PART III
Curriculum policy and reform

Introduction
Curriculum reform is many things to many people. It can be an opportunity to change or influence what skills, knowledge and understanding are at the fore of children’s experiences in physical education, a chance to make a political statement about the status of particular learning, something that can be exploited for financial gain, a source of frustration, something that seems little more than rhetoric, or something with profound implications for teaching and learning. This part of the handbook connects with these and other views of curriculum reform. Most of the chapters in reflect that curriculum reform has been and needs to remain an important focus for research in physical education.

While curriculum reform may well be something that we are familiar with and that, at least to some extent, we appreciate the significance of, much about curriculum reform can appear frustratingly opaque. This set of chapters therefore seek to challenge established familiarity with curriculum reform and extend understanding of its significance for physical education as a field and profession. In various ways the chapters that follow all strive to give more transparency to a process that is accepted as complex and always value laden. It is a part of the handbook that, as a result, openly aims to prompt more questions to be asked of current and prospective future curriculum reform. As a group of authors we make no apologies for raising many questions and not providing simple or definitive answers. The issues that we raise are undeniably complex, always need to be contextualised in relation to unique political, policy, demographic, institutional and professional settings, and remain matters that are open to different standpoints. Each of us has our own personal standpoint on a range of issues associated with curriculum reform in physical education. Collectively, however, the chapters reflect that we adopt a socio-critical stance and as a consequence have pursued research that seeks to ‘dig deeper’ into curriculum matters in physical education.

How can we, for example, explain stability in significant aspects of school curricula amidst major curriculum reform initiatives? Why is it that policy developments originating beyond education continue to have an apparently defining influence upon physical education curriculum? Are contemporary policy developments aiding or inhibiting efforts to challenge long-standing inequities inherent in physical education curriculum? How can curriculum reform in physical education be effectively progressed and supported in increasingly complex policy contexts?
These are amongst the challenging questions that our chapters address. Insights from education policy sociology provide foundational understanding of complexities that characterise the contemporary policy landscapes and contexts within which curriculum reform is set, and the process of curriculum reform. The first chapter (9) in this part, *Policy and possibilities*, opens by problematising what we understand curriculum reform ‘to be’ – and, therefore, what it involves and extends to. I present conceptualisations that are intended to go some way towards providing a platform for theoretically and empirically extending curriculum research in physical education, and for fresh thinking about the professional and practical dimensions of curriculum reform. Rather than denying tensions inherent in curriculum reform, the chapter argues for these to be reframed as critical opportunities for ‘policy action’. Jess and Gray’s chapter (10) and Penney and Mitchell’s chapter (11) both vividly illustrate that these opportunities are being pursued in various curriculum settings, by an increasingly diverse range of organisations and agencies. In Chapter 9 I specifically prompt teachers and teacher educators to engage more proactively with curriculum texts that openly offer the scope for various readings and responses. The tensions and gaps in curriculum texts and their positioning in and amidst other policy developments relating to education, but also sport, health and public services as a whole, are identified as critical spaces for action and influence in curriculum reform. They are spaces that several of the chapters in this part very clearly indicate are being exploited by an increasing number of agencies. Hence, Chapter 9 raises the issues of ownership of curriculum reform and professional responsibility for the curriculum futures that will materialise in schools.

Chapter 10, entitled *Curriculum reform and policy cohesion in physical education*, by Mike Jess and Shirley Gray, presents historical and contemporary analyses to illustrate the parallel influences that the ‘internal dynamics’ of physical education and external factors have on curriculum reform. A chronological account reveals the tensions that can be created amidst shifts in discourses internal to physical education and changes in the discourses shaping the political, economic and policy context. Jess and Gray’s discussion prompts us to reflect on the flow of influences shaping curriculum reform in physical education from a long-term, rather than short-term and reactionary viewpoint. Their analysis leads them to suggest that “the profession’s capacity to create robust but flexible curriculum structures to cope with, negotiate and influence the dynamic and crowded policy landscape” is likely to be critical in shaping physical education curriculum futures. The developments in Scotland that Jess and colleagues have been centrally involved in also vividly illustrate that work directed towards achieving greater coherency between various policies and sites of influence associated with developing physical education curriculum, is equally important in this endeavour.

