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Physical Education Teacher Education Leaders’ Perceptions on a National Curriculum in Physical Education

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Given criticism of P-12 physical education and wide variability in instructional quality and subject matter outcomes in the United States (US), a national curriculum has been debated by some scholars as a mechanism for improving the status of the subject matter. Grounded in the systemic reform (SR) model, the purpose of this study was to explore physical education teacher education (PETE) leaders’ perceptions regarding the implementation of a national curriculum.

Method: In total, 28 individuals participated in in-depth interviews that were inductively/deductively coded and triangulated.

Results: Themes indicated that nationalizing the curriculum has the potential to offer explicit educational goals, substantial pedagogical guidelines, and valid assessments. Despite recognizing the potential benefits of national curriculum, however, the majority of participants were opposed because of the inflexibility of such a system in the culturally and geographically diverse school contexts across the US.

Conclusions: The concept of national curriculum can be differently interpreted in different countries based on sociocultural, historical, and contextual factors, and its relevance depends primarily on one’s perceptions and previous experiences.

Education reform has been at the center of political and academic debates over the past two decades. Specifically, curriculum improvement and emphasis on accountability have been at the top of the agenda. In 1983, a document titled A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) reported that the academic progress of students in the United States (US) was in decline and failing to prepare graduates to compete in a rapidly changing job market within the global economy. Many government leaders and educational professionals argue that establishing challenging academic standards, unified standardized testing, and accountability measures are essential remedies (Hursh, 2008). In response, several educational initiatives intended to set nationwide goals, establish standardized testing and accountability systems, and reform teacher education were implemented.

Despite the 1990s multifaceted efforts to raise learning standards, however, there was no visible improvement in student achievement in core subjects throughout the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Some scholars believe that the root cause of lack of the significant progress of student performance is attributed to disparate content standards that vary widely from state to state (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2017). For example, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation signed in 2002 by the George W. Bush administration was grounded on the standards-based system outlined by the 1994 reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The act called for challenging standards and rigorous, extensive assessment measures to not only monitor student progress but also hold school personnel accountable for student achievement. Some, however, argue that the lack of a mandatory set of standards underpinning the NCLB Act resulted in highly uneven consequences in implementation and student performance across states (Savage, 2016). The absence of consistency is a primary reason explaining why states developed “Common Core” standards. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) effort, led jointly by state leaders including school chiefs, administrators, and governors from 48 states comprising the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, represents one step toward a national curriculum. (Burks et al., 2015).

Common Core standards are a uniform set of shared expectations for skills and knowledge that all students from kindergarten through Grade 12, regardless of background or home location, should acquire at the end of each grade in English language arts/literacy (ELA) and...
mathematics. The standards were to build upon the best facets of international and previous state standards with the goal that all graduates should be prepared to succeed in college and the workforce after graduation from high school (CCSSI, 2017). Unlike previous disjointed academic standards, the Common Core allows for state collaboration in implementing policies and affording resources such as securing CCSS-aligned curricular materials, reforming teacher evaluation systems, and providing quality professional development (Rentner & Kober, 2014b). For this reason, some researchers regard the standards as an attempt to nationalize curriculum across the states (Rentner & Kober, 2014a). Furthermore, the Race to the Top (RTTT; U.S. Department of Education, 2009b) federal fund, initiated in 2009 by the Obama administration, encouraged states developing and adopting CCSS-aligned goals, curriculum, and assessments to raise educational standards and offer every student a better learning opportunity. This undermined the state-led nature of the Common Core, thereby instigating misperceptions among members of the public that the standards are a federal-led initiative to standardize curricula across states (Savage & O’Connor, 2015).

In the mid-2010s, the Common Core had been widely employed by 42 states and the District of Columbia, but some of the states that had initially adopted the standards recently discontinued implementation (South Carolina, Indiana, and Oklahoma) because of uncertainty about its effectiveness as well as multiple other issues (i.e., resistance to reform inside and outside the system, redundant effort to integrate the Common Core into existing state standards, the increased emphasis on testing activity, and maintaining quality teacher education programs) (Rentner & Kober, 2014a). There is increased opposition to and criticism of educational and political groups about the Common Core standards, and heated debates about the implementation and effectiveness of CCSS-aligned curricula are ongoing. For example, Schmidt and Houang (2012) examined the CCSS for mathematics by reviewing student achievement from the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results and found that states that had adopted more “Common Core-like standards” saw higher NAEP scores on average. In contrast, Loveless (2016) noted that in those states adopting the standards, no greater gains on the 2015 NAEP were found. Polikoff (2017) recently reviewed studies that had investigated the effectiveness of the CCSS by focusing on the question, “What do we know about the implementation and effects of the standards?” and concluded that an estimate or determination of the CCSS’ impact on learning is premature due to design issues and the crude analyses of previous research. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the CCSS-aligned curricula, therefore, still remains unclear.

The introduction of core standards in ELA and mathematics has also prompted interest in comparable documents for science. This led to development of a set of science standards – Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) – voluntarily and collaboratively established by 26 state leaders and other stakeholders in science, industry, and higher education with the aim of providing K-12 students an internationally benchmarked science education throughout the nation (NGSS Lead States, 2013). The NGSS promotes and involves a three-dimensional learning approach outlined in A Framework for K-12 Science Education (National Research Council, 2012) that requires every student to have a deep understanding of disciplinary core ideas, connect crosscutting concepts across disciplines, and acquire skills and knowledge through engineering and scientific practices (NGSS Lead States, 2013). Although there are mixed reviews with regard to implementation and effectiveness of the NGSS across states, it has raised multiple concerns and challenges such as narrow core ideas across grade levels that limit opportunities to engage pupils in deeper understanding; difficulty of developing authentic and meaningful tests that would represent the primary concepts and ideas of the extensive and diverse science-related subjects; securing NGSS-aligned curricular materials; and building awareness and understanding of classroom teachers, parents, and community (Pruitt, 2014).

