



# Teachers' experiences of teaching the Australian Health and Physical Education Health Benefits of Physical Activity curriculum and the need for greater reality congruence

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## Abstract

The paper's purpose was to understand how Australian Capital Territory primary school Year 5/6 teachers deliver the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education (AC: HPE) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016) Health Benefits of Physical Activity (HBPA) Focus Area. Our research questions were as follows: (1) 'How do ACT Year 5/6 primary teachers understand the AC: HPE HBPA Focus Area?' and (2) 'What enablers and constraints exist for teaching this Focus Area?' A qualitative approach was adopted with 15 participants who were specialists or generalist teachers of Physical Education/Health and Physical Education (HPE). Data were collected using three semi-structured group interviews which were recorded and transcribed. The resulting transcripts were interpreted using figurational sociology and the relevant literature. Participants were found to understand and teach HBPA in limited ways through privileging fitness, fitness testing and considering the students as individuals who were predominantly responsible for their own physical health. In contrast, the HBPA Focus Area requires teachers to connect with community social and emotional health and well-being and acknowledge individual physical health is influenced by others, as well as broader societal issues. Participant passion for teaching physical activity was identified as a possible enabler for teaching HBPA. However, participant capacity for teaching this Focus Area was affected by historical ways of teaching and a range of imposed constraints. Traditional teaching and constraints characterised by social power relationships that included the participants and educational management, if addressed, could lead to HBPA being taught in what we describe as more reality-congruent ways.

**Keywords** Australian curriculum · Physical education · Health benefits of physical activity · Figurational sociology

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how Year 5/6 (children between 10 and 12 years of age) Australian Capital Territory (ACT) primary school teachers are teaching the *Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education*<sup>1</sup> (AC: HPE) Health Benefits of Physical Activity (HBPA) Focus Area (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016). The HBPA, like all 12 AC: HPE Focus Areas, is taught across Foundation to Year 10 (children between 5 and 16 years of age). Within the AC: HPE, HBPA 'refers to the influence and impact

regular *physical activity* participation has on individual and *community social* and *emotional health* and *wellbeing*. It involves making active choices and exploring the range of influences on physical activity participation and choices' (ACARA, 2016, p. 70). Significantly, this definition is only included in the glossary towards the end of a PDF of the AC: HPE, Version 8.3, and as the only explanation of HBPA. Consequently, there is the possibility teachers will miss this interpretation and importantly the scope of the curriculum writers' learning intention.

We contend that the placement of the HBPA definition so late in the document can serve to reduce the likelihood of this Focus Area being implemented or in the way it was planned. Even if teachers were to find this definition, they may well have unanswered questions because of limited information about the HBPA Focus Area. For example, questions about

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what exactly is meant by ‘influence’, ‘impact’ and ‘regular’? How much emphasis should be placed on ‘community social and emotional health and wellbeing’ compared with experiencing and making choices about PA? In broader terms concerning the then forthcoming AC: HPE, Penney (2014) raised concerns it would create ‘more questions than answers’ by being designed not to be prescriptive, but to instead offer flexibility for teachers according to their different contexts. Acknowledging these broader concerns, our aim is to go beyond our initial observations about the HBPA Focus Area and explore other factors which may not only constrain but also enable teacher delivery. By focusing on the latter, we are mindful of *Take a strengths-based approach* as one of five AC: HPE propositions.