In Chapter 11, *Reforming curricula from the outside-in*, Dawn Penney and Steve Mitchell arguably reveal the scope of the challenge involved in thinking about, let alone achieving, such coherency. Their chapter takes a close (and professionally ‘hard’) look at the extent to which ‘external’ forces stemming from multiple government arenas, non-government, charitable and commercial sources influence the development and enactment of curriculum reform in physical education. The research that they report paints a picture of many organisations filling a vacuum and openly re-populating the curriculum, policy and professional spaces of physical education. Penney and Mitchell describe contexts of curriculum reform and prospects for reform that clearly demand that physical education teachers, teacher educators and researchers all need to develop new ways of connecting with and influencing the flow of discourses and practices within and across complex policy communities and networks.

In Chapter 12, *Curriculum reform where it counts*, Kirsten Petrie offers us insight into the sorts of shifts in thinking and approaches to curriculum reform that can help in addressing this need. The chapter directs attention particularly to ways in which teachers can be
effectively supported as drivers of curriculum reform that is directed towards enhancing equity and opportunity in physical education classrooms. Drawing on her own and international research, Petrie engages us with the creativity inherent in curriculum reform that is underpinned and driven by shared ownership, investment and characterised by ongoing, open negotiation between teachers and teacher educators as collaborators and co-constructors of reform.

All of the chapters to this point variously illustrate the importance of equity in curriculum reform in physical education and identify it as an ongoing agenda for curriculum reform and research. In Chapter 13, Shaun Wilkinson brings the spotlight firmly onto equity issues. Equity and inequity amidst curriculum reform critically explores the curriculum and pedagogical realities of ‘reform’ in physical education and education, over time and internationally. Extending theoretical perspectives introduced in other chapters, Wilkinson pursues ways in which the interplay between policy texts and policy contexts play out to directly and subtly advance or, alternatively, inhibit advances in equity in physical education curriculum. Wilkinson’s chapter unequivocally makes a case for equity to be at the fore of thinking about curriculum reform and curriculum futures. My hope is that collectively, the chapters in this section will both inspire and enable physical education professionals internationally to ensure that ongoing inequities in physical education are meaningfully challenged in and by future curriculum reform.

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This chapter focuses on the complexity of curriculum reform in physical education (PE) and specifically directs attention to the ‘possibilities’ for curriculum reform that are inherent in contemporary policy developments and policy contexts. Key issues that underpin the chapter are the ownership of, and professional responsibility for, curriculum reform in PE. The stance I take is that professional responsibility for curriculum reform is tied to the challenge of advancing quality and equity in PE (UNESCO, 2015). This is a challenge that I argue is as relevant in any local setting as it is internationally, and that any analysis of curriculum reform should address. This and other chapters that follow present research evidence that illustrates that despite many curriculum reforms that would be regarded as ‘landmarks’ for state or national education systems, longstanding inequities remain engrained and expressed in the PE curriculum that is enacted and experienced in many schools. Understanding more about curriculum reform ‘as policy’ and as also fundamentally about teaching and learning in PE, is arguably a critical pre-requisite to challenging this status quo.

Theoretically, the chapter is therefore grounded in education policy sociology. It draws on mainstream education research and specialist research in PE to present a series of conceptualisations that challenge how we think about curriculum reform in PE and that help to reveal the many ways in which curriculum reform is advanced, resisted and/or redirected. Advancing, resisting or influencing the direction of curriculum reform are all processes that I emphasise are inherently complex, associated with many sites, and that implicate many people in the pursuit of various interests in and for PE curriculum. The processes directly and indirectly involve people and organisations that we regard as legitimate players in curriculum reform in PE – and others whose influence we perhaps question. From the outset, then, curriculum reform is presented as always political and value laden; a process that both historical and contemporary studies show is characterised by contestation. It is, essentially, the negotiation of possibilities for future policy and practice, and always involves opportunities and constraints that impact what can appear in the text of official curriculum documents; what can happen in the name of PE in schools; and what we imagine as possible and desirable directions to pursue in curriculum development.

This chapter reflects that as a social, political and, ultimately, pedagogic process, curriculum reform includes but goes well beyond the production of new official curriculum texts. As I discuss further below, ‘curriculum’ and, hence, ‘curriculum reform’ is conceptualised as a process that spans and connects policy and pedagogy. In the chapter I try to reveal more about the
opportunities and constraints pertaining to current and prospective future curriculum reform – conceived as encompassing official policy texts and extending to the lived experiences of PE curriculum. In doing so, I emphasise agency as a critical issue for all professionals in the field to address. From this perspective, teachers and teacher educators are key actors in increasingly complex policy communities and networks that shape, influence, enable and constrain curriculum reform in PE. I suggest that as PE professionals we need to see ourselves as active players in these communities and networks, and recognise that our actions play a part in enabling or inhibiting particular curriculum futures for PE and for children in PE (Kirk, 2010; Penney, 2013a; Penney & Chandler, 2000). I argue that whether we acknowledge it or not, on a daily basis we are implicated in either extending possibilities for curriculum reform or closing possibilities down. Those possibilities relate simultaneously to the future of the field and to what children experience as PE.