Although multiple reform efforts have been initiated to accomplish academic excellence through the promotion of greater national consistency in curriculum, the issue of having a national curriculum is, in fact, problematic and leaves many concerns about its potential negative consequences. In particular, standardized testing accompanied with a national curriculum often has been the center of much criticism and debate in the US and even other countries where a unified, core curriculum has already been introduced. A number of educators and researchers argue that a heavy emphasis on standardized tests and the summative test-based accountability could negatively affect student learning and pedagogical practices by focusing primarily on curricula that are narrowly specified within high-stakes testing systems (Hursh, 2008; Sleeter, 2005). They are concerned that schools focus on preparing pupils to achieve higher test scores, and therefore, students and teachers are ranked and compared by these results.

Although educational leaders and federal administrations have wrestled with the prospect of raising learning standards over the last two decades, the profession of physical education (PE) has not been without deliberation and efforts to effect change. In response to the passage of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) that emphasized a national commitment to educational standards, the National Association for Sport and Physical
Education (NASPE) developed and subsequently revised national content standards for PE intended to guide development of P-12 curricula, assessments, and instruction. As the central frameworks that steer and direct current state PE policy, the standards are widely used by states, local schools, and individual teachers. At present, most states (50) have their own standards for school PE while generally adopting the five national standards that describe physically literate individuals (Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) America, American Heart Association [AHA], & Voices for Healthy Kids, 2016).

The standards for P-12 education are usually different in each state, and their specific requirements and implementation are typically determined by lower level government entities and teachers. The flexibility of the standards offers curricular and pedagogical autonomy to meet the needs and interests of individual pupils and establish suitable curricula for specific learning environments (Humphries, Lovdahl, & Ashy, 2002). As a result, teachers and personnel in local schools are able to develop relatively independent guidelines for implementation of curricula.

In the area of PE, discourse about aligning curriculum at the state or national level has arisen, in part, in response to low expectations and credibility for significant learning outcomes, as well as the low stature of the subject matter within the school curriculum. There has already been a call for a nationwide curriculum in P-12 education by some researchers since the mid-1980s. For example, Smith (1993) discussed the possibility of a national PE curriculum in the US through the analysis of the developmental processes, forms, and structure of the British curriculum that had been adopted since the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA; United Kingdom Parliament, 1988). The author suggested that the national curriculum provided strengthened accountability for British PE that had often been regarded as extracurricular or nonacademic for years, enabling physical educators to focus on a common set of goals – “the successful delivery of the curriculum” (p. 23). He further argued that it has enhanced the quality of the overall PE by strengthening student assessment, teacher education programs, and the accountability system.

Recently, professionals in PE debated the need for a national core curriculum in the “Issues” commentary section of a 2016 issue of the Journal of Physical Education Recreation and Dance (JOPERD). Some who favored a uniform curriculum maintained that a common curriculum for PE would enable the field to establish coherent learning goals throughout the country, offer students equitable opportunities across states, develop unified assessments to ensure that students achieve suggested performance outcomes, and finally gain national stature for the field as a core subject. Those opposed argued that the embedded, educational pattern of local curriculum control would not allow for nationalizing the P-12 curriculum and that it could cripple local and teacher autonomy.

Oh and Graber (2017) debated the relevance of adopting a national curriculum in K-12 PE concluding that the concept of national curriculum can be variously interpreted in different countries in terms of sociocultural and contextual factors, and that its relevance relies primarily on one’s perceptions (see Curtner-Smith, 1999). In particular, the authors pointed out that though a standardized curriculum has the potential to offer some credibility and security for P-12 programs by uniting the core elements of education, an overly prescriptive change could result in a stifling learning environment where student interests and differing cultural contexts are not taken into account. They also argued that it would not be easily accepted in a country like the US in which constitutional governance and responsibility are split among federal, state, and local governments.

Scholarly investigation about the feasibility and drawbacks of a national PE curriculum in the US is timely, particularly because there have been increased calls for linking pedagogical practices with program objectives, student assessments, and accountability systems connected with designated program outcomes; and establishing a more explicit, common foundation in the field (Oh & Graber, 2017; Rink, 2013). Local control and state accountability (with some financial support offered by the federal government), however, are largely perceived as the “American way” in education, which may preclude a nationwide, uniform set of curricular guidelines and testing. The idea of conversion to a nationwide curriculum is, by nature, controversial. It is a highly complex undertaking to determine whether a uniform curriculum is a desirable change, especially in the US where different interests and needs from diverse populations and circumstances coexist.

**How prescriptive is a national curriculum in other countries?**

The concept of national curriculum, often referred to as a top-down approach (Jewett, Bain, & Ennis, 1995), begins with the belief that student learning is most effective when primary components of education are purposefully aligned with a standard set of curricular frameworks (Smith & O’Day, 1991). Although many countries have a national curriculum, the extent to which it is specific and rigorous, elaborating on outcomes or the processes in which the outcomes are developed, varies widely from one country
to another (see Oh & Graber, 2017; Smith, O’Day, & Cohen, 1991). It is usually perceived as a common educational base that is widely used to ensure that instructional practices and learning are consistent. Individual countries typically develop a national curriculum by establishing goals, subject matter content, assessment tasks, instructional guidelines and attainment standards that every student is expected to achieve at each developmental stage.

The national curricula for two different countries are contrasted below in relation to prescriptiveness and rigor to help readers understand how a national curriculum might take shape. First, the British national curriculum was developed to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed and become educated citizens regardless of where they reside or other contextual factors (Department for Education, 2013). It includes “attainment targets (ATs)” that describe the understanding and knowledge that students with different maturities and skill levels are expected to acquire in each subject. “Programs of study (POS)” – skills, matters, and processes through which individual pupils achieve the attainment targets at designated key stages – are specified. The curriculum is intended to establish a curricular framework for teachers rather than prescribe in detail how a particular content area is to be taught (Kirk, Penney, Burgess-Limerick, Gorely, & Maynard, 2002; Smith, 1993). A revision of the original national curriculum emphasized stable change and greater clarity, further “reducing prescription and extending flexibility in the statutory requirements” (Penney, 2001, p. 94).