### Constraints that affect implementing HBPA

Lambert and Penney (2020) concerning the AC: HPE argued practitioner actualisation of progressive curriculum intentions is not guaranteed. In other words, slippage can occur between curriculum writer articulations of new ways of *doing* and what teachers deliver in practice. An example of a new, or relatively new way of *doing*, is teaching HPE through a sociocultural lens, as a shift away from privileging natural science towards teaching in more holistic ways that consider students as social beings. In the context of our paper, a move towards a sociocultural lens is significant because ‘... its attention to social and cultural influences on health put it in direct opposition to notions which locate health almost solely in the individual and his or her decisions’ (Cliff, 2012, p. 293). That said, reasons why teachers may not embrace new way of *doing* are complex, and to understand this more, the broader social networks teachers form need to be examined (Green, 2002). Such analysis can be undertaken by consideration of the inter-related areas of school environment, teachers and students consistent with the aim of the Australian Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework, now incorporated into the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) Active and Healthy Schools Committee (<https://www.achper.org.au/advocacy/australian-health-promoting-schools>), which is to encompass a breadth of internal and external school environment influences to promote health (O’Dea & Maloney, 2000). Boonekamp, Dierx and Jansen (2021) recognised the potential a HPS framework has for providing social and cultural settings to promote physical activity (PA). Such settings can empower students to manage their own PA participation and understand how individual and collective notions of health modify according to different environments (Lynch, 2017), thus establishing ‘... not a fixed endpoint, a ‘product’ we can acquire, but rather something ever changing, always in the process of becoming’ (Haglund et al., 1991, p. 3).

Concerning school environments and policy in particular, any notion schools can simply implement policy such as new curriculum, in consistent ways matching writer intentions, is ideological failing to consider ‘policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors which act as constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments’ (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, p. 19). Regarding constraints, some school principals may not understand contemporary notions of HPE or value it in the same way as other Key Learning Areas (KLAs), and therefore may not approve staff to attend HPE continuous professional development (CPD) when faced with limited budgets and supporting the more ‘serious’ subjects. The latter may, to a greater or lesser extent, be an unplanned outcome (Elias, 2009) of pressure from parents with high academic expectations for their children (Pinquart & Ebeling, 2020).

About teachers, it has been reported specialist Physical Education (PE) and generalist primary teacher graduates often lack the knowledge and skills to teach healthy, active lifestyles (Harris, 2014; Lynch, 2014). Compounding this shortfall is a need for teachers to develop new perspectives, knowledge and pedagogies for teaching ‘health for life’ that encompass PA (Haerens et al., 2011). A concern is where teachers have not accessed contemporary methods for teaching health-based PE, that they may resort to their own ‘ideas’ or those of their colleagues. By contemporary methods, we mean curriculum-aligned pedagogy that produces student-centred outcomes (Pill, 2004). A concern, where teachers fail to use such evidence-based approaches, is that they instead resort to their ‘everyday philosophies’. This term meaning teacher practice, including interpretation and implementation of curriculum, is informed to varying degrees by ideology (Green, 2002). A way that teachers can be supported to learn new ways of *doing* is through connecting with professional associations, like ACHPER, who provide CPD that includes support to help teachers understand and deliver curricula. Nonetheless, ACHPER branches differ in size and influence across states and territories and therefore support varies.

Regarding students, Armour and Harris (2013) have called for more detailed analysis of their diverse learning needs. For example, by collaboration with health professionals outside of schools, to connect students with wider community issues. Similarly, teaching health-related exercise outside of the school environment, to facilitate relatedness and connection between students and others, beyond focusing only on the student as an individual (Cale & Harris, 2009). Both examples suggest ways in which the community social and emotional health and well-being aspects of the HBPA Focus Area can be taught. By teachers adopting such an approach, they can deliver more reality-congruent teaching. Here, we use ‘reality-congruent’ as a figurational sociology term, with this branch of sociology used as our

theoretical framework introduced later. The term meaning as close to reality as possible (Dunning, 1992). The ‘reality’ here being the HBPA Focus Area definition within the AC: HPE.

### Health in PE as a long-term curriculum process

Throughout the history of PE, health has existed as a discourse with the relationship between the two altering over time. In the first half of the twentieth century, health in PE and its predecessor physical training, emphasised the preparation of citizens for war (Tinning et al., 2001). After World War 2, the focus shifted towards health for individualistic reasons rather than for militaristic or nationalistic purposes (Pühse et al., 2011). According to Tinning et al. (2001), health became popularised in the public domain from the 1970s through increased awareness about its importance. Reflecting this greater societal concern about health, PE became increasingly seen as health-oriented PE through its role in improving children’s fitness (Tinning, 1991).