Below I provide a brief historical backdrop to the ways in which curriculum reform is explored in this chapter. This leads into a section that adds depth to the theoretical basis of my approach and explains some of the key conceptualisations that are important reference points for analysis of trends and issues emerging from research pertaining to curriculum reform and PE. My discussion of trends and issues deliberately features insights from mainstream education and from specialist PE research. It focuses on research that collectively establishes a socio-critical orientation to analysis of ongoing curriculum reform in PE and prospects for the future. The studies and approaches discussed illustrate inquiry that goes beyond ‘what’ is happening in curriculum reform in PE to also engage with questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ reform follows the paths it does, and that direct attention to the curriculum consequences of particular interests and discourses gaining prominence in education and physical education.

Issues that I identify as particularly significant in considering curriculum reform ‘possibilities’ amidst policy contexts that are dynamic and increasingly complex, are: the collective impact of seemingly unconnected or incoherent policy developments; the importance of the people and organisations influencing interpretations and enactment of curriculum; the fact that official curriculum texts are always an expression of compromise; and the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. I also draw attention to research that highlights that ‘context matters’ greatly in terms of the possibilities for curriculum reform that will be (and can be) pursued in any individual school context. Theoretical and empirical insights from research are then used to address implications for future approaches to curriculum reform in PE and future directions for research. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings and a series of questions that are designed as prompts for reflection and discussion of PE curriculum developments and futures.

**Insights from history: politics, process and contexts**

The limitations of length mean that it is neither feasible nor appropriate to attempt to engage with the full spectrum of research in PE that has, at various points in time, directly addressed or provided insight into matters of curriculum reform in PE. Rather, the chapter centres on education policy and the use of policy as a conceptual tool for analysis of curriculum reform. This reflects that there is now a sustained line of curriculum research in PE, particularly in the UK, other parts of Europe and Australasia, that has used policy developments as a catalyst for research while also seeking to extend the theorising of policy as it relates to curriculum reform. Here I introduce some of the insights about the ‘policy-curriculum’ relationship that have emerged from research within and beyond PE over approximately the past 25 years. This period has been particularly rich in relation to the development of education policy sociology and is also characterised as a period of unprecedented and ongoing changes in political, economic and education
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Research that has taken curriculum and/or other policy developments as its focus during this period has repeatedly revealed curriculum reform as an openly political process, with challenges, tensions and negotiations involved in reaching a point of ‘settlement’ (Luke, Woods & Weir, 2013) marked by publication of a new official curriculum text (see for example, Davies, Evans, Penney & Bass, 1997; Dinan, 2000; Ovens, 2010; Penney & Evans, 1999; Thorburn & Horrell, 2011). At the same time, this research has highlighted that such publications are far from the end of tensions and negotiations. Hence, I have previously emphasised the need to understand curriculum as always ‘unfinished’ (see for example, Penney, 2013a). An increasing number of studies in PE have demonstrated the significant role that various ‘intermediary’ sites, parallel policy developments (associated for example, with sport policy) and school contexts themselves play in shaping interpretations and enactment of official texts. Curtner-Smith’s (1999) study still stands out for revealing the shortcomings of simplistic notions of ‘implementation’ and the potential for the ongoing negotiation of curriculum reform mandates and recommendations to result in ‘no change’ in pedagogical practice.

The concept of ‘slippage’ (Bowe & Ball with Gold, 1992; Penney & Evans, 1999) has been central to analyses seeking to explain such an outcome and also reveal the creation of multiple hybrid texts as an integral feature of curriculum reform processes. Research has also increasingly illustrated, however, the complex composition of the political and policy ‘space’ impacting curriculum reform in PE (see for example, Houlihan, 2000; Houlihan & Green, 2006; Thorburn & Horrell, 2011). To a great extent, the theoretical section that follows reflects that ‘slippage’ is now a seemingly inadequate analytic tool for curriculum studies that are located within education systems that have been transformed by neoliberal and market discourses, and that need to engage with the particularly complex policy dynamics that impact curriculum reform in PE. In Chapter 11 Penney and Mitchell discuss a body of research that highlights the need to critically examine who the dominant voices are in contemporary PE policy networks that are anything but linear.