As a second contrasting example, French education has traditionally employed a top-down, centralized approach in which the government takes an active role on managing the school system and developing curriculum. France has had a prescriptive national curriculum elaborated by authorized committees under the Ministry of Education and intended for all disciplines in grade levels from école primaire (primary school) through lycée (upper secondary school) (Gueudet, Bueno-Ravel, Modeste, & Trouche, 2017). Schooling is compulsory from age 6 to 16, and students at the end of Lycée must take a written qualification examination – baccalauréat. Local authorities and school teachers are free to choose textbooks developed by publicly appointed institutions, but actual curriculum and learning content are usually limited within the prescribed curriculum because texts are typically written on the basis of the curriculum (French Ministry of National Education, 2012). The French national curriculum, therefore, quite rigorous and prescriptive.

### Grounding framework

In the early 1990s, the concept of systemic reform (SR) first appeared in the form of widespread public debate. It was suggested that a coherent system of all components of education provides clarity, effectiveness, and efficiency in teaching and learning by facilitating purposeful coordination. Conceptualized by Smith and O’Day (1991), this vision for system-wide improvement emerged in response to the criticism that the reform efforts of the 1980s, including top-down and bottom-up approaches, did little to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

A multilayered governance structure with independent and disjointed centers of authority at each level impedes purposeful coordination and results in low-quality curriculum materials, conflicting goals and policies, and dissatisfaction with schools and classroom teachers who feel accountable for educational achievement (Smith & O’Day, 1991). The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) criticized the policy fragmentation that created complex pedagogical and administrative requirements and provided teachers with almost no support in raising learning standards (Goertz, Floden, & O’Day, 1995). The SR model embodies three major components: a unifying vision and goals, a coherent instructional guidance system, and a restructured governance system.

The SR model has the potential to provide a clear structure within which other important educational components may be organized (Smith & O’Day, 1991). For example, textbook and curricular materials, assessment and testing systems, teacher professional development programs including pre- and in-service, and teacher licensing programs could all make up the content of the frameworks. According to Smith and O’Day (1991), to ensure adequate guidance to improve instruction, the frameworks must be of the highest quality possible. Furthermore, local school personnel must have the freedom to interpret and implement instructional strategies that most effectively meet the particular needs of their students.

For purposes of this study, the model was used to assist in the formation of formal and informal interview questions to understand physical education teacher education (PETE) leaders’ perceptions regarding the acceptability of a national PE curriculum in the US. PETE leaders’ knowledge about and familiarity with national curriculum and their perceptions concerning adoption and implementation were explored in this investigation. Further, the study examined whether nationwide curriculum is the relevant and advisable reform in socio-culturally and contextually diverse
school settings and whether conversion to a national curriculum is feasible in the US where the longstanding tradition of state and local control is dominant. A qualitative approach to data collection was employed.

**Method**

**Participants and settings**

Leaders in PETE were purposefully selected from a data base of four-year colleges and universities across the US holding different Carnegie Classifications. Participants had previously served or were currently serving in leadership capacities at the state and national level in a primary professional organization (e.g., SHAPE America; Special Interest Group: Research on Learning and Instruction in Physical Education of the American Educational Research Association) or had published three or more articles in the past 5 years in leading research journals (e.g., *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*).

A stratified sampling was employed using Carnegie Classifications. In total, 28 faculty (14 female, 14 male) from four different types of colleges were invited to participate: very high research activity universities ($n = 10$), high research activity universities ($n = 7$), doctoral/research universities ($n = 5$), and large and medium program master’s colleges and universities ($n = 6$). The researchers believed this grouping would be a relevant indicator useful in comparing and contrasting the responses from PETE leaders employed in different types of colleges and universities. Interviewing 28 PETE leaders allowed the researchers to reach redundancy with regard to emergent information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants included 26 national leaders, one state leader, and one researcher who met the qualification criterion for publications. Most had been directly or were currently involved in the determination, administration, and implementation of major PE policies or legislative acts. Of the national leaders, 12 were past or current presidents of primary professional organizations, seven were chairs of various scholarly and administrative groups within national professional organizations, and seven were editors of major journals. Nearly all of the participants (27) had published at least three peer-reviewed articles in the past 5 years.

Recruitment took place through e-mail or by phone contact after obtaining clearance from the investigators’ Institutional Review Board. All participants provided consent and were assigned fictitious names. Distinctive information such as professional title is not described for purposes of maintaining confidentiality, but demographic information including gender, types of institutions, rank, years teaching in higher education, and number of referred publications can be found in Table 1.

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*Note. VHRAU = very high research activity universities; HRAU = high research activity universities; DRU = doctoral/research universities; LMPMCU = large and medium program master’s colleges and universities.

*Participants were grouped into four different types of colleges/universities using Carnegie Classifications.
Data collection

Formal and informal interviews served as the primary method of data collection. In addition, a document analysis of each participant’s curriculum vita was conducted. Twelve individuals participated in formal and informal interviews during the annual meeting of SHAPE America. For those \( n = 16 \) unable to participate at this time, in-person interviews were conducted at the participants’ home institutions or by telephone if distance was a precluding factor. Interviews lasted approximately 2 hours and were subsequently transcribed using fictitious names. The name of the interviewee, date, time, and location of the formal/informal interview were recorded in a research log along with general notes.