Concerning the relationship between health and PE, there has been considerable debate and a lack of agreement about how both connect. As Pühse et al., (2011, p. 4) argued, ‘a generally accepted understanding and/or definition of health, let alone a catalogue of strategies to improve it in physical education, is absent’. This lack of consensus and misunderstanding can lead to health in PE being delivered in disparate ways, thus restricting student learning and creating a dynamic between text and context that is convoluted and disconnected (Lynch, 2017; Penney, 2014). This agreement and comprehension shortfall has also contributed to health in PE being reduced to a physiologically oriented individual problem or responsibility (Powell et al., 2019). Such reduction is important here, given the HBPA Focus Area requires broader focus to encompass wider understandings about community health and well-being.

In terms of a focus on the individual, historically, fitness testing has existed as an unintended consequence of numerous long-term social processes since World War 2, and is often viewed by teachers as a way through which students become motivated to increase their fitness (Alfrey & Gard, 2014; Hopple & Graham, 1995). However, some students report feeling constrained and shamed from experiencing this form of physical measurement (Alfrey & Gard, 2019). Those feelings occur then as unintended outcomes (Elias, 2009) from what teachers have planned because of their exclusionary, counterproductive or contra-indicated nature (Williams, 2015). Contemporarily, the absence of the words ‘fitness testing’ in the AC: HPE suggests a move away within our subject area from a traditional focus on fitness testing. This shift is perhaps indicative of the AC: HPE writers challenging Australian teachers to modifying

their teaching towards more contemporary and curriculum aligned instruction.

### Figurational sociology

Figurational sociology was chosen as our theoretical framework as it includes several concepts introduced below that were useful for informing the research design and along with the relevant literature, interpreting our findings, specifically, figurational ideas about human relationships, long-term processes and related theories of individual habitus (Elias, 2012) and social habitus (Elias, 2010). In addition, the figurational notion of homo-clausus (Elias, 2006) meaning ‘... an image of single human beings each of whom is ultimately absolutely independent of all others – an individual-in-himself’ (Elias, 2006, p. 155) was seen as having relevance. This importance connects with the AC: HPE proposition *Take a strengths-based approach* by acknowledging that instead of existing in social isolation, all humans learn from each other. Similarly, we view the HBPA Focus Area through a salutogenic lens, where causes of health are sought through collective knowledge, instead of more deficit orientations towards causes of disease, for which individuals are often made to feel responsible (McCuaig, 2018). Nonetheless, and also in keeping with a *Take a strengths-based approach*, we recognise the potential of the HBPA Focus Area, to empower students to take some responsibility for managing their own health. In particular, by learning about the benefits of enhanced mental and emotional health, quality sleep, healthy body image and weight management and social health opportunities that can be realised through lifelong PA.

The term figuration is described by Elias (1978, p. 261) as ‘a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people’. The figuration examined here comprised teachers as the study participants, as well as other teachers, and people with a management role in the participant’s respective schools. Here, the participants were collectively concerned and aligned towards teaching the AC: HPE, since this is the curriculum used throughout ACT schools. Also within figurational sociology, long-term social processes and human relationships are emphasised as having central importance in understanding contemporary issues (Dunning & Hughes, 2013). An example of a PE-specific long-term social process is provided by Williams (2016), who found the way PE is taught in ACT schools has changed little over the past 50 years. Williams (2016) also found teachers placing a high emphasis on student fitness through PE was a recurring theme over at least three decades, along with a focus on fostering student lifelong interest in PA.

With regard to human relationships, our study participants do not exist in isolation, instead they are bonded by interdependent connections (Van Krieken, 1998) between themselves, those with whom they work and others that they

share figurations with more broadly. Similarly, in all figurations, the individual is inseparable from society and vice versa, as both are mutually reliant upon each other (Elias, 2010). Also, according to Van Krieken (1998), people in all figurations engage in purposeful action leading to unplanned and unintended outcomes on account of social power differences (Elias, 2009). Regarding this social power, individuals have differing amounts, the balance of which is in constant flux. Although social power differentials exist between individuals and groups, importantly no single person or group has absolute power (Elias, 2009). Equally, no individual or group is entirely without power.

