changing contexts and policy relations are shaping curriculum reform in PE and/or the conditions in which responses are formulated by schools and teachers (Penney, Petrie & Fellows, 2015). Both policy texts and policy contexts can thus be seen as contributing to an ongoing acceptance and dominance of sport and physical activity discourses as the prime point of reference for PE curriculum. Irrespective of whether they are stimulated by educational or other agencies (see Penney & Mitchell, Chapter 11) there is little evidence that curriculum reforms are embedding requirements that actively extend notions of ability in PE. Hunter’s (2004, p. 181) comment that the “discursive space of the good student in PE is shaped by characteristics of competence, competition, comparison, display, skill, and fitness” within a context of PE as sport, highlights the implications for learning and learners. Alternative,
Equity and inequity amidst curriculum reform

culturally distinct and/or creative, aesthetic and non-performance aspects of movement education are marginalised and effectively disregarded as valuable – they do not contribute to one’s recognition as ‘able’. This exclusionary consequence of curriculum – that it is restrictive in the abilities that it acknowledges, is now well documented (e.g. Evans, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2005; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b).

Taking a broader view, differences in the quality and scope of curriculum provision continue amidst reforms, and it remains the case that students are differently positioned to benefit from the ‘opportunities’ provided. In this regard, PE curriculum and reforms remain largely blind to (or in denial of) social inequities beyond schools. As Evans and Bairner (2013) have illustrated, the playing field beyond schools is far from ‘level’ and without acknowledgement of social disadvantage, curriculum reform in PE is destined to perpetuate current inequities in society.

Implications and challenges for evidence-based policy and practice

Preceding sections have raised many issues for curriculum authorities, teachers, teacher educators and researchers to consider. In focusing on the implications of theoretical and empirical insights, Evans and Davies’ (1993, p. 18–19) comments on equity are a good starting point: “the issue must not be whether differences can be dissolved … but how they can be celebrated in ways which negate prejudice and stereotyping and at the same time respect individual cultural identity”. Adopting this stance, and in the light of findings highlighted thus far, a number of challenges are evident. PE curriculum reform clearly needs to start from a more sophisticated understanding of difference/s in PE (informed by notions of intersectionality) and those developing official curriculum frameworks and interpreting them need to consider ways in which reform can enable and celebrate the expression of a greater range of identities and abilities in PE. Physical educationalists internationally need to work collectively to generate more practical examples of curriculum structures, requirements and practices that explicitly seek to do this. Future reform also needs to commit to equity being at the fore of aligned thinking and requirements relating to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (see Penney, Chapter 9). Assessment, particularly, is a prospectively powerful avenue via which to push for greater equity in educational experiences and achievement (e.g. Hay & Penney, 2013). The OECD’S (2012, p. 9) emphasis that in education systems characterised by quality and equity “the vast majority of students have the opportunity to attain high level skills, regardless of their own personal and socio-economic circumstances”, has further implications for curriculum reform in PE. Perhaps most contentious is the challenge to reach agreement upon the PE ‘skill set’ that should be an entitlement for all students. That agreement is a necessary prerequisite to future curriculum reform directed towards the ‘quality and equity’ that the OECD advocates for.

Future directions for curriculum policy, practice and research

As mentioned in the theoretical perspectives section of this chapter, researchers in PE have begun to respond to calls for an intersectional approach to understanding the complexities of students’ lived and differentiated experiences in and of PE. Despite a growing body of empirical work, however, gaps remain in our understanding of the ways curriculum reform and enactment in schools impact students’ multiple identities, especially in contexts of PESS. For example, with exceptions (e.g. Azzarito, 2012; Oliver & Lalik, 2004b; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014), the hidden curriculum in PE has typically been reported as ‘a gender issue’. Further research exploring the complexities of other aspects of students’ identity and the ways in which they intersect with gender would be a welcome addition in extending analyses of the perspectives
of young people to find out more about their experiences of reform associated with PESS. As Chapter 11 (Penney & Mitchell) reflects, another area worthy of further research is the ‘outsourcing’ of PESS. Indeed, in England and Wales, Central Europe, Australia, New Zealand as elsewhere, the services of ‘external’ providers, most notably peripatetic sports coaches, commercial and non-commercial sporting organisations, and sports clubs in the community, are integral to the provision of PE, physical activity and/or sport within and beyond the curriculum. Developments have signalled new policy and curriculum relations and the impact of these shifting relations in equity terms is undoubtedly important for future research to pursue.

Summary of key findings

- Curtner-Smith (1999) and Penney and Evans (1999) provided vivid insight into the frequently reported gap between policy rhetoric and the realities of curriculum reform in PE. Their research serves as a salutary reminder that educational policy legislation, in itself, does not automatically affect a shift in teachers’ perspectives and ideologies. Accordingly, ‘reforms’ alone may yield few changes in either forms of curriculum organisation, content and pedagogic practice.
- Research has highlighted that the sex-differentiated structure of PE (e.g. Nutt & Clarke, 2002), PESS as a policy space (Penney & Evans, 1999) and the policy trend towards increased use of ‘external’ resources and coaches being central to provision of sport in schools (e.g. Flintoff, 2008), can all reaffirm discourses and practices that legitimate and contribute to the ongoing perpetuation of longstanding inequities that arise from narrow conceptualisations of ability, masculinity and femininity.
- Research in England (e.g. Evans, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2005) and Australia (e.g. Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b) has revealed that many students are designated as low ability in PE, not because they lack ability per se, but rather because their interests and abilities are marginalised by systems of judgement and curriculum that are not inclusive of diverse abilities – and that remain unchallenged by ‘reforms’.

Reflective questions for discussion

The following questions prompt readers and/or practitioners to critically reflect on the material presented with a view to extending their capacity to maximise the opportunities that curriculum reform presents to advance equity in PE.

1. How can we create a curriculum that is more inclusive for students from all social groups? What are the strengths and limitations of using the notion of ‘social group’ as a starting point for thinking about equity and curriculum reform?
2. What changes to content would shape a ‘more inclusive’ PE curriculum? Why?
3. How has PE’s association with sport and particularly ‘traditional games’ impacted on how ability is viewed? What evidence do you have for this?
4. What curriculum directions are emerging from, or reinforced by, ‘partnership-based’ delivery models in PE, or by the outsourcing of PE? Are these developments extending PE learning opportunities for all students?
5. What is being learnt through the hidden curriculum in PE and what are the effects of this learning?
References


This page intentionally left blank