Formal interviews

Formal interviews (Patton, 2015) were utilized to evoke in-depth responses about participants’ perceptions regarding the feasibility of a nationwide curriculum for P-12 programs. A standardized format was used to enable the investigators to compare and contrast responses of individuals employed at colleges/universities with different Carnegie Classifications. In addition, the informal conversational technique was employed (Patton, 2015) to enable researchers to spontaneously ask questions that emerged from the natural flow of the interaction.

Prior to implementation, formal interview questions were refined by a panel of experts, and a pilot interview was subsequently conducted to determine the arrangement and delimitation of questions and approximate interview length. Grounded in the SR model (Smith & O’Day, 1991), interview questions focused primarily on (a) knowledge about and familiarity with a national curriculum, (b) perceptions of a national curriculum, and (c) relevance and feasibility of a national curriculum in educational mainstream and P-12 education.

Informal interviews

The researchers also engaged participants in informal conversations prior to and after formal interviews. For example, participants who wished to share additional information after the taped interview ended could supplement their responses during the course of the SHAPE America conference or afterward. To effectively record these informal responses, the researchers maintained an interview log.

Document analysis

Participants were asked to share a recent copy of their curriculum vitae for purposes of acquiring demographic information, understanding participants’ professional affiliations and involvements, and determining participation eligibility.

Data analysis

Verbatim data from formal and informal interviews were coded using open and axial techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding is described as a process of breaking apart, conceptualizing, cross-checking, and categorizing data. Themes, concepts, and categories from the interview transcripts were identified and qualified through multiple reviews and analysis of the raw data. In addition, axial coding was used to “reassemble data that was fractured during open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124) and to build a dense texture of relationships between categories. During the axial phase of coding, related concepts and thematic categories were connected to each other in relation to their properties and dimensions.

Analytical procedures were based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that emphasizes the interplay of inductive and deductive reasoning. Data were analyzed inductively in the early stages to discover possible themes, patterns, and categories. Subsequently, a deductive approach was used to test and verify the appropriateness and authenticity of the SR model. This procedure provided rigor and thoroughness to the analytical process (Patton, 2015).

Peer debriefing, negative case analysis, member checking, and triangulation were used to establish trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) emphasize that maintaining complete neutrality and impartiality is not a simple task. It is simply not possible, and perhaps not even desirable, to remove all aspects of human character from a qualitative investigation. Thus, investigator backgrounds and biases were noted.

Researcher bias

Although neither researchers had strong convictions about whether or not a national curriculum is the appropriate model for the US, both were concerned that some PE classes often lack appropriate instruction and are missing designated program outcomes. They also believe, however, that teachers have the most knowledge about individual students and their specific instructional needs. Therefore, from study design through manuscript development, the researchers repeatedly checked for any bias that might affect the findings.
Results

To generate knowledge about the desirability and overall feasibility of a national curriculum, PETE faculty leaders who were knowledgeable about the topic of curriculum, curricular reform, and policy in PE were interviewed. Notable anecdotes and powerful testimonies related to past efforts to reform curriculum in the field of PE are included in the results. Five primary themes are discussed here.

Range of knowledge: Explicit to conversational

Although participants had a range of knowledge about national curriculum in accordance with research interests, teaching experiences, and professional careers, in general they were familiar with the concept and principles. Knowledge ranged from “very little” (Dr. Reid) to specific recall of previous conversations with committee members in a national organization regarding a national curriculum for P-12 PE. One participant with over 40-years of teaching experience in the field stated:

In the early 90s when NASPE was beginning to form a committee to develop national standards, one of the main curriculum people opposed the idea of developing a national curriculum because there has been a strong history of local curriculum. From her perspective and most of us early in our careers were taught that each school should develop their own curriculum because the needs and context in which physical education is taught are unique to a particular school. (Dr. Scott)

Some participants had cursory knowledge of national curricula that existed in other countries. For example, one participant stated, “I’m probably most familiar with the English national curriculum, but not familiar in a detailed way, so I would say that I’m just familiar with some of the general principles” (Dr. Nelson). A few had inaccurate knowledge, believing that a national curriculum did not exist in countries where one has in fact existed for many years:

I had the chance to spend some time in Australia and I don’t think they have a national curriculum…Um…two years ago… Singapore didn’t have a national curriculum, but they were in the process of trying to develop a curriculum. (Dr. Elliott)

Despite having a range of knowledge, most participants easily answered interview questions because they had acquired conversational knowledge through active engagement at the national and international levels by attending conferences, presenting papers, reading the literature, and previously living in other countries:

I talked with the people from Greece at a conference about their national curriculum and they showed me a number of the texts that they had written. And this past summer I was associated with the national curriculum in Brazil. Also, I’ve been reading about the national curriculum in Australia and England. (Dr. Green)

“I attended the Australian national physical education conference in November and I talked about a national curriculum with leaders from Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K.” (Dr. Murray).

Although the institutions in which participants were employed did not appear to be a factor influencing their knowledge level of national curriculum, two who were the most knowledgeable came from a country where a national curriculum had been in existence for many years. One of these participants stated:

All my undergraduate education and my own physical education were based on a national curriculum. I was actually going through teacher education in the early nineties when it was first put into practice. So, I was taught how to do and teach physical education through the original national curriculum document in ____, which was very extensive and prescriptive. (Dr. Mason)

A national curriculum could provide explicit, substantial guidance for P-12 programs and pedagogical practices

From the in-depth interviews, it was found that the primary benefits of adopting a nationwide curriculum stem from consistency about what should be taught. For example, some participants stated, “having a national, standardized curriculum would ensure consistency for teaching and learning” (Dr. Reid) and “I like the consistency of national curriculum. Consistency could give more credibility to the profession. It is more likely that kids will reach what they should be learning at appropriate age” (Dr. Davis).