Finally, I highlight three points from a historical perspective. First, the history of curriculum reform in PE repeatedly illustrates that specific contexts matter in the sense that they create conditions of possibility for particular reform agendas to be pursued. Below, I expand on the complex interplay between curriculum reform and curriculum contexts. Second, a historical perspective prompts exploration of how and why particular discourses and practice maintain their dominance in PE curriculum over time, amidst the rhetoric of ‘reform’. Third (and a related point), I suggest that an important argument for renewed attention to be given to a historical perspective in curriculum reform studies in PE is that it has the capacity to reveal the cumulative impact of multiple policy developments over time. I suggest that we have limited insight into how, subtly and progressively, a catalogue of policy initiatives impact official curriculum developments and the ways in which official reforms are interpreted and enacted. Such inquiry is highly pertinent to pursue in political contexts that research shows are premised on increasingly distributed and opaque governance of education (Ball, 2007; see Penney & Mitchell, Chapter 11).

Theoretical insights

Contemporary education contexts are such that we need “a set of analytic concepts which are potent and malleable” (Ball, 2007, p. 1) to effectively engage with what is happening in relation to curriculum reform in PE, but also, how and why it is happening, and with what effects.
This commentary offers an introduction to some such concepts and certainly is not exhaustive. I discuss concepts and insights about curriculum reform generated from three areas of literature: curriculum theory within sociology of education; network theory as utilised and developed in recent work in education policy sociology; and complexity theory. These are presented as complementary rather than oppositional approaches to theorising contemporary curriculum reform in PE.

**Curriculum policy**

Preceding discussion has already illustrated that talking about curriculum reform is inherently problematic, as people have different understandings of what ‘curriculum’ encompasses. Connelly and Connelly (2013) offer a ‘three-pronged’ conceptualisation of curriculum policy that can counter the tendency for vagueness and, at the same time, extend and give clear foci for curriculum research. They distinguish between (i) “formal curriculum policy”, centring on official, mandatory written curriculum texts; (ii) “implicit curriculum policy”, referring to policy documents and resource materials arising from government and non-government sources, that influence either curriculum practices or the writing of formal curriculum policy (p. 58); and (iii) “prudential curriculum policy” that directs attention to the “prudence, practical wisdom and practical knowledge” (p. 59) that features in the adaptation of curriculum requirements and recommendations for specific local and institutional contexts. As curriculum researchers in health and PE have identified, this conceptualisation aligns with the Ball, Maguire, Braun, with Hoskins and Perryman’s (2012) call for a shift in language from policy ‘implementation’ to ‘enactment’ (see Leahy, Burrows, McCuaig, Wright & Penney, 2016; Penney, 2013a). Ball et al.’s (2012) intention was to bring to the fore the “originality and creativity” in teachers’ contextualisation and enactment of policy, albeit within limits arising from “the possibilities of discourse”, such that teachers are simultaneously “policy subjects and actors” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3). I advocate for this shift to talk of enactment of curriculum policy and for curriculum reform to be conceptualised as encompassing all three of Connelly and Connelly’s (2013) dimensions of curriculum policy.

**Sites of influence and sources of possibility**

Reflecting the above stance, I also point to the utility of Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) theoretical work. Again, my commentary is necessarily selective. Connelly and Connelly (2013) allude to the blurred boundaries between formal and implicit curriculum, highlighting that curriculum policy ‘users’ rarely distinguish between requirements and recommendations. Penney and Mitchell’s chapter (11) looks further at how changes in the composition of policy communities and networks mean that we should also be posing questions about who is influential in producing materials that amount to “implicit curriculum policy” (Connelly & Connelly, 2013) and prospectively supersede official texts as the prime point of reference in enactment. In his theorising of pedagogic discourse, Bernstein (1990) identified “recontextualising fields” (specifically, the “official recontextualising field” and “pedagogic recontextualisation field”) as playing a critical role in the creation, legitimation and transmission of discourse, through the selective appropriation and transformation of texts. This is a process of “re-positioning them [i.e. texts] in relation to other texts and practices, and modifying and re-focusing them through ‘selection, simplification, condensation, and elaboration’ (Bernstein, 1990, p. 192) of content” (Penney, Petrie & Fellows, 2015, p. 46). From their research in New Zealand, Penney et al. (2015) identified recontextualisation and, more particularly, the composition of the “official
recontextualising field” and the “pedagogic recontextualising field” (Bernstein, 1990), and the relations between them, as critical issues in relation to changes in the influence of various policy actors and agencies in health and PE curriculum (see also Penney & Mitchell, Chapter 11).