Although the majority of participants did not express strong or decisive opinions about the implementation of a national curriculum due to perceiving both advantages and disadvantages, some expressed the view that the adoption of a core curriculum would provide clear guidance for P-12 programs and instructional practices in general by clarifying what every student is expected to learn at each grade level:

One good thing is that we can ensure what every American child should be taught. In order for students to be successful in many of the lifetime activities taught in schools and demonstrate that our programs have been successful in promoting students’ active lifestyles, they have to at least be able to throw and catch. At the present time, however, many American students graduate from schools not being very skilled throwing and
catching.... I think this because there aren’t clearly articulated guidelines for physical education programs. (Dr. Griffin)

“If a national curriculum emphasized fundamental skills and knowledge, it could be beneficial, because fundamental motor skills and basic movement that young children should develop should be uniform throughout the country” (Dr. Miller).

In particular, they were concerned that students are not demonstrating competency in fundamental motor skills essential to be considered physically active during their lifetime.

Many participants also expressed frustration about teachers’ inadequate knowledge of the PE content standards and a lack of accountability, both of which might potentially be addressed with a national curriculum.

Nobody decides what physical education programs should look like, so teachers do whatever they want when teaching.... For example, if you asked ten teachers, maybe two of them would know what the standards are or could describe them.... Most teachers aren’t really worried about it .... there’s also no evidence that students are achieving the standards. (Dr. Richards)

There is no accountability.... When I ask them (teachers) if they’re aware of their district, state, and the NASPE standards, they’ll tell me “yes” .... and then I ask them “Does this impact their teaching?”, and they say “no” .... the standards are written so vaguely that you don’t know what you should essentially do and you can’t ensure that you’re meeting the standards. (Dr. Richards)

The primary challenges participants identified with current standards-based PE were disorganized, unreliable teaching practices; nonexistence of accountability measures to evaluate teacher effectiveness; and lack of evidence of student achievement. Some participants attributed the poor quality of PE programs in general to a lack of substantive, systematic guidance for P-12 programs and instructional practices, while suggesting that using a unified core curriculum for PE could be a way to remediate these problems.

The majority of PETE leaders stated that PE teachers typically employ idiosyncratic or discretionary approaches in curricular implementation without any explicit guidelines for teaching. They indicated that many teachers do not use the content standards to guide their daily lessons, and some are not even familiar with them. One participant stated, “Standards are so broad that people can pick and choose what they want.... but, nowhere does it say how you teach to the standards” (Dr. Green). Another stated, “How many people know those national standards and grade-level outcomes that were recently published at our national convention? Probably not very many .... (PE) teachers just sort of exist in a state of ignorance .... we have to have coherent guidelines” (Dr. Dixon).

Some participants perceived that mixed signals, policy fragmentation, and inconsistent pedagogical requirements from the polyphonic policy structure between federal, state, and local entities were another primary factor that has resulted in low quality PE programs:

We have national standards. And, states adopt their own standards modified or completely different. So, we already have our first fracture at the state/national level. Then at the school level we have: “Do I use the state standards or national standards? Do I try both?” There’s no guidance, support, directional involvement given out across those levels. I think it’s difficult for anybody to figure out what best practice looks like. (Dr. Dawson)

“Most of the states have adopted versions of the NASPE standards, but those vary widely across states. And again, at the state level, there’s just not a whole lot of rigor and follow-up support” (Dr. Morris).

These statements illustrate frustration with the current multi-layered governance structure – often referred to as problematic levels of split responsibility between government entities – that “impedes efficient teaching and learning” (Dr. Spencer) and results in teachers receiving mixed signals and inconsistent administrative and pedagogical guidelines. As Dr. Davis commented, “Absolutely .... Mixed signals from multi-level governance make it even more difficult for the kids who are 21 or 22, brand new teachers.” In support, another participant stated, “When you transfer anything from one level to the other, it gets diluted, it gets misinterpreted, and it gets ignored” (Dr. Nelson).

**Rigidity of national curriculum and a “one-size-fits-all” approach**

Although some PETE leaders recognized the potential benefits of consistency that a national curriculum would provide, disadvantages were also documented, particularly in relation to its inflexibility; which would be enough to offset any advantages. Many believed a national curriculum can be “differently interpreted at different times and places” (Dr. Morris), but expressed that it seems rather conceptually rigid. There was concern that a uniform curriculum creates an oppressed educational context where individual interests are ignored:

I don’t think there is a “one size fits all.”... it assumes that the curriculum is fixed. National curriculum doesn’t allow for anything like a social perspective, private need, or public hope. It leaves out what the
student brings to the educational environment. (Dr. Kelly)

Many PETE leaders warned of the danger of educational rationalization for curriculum standardization, emphasizing that a core curriculum is to be too rigid to be useful. In particular, cultural and geographical differences were frequently addressed:

There are idiosyncratic, unique opportunities within states that need to be embraced. For example, in ______, we have a lot of outdoor adventure activities such as backpacking, whitewater, hunting, and fishing that are done by many adults and young people. There are cultural differences, too. I had worked in ______ a lot of my career, 10 years, and there are certain activities that are common to Hispanic students.... We need to be sensitive to those cultural and geographical differences. (Dr. Nelson)

In countries as vast and diverse as the US, in geography and population, the implementation of a national curriculum is often perceived by scholars as unacceptable. The majority of participants in the present study expressed similar perspectives. In addition, they cited disparities in funding and available resources as reasons for why it would fail:

For example, I’m teaching at a gym in the inner city, as opposed to living in the area where we have outdoor space. Maybe this school district can’t afford all the equipment required in addressing a national curriculum. There are different levels funding and facilities available in different schools. (Dr. Davis)

“The resources provided to schools are locally limited with some regulation and funding by individual states. Thus, we have a wide disparity in the funding and support for resources in schools” (Dr. Jenkins).

The majority of PETE leaders were skeptical or even vehemently opposed to adopting a standardized curriculum for PE in the US that would not allow for local flexibility. Instead, they suggested that a common curriculum is more reasonable in smaller countries with culturally homogenous populations. The longstanding educational pattern of state and local control of education was another noticeable factor that contributed to the belief that a national curriculum is too rigid to be implemented throughout the nation:

The concept of local control is so prevalent. The local districts will have a difficult time accepting a national curriculum ... because of the governance system and political history where governance is structured from the federal government on down to states and local districts. (Dr. Duncan)

“I don’t know if anyone would ever allow themselves to be assigned to teach such a curriculum... Local control is all part and parcel of the American independent spirit. I think school stakeholders and teachers, as well as state-level policy makers, are not going to give up their independence” (Dr. Jenkins).

With concerns about noncompliance and nonconformity at each level, most PETE leaders emphasized that there could be strong resistance and fear of change expressed from teachers, schools, and states. In addition, participants understood that educational policy is largely built within states (e.g., hours assigned to PE class and teacher education) and that states are the level of the system that can significantly influence all parts of P-12 education. For this reason, the majority supported statewide curricular reform rather than nationwide change.

It’s the devil!

Most PETE leaders perceived the concept of national curriculum as “value-laden” (Dr. Duncan) and suggested that it would be differently interpreted in relation to how it is established and operationalized in practice (e.g., specificity, rigor, or coverage). Nevertheless, many used negative terms or phrases like “very rigid,” “strict,” “restrictive,” “completely identical,” along with “devil” and “nightmare” when describing different aspects of its potential implementation. One participant provided a notable anecdote:

The first national standards committee was interesting. When a committee to develop national standards was formed in NASPE, not only did a lot of people not want to serve on it, but they didn’t want any part of it because they thought it (national standards) was national curriculum. (Dr. Scott)

This anecdote implies that there was widespread antipathy among professionals in the field regarding the implementation of national curriculum reform. In addition, some were reluctant or even refused to answer hypothetical questions about the enactment of a national curriculum. For example, when Dr. Duncan was asked to describe what types of resources/support would need to be available to ensure the success of a national curriculum (should one ever be enacted), he promptly responded, “That’s not even a question.... It’s non-question because it won’t work.” Another stated, “I’ll not answer those questions that assume we might have a national curriculum or imagine what it would look like if we had” (Dr. Kelly).

Using examples of British and Australian national curricula, the interviewers and participants discussed whether a national curriculum can be intentionally designed for local autonomy and creativity in statutory
requirements rather than merely dictating schools and teachers what and how to teach. Many of the PETE leaders also expressed that it could be operationalized for flexibility in local schools. Nevertheless, they frequently associated a national curriculum with being simplified, suppressing, or even socialistic. Some participants emphasized it teaches the same content and experiences to every student, while restricting both teaching and learning. They believed it would result in strict mandates that every school throughout the nation would need to precisely follow. “That everybody gets a particular curriculum seems rigid. Everybody is going to learn the same thing at the same time” (Dr. Green) and “That we say very definitively that all second graders must do this, this, and this during the first week of school … in fact, is not probable. We’re not in a country that likes to be dictated to in terms of ‘This is what you’ll do’” (Dr. Miller).

The negative image of a national curriculum appears to stem, in part, from a longstanding conviction to an idiosyncratic approach to curricular implementation:

My advisor, Dr. ____, a curriculum theorist, was very strongly opposed to a national curriculum. She believed that curriculum should be developed by individual teachers who are as close to the students as possible. So if I want to develop the right curriculum for you, I would know you... know the skills you do or do not have ... know what you like and are interested in … I believe that is the best type of curriculum. (Dr. Green)

Several PETE leaders also strongly supported a localized curricular approach – designing curriculum fit to individual interests and needs; and this seems to have heavily influenced their negative perceptions of national curriculum as being restrictive, inflexible, or simplified.

Finally, one participant suggested that resistance to a national curriculum would arise because of preference for the existing content standards, “I would bet that people who have worked harder with the standards would be more critical of a national curriculum because of their preference toward the standards and what they’ve invested in them” (Dr. Ryan).

Previous exposure to a national curriculum influences one’s perspectives

Although there were no visible differences between participants employed in institutions holding different Carnegie Classifications, those raised in countries outside the US had notably different perceptions than those raised in the US. These individuals were not averse to the implementation of a national curriculum in the US, perceiving it would provide a common foundation or broad guidelines. They suggested their colleagues raised in the US have misconceptions about a national curriculum:

When you say “national,” people in the United States think it becomes nationalistic or socialistic like, “Oh! The meaning’s that I have to be...” However, is just a standard set of goals and assessments.... It would provide more of a framework, but it’s not a constrictive rule that must be followed. So, it’s somewhat in between. (Dr. Mason)

Some think of it (national curriculum) as something that would have been taught in a socialist or communist country where everybody does the same thing on the same day at the same time. And, folks who interpret it in that way would suggest that it wouldn’t work in this country for a variety of reasons.... But I think the problem here is their interpretation of what we mean by national curriculum. (Dr. Griffin)

Unlike the PETE leaders raised in the US, those not raised here perceived the adoption of a national curriculum as positive change – providing a standard framework for curriculum, assessment, and instruction, but not necessarily restricting local flexibility and teacher autonomy. Previous exposure and experiences to a national curriculum appears to account for the differences in perspectives among the two groups.

Discussion

Due to increased emphasis on teacher and school accountability, lack of consensus about subject matter outcomes, and concerns about the quality of PE in US schools, it is not surprising that a conversation about a national curriculum would emerge. The idea of establishing a standardized, common curriculum across the nation merits attention and discussion within the profession. Although the authors neither advocate for nor against a national curriculum, they believe it is timely to investigate the perceptions of PETE leaders with regard to this debatable and often divisive topic.