If we consider curriculum reform as encompassing formal, implicit and prudential curriculum policy (Connelly & Connelly, 2013), I also suggest that matters of assessment and pedagogy are intertwined with curriculum policy and that they should be integral to our conceptualisation of curriculum reform. Bernstein’s (1990) conceptualisation of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation (incorporating assessment systems) as three inter-related “message systems” of schooling, then offers further insight for analyses of reform. For example, it directs our attention to the ways in which formal assessment requirements that accompany new curriculum frameworks, or assessment texts that take on the status of “implicit curriculum policy” (Connelly & Connelly, 2013) can have a defining influence in interpretations and enactment of new official curriculum texts. As I discuss below, this is particularly evident in examination PE contexts. Bernstein’s conceptualisation points particularly to the alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as being fundamental to coherency in curriculum reform efforts (see Penney, Brooker, Hay & Gillespie, 2009). Again research focusing on examination PE has revealed the consequences of misalignment (see below and e.g. Thorburn, 2007). Relationships between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are also identified as presenting opportunities to challenge the positioning of various discourses in PE curriculum ‘reform’. Jess, Antencio and Thorburn’s (2011) research grounded in complexity theory (see below) has particularly illustrated pedagogy (and processes to support pedagogical change) as vitally important in advancing curriculum reforms in Scotland that have sought to challenge long-established curriculum practices in PE.

Finally from Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) work, curriculum structures and knowledge boundaries are issues that I have directed attention to previously in openly challenging the scope of thinking about curriculum futures in PE (Penney 2013b; Penney & Chandler, 2000). From Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) work, challenging knowledge boundaries that are embedded in and sustained by curriculum policy (formal, implicit and prudential, see above) is central to what we might regard as “radical reform” (Kirk, 2010). Following Kirk (2010), I suggest that much ‘reform’ has acted to legitimate rather than challenge the dominance of established curriculum structures, practices and discourses – and their inherent inequities (see Wilkinson, Chapter 13). Conceptualising curriculum reform in terms of formal, implicit and prudential curriculum policy, and as an ongoing interplay between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, can prospectively help in efforts to break that trend.

**Network theory**

In employing network theory, Ball (2007) makes the observation that the new policy networks and communities that now characterise education policy and, I contend, curriculum policy, need to also be understood as “discourse communities” that “bring into play new policy narratives” (p. 123) and give authority to new policy actors and the discourses that they speak (see also Ball & Junemann, 2012). I suggest that as a new mix of discourses “re-populate the field of [education] policy” (Ball, 2007, p. 123), they progressively change the discursive boundaries of thinking about curriculum and curriculum reform. In Chapter 11 Penney and Mitchell draw on research addressing the role and influence of ‘external providers’ in PE curriculum to further explore this proposition.

Also relevant in the conceptualisation of curriculum reform ‘as a network activity’ is the recognition that new policy communities do not simply replace existing structures and
actors. Rather, they “both circumvent and incorporate, overlay or extend beyond” (Ball, 2007, p. 122) established policy communities associated with the development and delivery of PE curriculum. A network perspective thus necessarily also encompasses a historical perspective and prompts examination of how organisations and individuals that historically have been at the centre of curriculum reform are repositioned in and by changing policy networks.

**Complexity theory**

PE researchers in Scotland (Jess et al., 2011) and New Zealand (Ovens, 2010) have also illustrated that complexity theory offers another conceptual tool for analyses of current curriculum practice, but also is a framework that offers an alternative view of possible curriculum futures. As Jess et al. (2011) explain, the strength of complexity theory in relation to thinking about curriculum reform is the grounding of the theory in uncertainty and unpredictability, such that there is not an expectation that order and set, singular logic will characterise processes of policy development, interpretation and enactment. Instead, complexity theory offers a platform for an ecological orientation, “viewing curriculum as a complex, emergent and self-organising phenomenon” (Jess et al., 2011, p. 183). Jess et al. (2011) highlight that adopting a complexity perspective generates a distinct view of the sorts of policy and pedagogical relationships that are inherent in curriculum reform conceived as a process spanning education systems and extending to teaching and learning in PE. In many respects, the characteristics (including shared vision and collaboration within networks) that they associate with thinking about curriculum as “a complex connective system” as compared to a “behaviourist hierarchical system” align with Petrie’s (Chapter 12) call for a shift in thinking about the positioning and role of teachers in curriculum reform. Jess et al. (2011) illustrate that a complexity perspective re-orientates our thinking about teachers as actors in curriculum and learning networks and systems that are complex and dynamic. It therefore also challenges our thinking about the nature and process of curriculum and pedagogical reform in PE. Based on their experiences in working centrally amidst major curriculum reform initiatives in Scotland, Jess et al. (2011) advocate for approaches to curriculum reform to be informed by complexity theory, but also acknowledge that their experience also shows the challenges that teachers and other curriculum stakeholders can have in engaging with a perspective that can prove “frustrating, vague, too complicated and, ultimately, uncomfortable to grasp and implement” (Jess et al., 2011, p. 194).