The majority of participants were relatively familiar with the basic concepts and principles of a national curriculum, and they were aware of its existence in other countries. Many, however, had difficulty accurately and specifically describing all of the elements of a national curriculum in detail (e.g., process of its development and implementation, rigor, and specificity). Some scholars might argue that lack of knowledge and first-hand exposure are partially responsible for its rejection in the US, whereas others might argue it is due to a model that would narrow school curricula options and circumscribe teacher and local flexibility (Sleeter, 2005).
Some participants expressed the expectation that nationalizing the curriculum in school PE could offer more explicit and coherent guidance throughout the nation by aligning primary educational components including goals, assessment tasks, instructional guidelines, and other delivery requirements from different levels of governance with a uniform set of curricular frameworks, thereby improving student performance in fundamental motor skills and knowledge. Such extensive curricular change alone, however, would not have a significant impact in practice without efforts to enhance instructional effectiveness. For example, Project Follow Through, an extensive educational experiment compared the effect of different instruction models on student achievement, especially in reading, math, language, and spelling (Siegfried, 2007). Over 200,000 school-age children from kindergarten through third grade in 178 communities participated in the study, and diverse groups of pupils were included. The results showed that 20 of the 22 models of instruction produced worse results for student learning outcomes than in classes of teachers who had not employed a specific curriculum. The findings indicate that the teachers using curricula developed at their discretion showed greater effectiveness in student learning than curricula packaged in particular ways. This implies that teachers are the correct level of the educational system to design, develop and deliver curricula for students, thereby significantly influencing curricular practice and program quality. Therefore, teacher effects on curricular implementation should not be underestimated.

In relation to systemic reform (SR), quality programs are built in supportive environments where states, local school districts, and individual schools from a multilayered governance system are purposefully coordinated and mutually cooperative. In contrast, policy fragmentation can distract school personnel and lead to confusion and discomfort. The principle of local flexibility and state ownership of education has led to diverse patterns of delivery, interpretation, and implementation of the PE content standards across states and local schools (see SHAPE America et al., 2016). This policy structure has enabled local schools and teachers to develop and employ curricula pertinent to the needs of individual students and their own educational settings. It also, however, has resulted in a misalignment between suggested standards and the actual curriculum used in school-based PE (Bulger, Housner, & Lee, 2008) by prompting incoherent and overlapped standards’ goals and guidelines. According to the SR model, curriculum alignment for P-12 education might provide a pragmatic educational base to promote collaboration, align policies and guidelines among multiple governments, and help to systematically assess students and school personnel based on aligned standards and guidelines (Oh & Graber, 2017).

A uniform curriculum for PE, however, appears to be too rigid to be adopted in the US, in the light of cultural and contextual differences arising from the country’s size and enormous population. Education scholars postulate that placing pupils within a standardized cultural and social norm in an ideological sense, a simplified, uniform curriculum and standardized tests could prompt resistance and the renewal of divisions between ethnic/racial groups and between socioeconomic classes, especially in a heterogeneous, large community with diverse cultures and divergent interests and needs (Sleeter, 2005). The nature of curriculum, and a national curriculum in particular, is described by Michael Apple (1996), as “never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge… It is always part of a selected tradition, someone’s selection, some group’s vision of legitimate knowledge” (p. 22) An overly rigid national curriculum and national testing is viewed by many as a stifling attempt to reaffirm the supposed consensus about what should be taught.

Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that there are overwhelming discourses and empirical studies in the US educational community that argue for localized curricular approaches and culturally relevant pedagogical practices for ethnic groups, children from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds, those with special needs, and students with insufficient English proficiency. Several curriculum theorists believe that curriculum must derive from the growth and needs of individual students and their own learning contexts, while warning of the peril of educational rationalizations for curricular standardization which would result in narrow, simplified learning contexts (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Jewett et al., 1995). Sleeter (2005) argued that disciplined and rigid pedagogical strategies from educational standardization could violate the diverse languages and home cultures of pupils, further marginalizing low-performing students within schools and society, and finally reproducing the hegemony that has been fractured by social movements (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

The majority of participants believe that conversion to a national curriculum would not be readily accepted in the US educational community for two primary reasons. First, the tradition of local and state control over curricular decisions has been deeply embedded; therefore, resistance, reluctance, or even fear of states, local schools, and individual teachers would be expected, and this is a primary reason why curriculum reform at the national level is difficult to realize (Bulger & Housner, 2009; Burks et al., 2015). Second, a strong conviction to an idiosyncratic approach to curricular
implementation is prevalent among professionals in the US educational mainstream as well as those in PE. Many educational professionals early in their careers are taught that curriculum should be developed by smaller levels of governance and by those (schools and individual teachers) who are closer in proximity to students, as they best understand their students’ needs and interests.

If the introduction of a national curriculum for P-12 programs were to be enacted, it would be advisable for individual states to implement the curriculum voluntarily in a similar way as the Common Core and NASPE/SHAPE America standards. This could potentially reduce any antisentiment or resistance to change from the states and local schools. The aim of a national curriculum would provide a standard framework (Kirk et al., 2002) – identifying what is to be taught in ways such that every pupil accomplishes designated learning standards, but not specifying how a particular content or activity should be taught. In addition, the framework would need to be broadly described to sustain local flexibility and educational clarity and be one that encompasses diverse curricular models, including health-related fitness, tactical games, sport education, social and personal responsibility, and outdoor/adventure education. The development process of a national curriculum, as Smith (1993) advised, would have to be not isolated, but expansive and consultative, entailing the combined efforts of diverse advisory groups including governors, legislators, and educational professionals. The documents of a national curriculum would need to be carefully developed based on international benchmarks and the results of solid, large-scale pilot testing, and diverse opinions and voices of representatives of the public, parents, and teachers must be reflected in the stages of curriculum shaping, writing, revision, and evaluation (Oh & Graber, 2017). The national standards for physical literacy and summative grade level expectations have recently been renewed by the Curriculum Framework Task Force appointed in 2011 by the NASPE. Valid assessments for the PE content standards have been developed, although there still exist reservations about whether these are practical enough to be widely used in many P-12 programs. They could, however, serve as the foundation for such an extensive curricular change.