**Current trends and issues**

Each of the chapters in this part provides further commentary on trends and issues relating to curriculum reform that connects in various ways with the perspectives discussed above. Here I focus on points that particularly connect with the notion of ‘possibility’ in ongoing and prospective future curriculum reform.

**The progressive and collective impact of policy developments**

Education policy sociology particularly prompts the realisation that amidst neoliberalism, significant impact lies not in any single policy initiative but rather in the collective impact over time of a sustained ‘package’ or series of initiatives. In PE, research is beginning to reveal this
sort of cumulative policy impact on curriculum. Studies featuring in Chapter 11 (Penney & Mitchell) show political and policy developments clearly changing the context within which curriculum policy is developed, interpreted and enacted. The chapters by Jess and Gray (10) and Wilkinson (13) also illustrate multiple policy interests and initiatives ‘coming together’ over matters of PE curriculum – and powerfully shaping the discourses gaining prominence in official curriculum texts and informing patterns of curriculum provision and support. Below I identify that a key challenge for future research is to further examine the impact that is associated with changed conditions of and for curriculum reform in PE.

Who are the key policy actors in physical education curriculum?

In any national or local setting and indeed, internationally, there are people who stand out as influential figures in PE curriculum – and such influence is by no means new. Yet, I suggest that the people and organisations influencing interpretations and enactment of curriculum is an important ‘current issue’. Ball’s (2007) and Ball and Junemann’s (2012) analyses bring to the fore the significance of the personal as well as structural dimension of policy networks. Their research highlights that individuals and inter-personal relations are increasingly important to pursue in seeking to reveal how and why particular discourses gain credibility and become a ‘natural’ part of curriculum reform discussions. “People move across and within” networks and some “who occupy multiple positions join things up” (Ball, 2007, p. 19) creating an accepted logic in relation to both curriculum problems and ‘obvious’ solutions. In PE there is a lack of contemporary empirical insights into who, specifically, is playing a key role in ‘making connections’ via involvement ‘across’ arenas of formal, implicit and prudential curriculum policy (see above), and what the ‘curriculum consequences’ are of changing patterns of policy influence. However, I suggest that the research evidence discussed by Penney and Mitchell (Chapter 11) supports the contention that this is an increasingly important issue to examine in relation to curriculum reform in PE. Further, Petrie’s chapter (12) calls for shifts in thinking and practice to ensure that curriculum reform is conceived and approached as a process that accords central status to teachers.

Compromise and curriculum reform

As indicated above, curriculum research has repeatedly illustrated tensions and compromises featuring in curriculum reform initiatives in PE and being expressed openly in official texts (see for example, Ovens, 2010). The development of a new Australian Curriculum and, specifically, Australian Curriculum Health and PE (AC HPE), that has involved the production of a series of texts to reach the point of an endorsed official curriculum text, is a recent example of curriculum reform characterised by tensions and compromise that will continue to ‘play out’ amidst enactment across states and schools in Australia (see Macdonald, 2013; Penney, 2013a). Limitations of space preclude in-depth discussion of specific features of the AC HPE official texts and associated development process. The point I want to make, however, is that it is an example of formal curriculum policy that in many respects, because of the tensions and compromises expressed in the official text, openly gives rise to notably wide-ranging possibilities for readings of and responses to the text – spanning the spectrum from ‘status quo’ to ‘radical reform’ (Kirk, 2010). It is a text that I have suggested has openly been designed with the anticipation that this range of readings and responses will materialise (Penney, 2013a). In these circumstances and arguably any contemporary context of curriculum reform, critical issues then are: what readings gain the status of preferred readings?, how?, why?, and what curriculum possibilities are therefore legitimated or effectively denied amidst the progressive uptake of ‘reform’?
Reform dynamics: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