A notable feature of the 21st-century reforms is greater emphasis placed on school and teacher accountability (i.e., NCLB, RTTT). In particular, the RTTT encourages the use of student achievement data as evidence for assessing teacher effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a). Many educational professionals, however, are concerned that teacher evaluations are linked to student test scores, especially in subject areas where standardized tests are not traditionally used (i.e., PE, arts). Although acknowledging the need to measure teacher effectiveness, test-based accountability pressure has resulted in schools and teachers focusing primarily on existing academic subjects, leading to reduced hours and minimal requirements for subjects like PE that are not tested, thereby further marginalizing those subjects (Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). Mercier and Doolittle (2013) commented that increased accountability pressure will continue to encourage the use of student test results as an indicator of teacher effectiveness.

Based on the results of this study, the term national curriculum is value laden, and perceptions about whether conversion to a uniform curriculum is desirable appeared to be heavily influenced by PETE leaders’ beliefs and values about teaching and learning. A national curriculum would likely be perceived as conservative, restrictive, adaptable, or coherent in terms of one’s beliefs or philosophical positions already formed through previous learning and personal experiences (e.g., participation in PE and physical activity, initial teacher education, or previous exposure to a national curriculum) (see Curtner-Smith, 1999; Jewett, 1994). Those who were strongly opposed to the implementation of a national curriculum expressed preference for a localized curricular approach, maintaining that curriculum should be built on the consideration of individual needs and sociocultural issues. These participants placed high priority on affective value orientations of self-actualization and social reconstruction beyond mastering the subject matter content, while perceiving conversion to a national curriculum as strict and inflexible change. In contrast, those in favor suggested that a national curriculum can be an effective way to help students master fundamental motor skills and basic movement (disciplinary mastery), perceiving it as a common foundation or standard framework to guide P-12 curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Their value perspectives (Ennis & Hooper, 1998; Jewett et al., 1995) appear to affect their perceptions and interpretations of a national curriculum. Finally, these findings imply that there might be a negative relationship between affective value orientations and a disciplinary mastery perspective (Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000; Ennis & Chen, 1995).

Curricular alignment across the nation is a “double-edged sword” – it would offer greater educational coherence yet inhibit local autonomy and teacher creativity. The concept of national curriculum varies widely in terms of time and space, and its relevance often relies on one’s perceptions and previous experiences (Curtner-Smith, 1999; Oh & Graber, 2017). Arguably, the US might already have a national curriculum, particularly in the area of PE (albeit an unofficial one). The field has developed national content standards, grade-level
expectations, and assessments aligned with these standards. Many states have a de facto state curriculum (Smith, 1993), and assessments, accountability measures, and teacher education, and other delivery requirements are largely determined and overseen by state authority systems. For these reasons, conversion to a national curriculum might produce redundant efforts in terms of focusing on numerous philosophical debates about an ideal curriculum instead of paying attention to student learning.

Even if a national curriculum were enacted, it is difficult to be sure that it would result in greater effectiveness and efficiency in actual teaching compared to the current model in which local and state governments have more control of curriculum and policies. Although total standardization of the P-12 curriculum is unlikely to be successful, if the quality of P-12 PE is to improve, it must offer more explicit and substantive goals and guidelines and establish relevant assessments and accountability systems. It will also need to be nested in a flexible educational setting where local and teacher autonomy in curricular development and implementation is allowed.

**Limitations and future research**

Limited research has been conducted on the topic of a national PE curriculum in the US, and this study represents only the perspectives of PETE leaders in the field. The perceptions of other teacher educators, legislators, administrators, and P-12 teachers are not addressed yet warrant investigation. Further, since this investigation employed purposeful, not random sampling, readers should be cautioned against forming universal conclusions that may not necessarily represent the complete spectrum of perceptions of individuals in the PE profession.

During study design, the researchers had anticipated that faculty from (very) high research universities would be more familiar with and knowledgeable about national curriculum than those from teaching-focused universities, because they are more likely to actively attend conferences/symposium at the national and international levels, present and publish papers, and read the literature. The researchers also expected that the degree of familiarity with national curriculum may result in differences in perceptions. Differences in knowledge and perceptions of faculty employed at colleges and universities with different Carnegie Classifications, however, were not found, likely because all participants were leaders in the field. Instead, there were differences in participants’ perspectives based on whether PETE leaders were raised in the US or in other countries. Thus future research should further compare the different perspectives of these two groups of individuals, particularly in relation to PETE leaders living in countries that have similarities to the US (geographically and culturally diverse). As Siedentop (1992) once advised, it is necessary for us to “learn from what is being done in other parts of the world” (p. 70).

Finally, future research should address state efforts at curriculum standardization and assessment in states that have enacted change, the facilitators and barrier to those efforts, and PETE state leaders’ perspectives about such standardization and its success or lack thereof.

**What does this article add?**

System-wide change for P-12 programs is needed to promote increased student learning and greater federal and societal investment, but which reforms would best improve the effectiveness of K-12 PE, and how those reforms should be initiated, remains unclear (Bulger & Housner, 2009). The present study examined the effectiveness and feasibility of a national curriculum approach as a mechanism for improving the status of PE. Based on the results of this investigation, leading scholars in the field have negative perceptions and skepticism about assuming a national curriculum approach in the US. This widespread sentiment appears to stem from cultural and regional diversity, a strong history of local curriculum control, and a deeply held conviction about idiosyncratic curricular implementation. If expansive curricular reform in the US is to occur, it must be culturally and contextually sensitive, and teacher control and creativity must be maintained in ways that sustain both educational coherence and flexibility.

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