At least part of the answer (or one answer) to the questions just posed lies in the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Research relating to curriculum developments in examination PE evidences ways in which requirements relating to assessment influence what teachers will perceive as approaches that are legitimate, desirable, or ‘too risky’ in enacting new curriculum (see, for example, Brown & Penney, 2016; Thorburn, 2007). Examination PE is also a context where assessment materials produced as ‘guidance’ clearly take on the status of implicit curriculum policy and, as such, influence decisions about curriculum content and pedagogy (Brown & Penney, 2016). While this research has shown curriculum and pedagogical possibilities being constrained by the dynamic between assessment, curriculum and assessment, I suggest that at the same time it highlights the potential for the reverse effect – that is, for progressive approaches towards assessment and pedagogy to notably extend the possibilities arising in and from curriculum reform. Research on the development of innovative pedagogical and/or instructional models (such as Sport Education) supports this contention. Jess et al.’s (2011) work in Scotland and Petrie and colleagues’ work with teachers in New Zealand (see Chapter 12) both provide further evidence that focusing on pedagogy can be a productive route to curriculum transformation.

Context matters

‘Context’ – global, national and local – is undeniably important in curriculum reform. As indicated above, research within and beyond PE indicates that the consequences of changes in the political, economic and policy contexts for PE curriculum reform are potentially profound (see Penney & Mitchell, Chapter 11). Returning to Ball et al.’s (2012) talk of enactment, these changes are about new discursive limits being placed on engagement in and with curriculum reform. While I certainly do not deny the importance of such changes, I also highlight that the individual particularities of any school context and any PE classroom matter greatly. They are vital to address in seeking to understand the different possibilities for reform that are recognised by teachers in any given school, and that can be pursued in practice.

Anyone undertaking or engaging in case study research, or working with a group of teachers from different schools, will readily relate to this emphasis that characteristics of individual school contexts are very significant in shaping curriculum reform – and, furthermore, that teachers are uniquely placed to exploit the curriculum and pedagogic possibilities that their particular school context presents. Indeed, many official texts, including the AC HPE referred to above, are consciously designed to enable these possibilities to come to the fore in teachers’ interpretation and enactment. Ball et al. (2012) usefully identify that analyses of contexts need to explore professional culture, as well as matters of history, locale and material aspects of resourcing, and the interplay between ‘internal’ dimensions of context and the external (state, national, global) policy context. Professional culture and professional responsibility for curriculum reform in PE are issues that I see as critical for all physical educationalists to reflect on, particularly in contexts that are openly being reshaped by neoliberal and market discourses (see, e.g., Evans & Davies, 2015; Macdonald, 2011, 2015; Penney & Mitchell, Chapter 11).

Implications for practice: teachers as policy actors and knowledge brokers

Jess et al.’s (2011) research illustrates that re-conceptualising curriculum reform prospectively impacts all stakeholders in PE curriculum. It is tempting to add ‘and every stage of the
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curriculum reform process’. However, such a comment sends us back to linear and hierarchical thinking that I want to avoid further legitimating. Hence, one of the notable implications of the theoretical and empirical research insights presented in this chapter relates to how we talk about and, therefore, think about, curriculum reform. For me the appeal of network theory is that we can see ourselves as a part of curriculum reform communities and networks and, furthermore, then consider the position/s, roles and influence that we have and that we also aspire to. In then talking of teachers as key policy actors (Penney, 2013a) and encouraging physical educators in Australia to think about personal policy action, I was identifying that in Australia over the coming months and years, it is teachers and teacher educators who will determine whether progressive ideals that are embedded in the AC HPE text, ultimately find expression in the curriculum enacted as the AC HPE in schools. The official text is one that I maintain offers clear possibilities for, but very little assurance that the ‘reform’ will be a landmark for, advances in quality and equity in PE curriculum.

The research insights presented in this chapter reaffirm that global policy contexts impacting education and PE, national and state policy contexts, and individual school contexts are all influential and important for future practice and research to engage with. Yet, research also repeatedly reaffirms that teachers are always critical mediators and negotiators of policy texts and policy contexts (albeit, texts and/or contexts that are seen as constraining). As Macdonald (2015, p. 37) has discussed, talk of ‘brokering’ can be seen to imply an essentially “technical rather than intellectual or creative” set of tasks. Hence, she has questioned whether

to talk of teacher-as-knowledge broker is to buy into discourses that position teachers as technicians, functionaries of state-sponsored surveillance systems of teacher and student performance standards, and abandon aspirations such as teachers as intellectual or creative workers. (p. 37)

As Macdonald (2015) also recognises, however, if we re-frame the notion of brokering to foreground a critical perspective and critical judgement calls about whether and how any resources and services feature in PE curriculum, it is clearly an intellectual and important role, not a merely technical one. I see the adoption of such a perspective as vitally important for the curriculum future(s) of PE.

Future directions for research

Evans and Davies (2015) recently observed that contemporary developments in education policy and governance are “not only affecting the forms, structures and modalities of educational provision and organisation” (p. 5), but are also ‘outrunning’ research agendas in PE. This chapter reflects the view that we need to respond by considering not only the empirical focus of those agendas, but also their theoretical and methodological underpinnings. It has endeavoured to foreground new ways of theorising curriculum reform as a social and political process that has structural and discursive dimensions, and present conceptualisations that convey curriculum reform as being as much a pedagogical issue as a policy issue. Looking beyond the immediate field of PE is undoubtedly important to locate conceptual tools that enable us to explore the relationship between the structures we now associate with PE curriculum reform and the discourses that are dominant in the thinking and practice of reform – or, alternatively, are marginalised amidst it.

Hence, my hope is that the theoretical discussion in this chapter will prompt further theoretical work in the field. I echo Ball and Junemann (2012) in identifying that the challenge
“is to theorise continuity and change together” (p. 134) and, in doing so, also embrace the notion that “[p]olicy creates context; but context precedes policy” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 18). Research focusing on curriculum reform in PE arguably needs to become more expansive and sophisticated in scope, depth and methodological approach if it is to ‘catch up with’ and ‘keep pace with’ the developments that Evans and Davies (2015) describe. Pursuing the complex (and changing) dynamics between official, implicit and enacted curriculum policy (Connelly & Connelly, 2013) is certainly not an easy task. Ball and Junemann (2012, p. 15) have articulated some of the inherent challenges of network research, highlighting for example, that network relations are typically “opaque” and networks themselves are dynamic, often featuring “fleeting” and “fragile” components. There are no simple methodological answers to the challenges, for example, of how to access, meaningfully engage with, and track the influence and impact that exchanges occurring amidst changing relations have on curriculum matters in PE. Engaging with such issues analytically and methodologically, is, however, a necessary research endeavour if we are to understand more about curriculum reform possibilities and, furthermore, actively extend those possibilities.

Summary of key findings

• Curriculum reform always needs to be understood as a complex political and social process that is characterised by compromise and negotiation.
• Connelly and Connelly’s (2013) three dimensions of curriculum policy – formal, implicit, and prudential – provide a framework for exploring the dynamic between official curriculum texts, guidance materials and resources, and the interpretation, adoption and application of these as curriculum in schools.
• Network theory and complexity theory provide conceptual insights that can extend the depth and sophistication of curriculum reform research in PE to align with contemporary curriculum policy contexts.
• The relationships between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are significant in relation to interpretations and enactment of new official curriculum, and the potential to challenge the dominance of particular discourses in curriculum reform.
• The tensions inherent in official curriculum texts represent avenues for ‘alternative’ readings and responses to be developed. By design official curriculum texts will typically enable and legitimate a range of readings and responses.
• The cumulative impact of multiple policy developments on curriculum reform texts and contexts is emerging as increasingly significant to engage with.
• Conceptualising teachers and teacher educators as policy actors and critical knowledge brokers positions them as having a key professional responsibility for curriculum futures in PE.

Reflective questions for discussion

Readers are encouraged to relate the issues discussed in this chapter to their specific context and experiences of curriculum reform.

1. Who do you see as the legitimate players in curriculum reform in PE?
2. Whose influence in contemporary curriculum reform do you question or oppose – and why?
3. The notion of “implicit curriculum policy” (Connelly and Connelly) relates to guidance materials and resources that accompany new official curriculum developments. Who do
Policy and possibilities

you recognise as producing influential materials and resources? What particular reading/s of official curriculum texts do they promote?

4. Can you recognise ways in which assessment policies or practices influence approaches to curriculum reform?

5. What aspects of your professional context do you associate with constraining, and enabling, curriculum reform?

6. What position/s do you hold or aspire to in relation to the policy networks and communities associated with curriculum reform in PE?

References