About individual habitus (Elias, 2012), figurationally the term means ‘... the web of social relations in which the individual lives during his most impressionable phase, during childhood and youth, which imprints itself upon his unfolding personality’ (Elias, 1998, p. 62). Over time and because of changes in human relationships and long-term social processes, people modify their individual habitus. A related concept is social habitus, which Elias (2010, p. 163) explained as ‘... each individual person, different as he or she may be from all others, has a specific character that he or she shares with other members of his or her society’.

Both individual and social habitus have been used previously in ACT PE studies. For example, Williams and Pill (2018) reported how teachers drew upon their ‘everyday philosophies’ (Green, 2002) to teach PE. Meaning they were influenced by their predisposition to and strong identity with sport. Both forms of habitus were also used by Williams et al., (2020a, 2020b) in their research about how teachers assess the AC: HPE Games and Sport Focus Area. In each of the aforementioned studies, there was limited evidence of teachers using evidence-based approaches. Instead, teachers typically sought guidance from their peers to inform their teaching, often limited to ‘what works’. This research sought to find if teachers had a similar approach in teaching the HBPA Focus Area.

It would seem the HBPA definition describes PA as having broader social meaning in ways we have alluded to thus far, necessitating understandings beyond homo-clausus. Indeed, Elias (2007, p. 100) noted it is:

... not possible to grasp in thought the manifold aspects of the human world and the connections between them by starting from the traditional ‘subject of knowledge’, as if a person could actually become a person at all without living with other people and learning from them.

In other words, any given individual does not possess knowledge developed or gained in isolation, as if in some way they were immune to the influences of other people. It would seem the AC: HPE definition of HBPA encourages teachers to embrace perspectives beyond homo-clausus. In

this context, homo-clausus can mean teaching and learning reduced to notions of the student as an individual, without consideration of how students are inter-dependent on others within figurations they are part of. Going deeper, broader learning through this Focus Area seems to include consideration of how individual participation in PA can positively impact the community through people becoming healthier citizens and making a greater contribution to society. To put it another way, by teachers emphasising the broader meaning of HBPA, using a *Take a strengths-based approach*, students can come to understand what causes them to be ‘healthy’.

In summary, we consider the HBPA Focus Area to be valuable within the AC: HPE, but its potential learning impact is marginalised by a lack of information and guidance about its purpose and enactment. This limitation may also be compounded by curriculum implementation issues, traditional ways of *doing* PE and possible teacher pre-dispositions or habitus about health-related exercise. Our research questions then, were as follows: (1) ‘How do ACT Year 5/6 primary teachers understand the AC: HPE HBPA Focus Area?’ and (2) ‘What enablers and constraints exist for teaching this Focus Area?’ Accepting the breadth of direction this study could have taken, with this Focus Area spanning Foundation to Year 10, our paper sought to critically examine how HBPA is taught by Year 5/6 primary teachers (see Table 1 below). It is possible in the future we may extend the study scope to include other Year groups.

## Materials and methods

A qualitative research design was selected because it was deemed appropriate for answering the research questions and is compatible with figurational sociology (Baur & Ernst, 2011). Concerning a qualitative design being most adequate, the nature of our research questions was closely linked to theory and practical problems, and we recognised our understanding of the topic of investigation was ongoing (Mills & Gay, 2017). Ethics approval (file reference HREC 2110) was granted by the Human Ethics Committee at Author 1’s University, by the ACT Government Education Directorate and by school management at independent schools where some of our 15 teacher participants attended.

The study was carried out at an ACHPER ACT Breakfast symposium that also had a CPD component about HBPA. Importantly, the latter was conducted post-data collection to avoid study bias. Year 5/6 specialist PE or HPE teachers were invited by direct email to more than 50 ACT ACHPER members. In addition, Author 1 emailed all 59 ACT Government and 11 Independent primary school principals, inviting Year 5/6 specialist PE or HPE teachers. Information forms were provided in all communication, stating teachers could attend the CPD without taking part in the study, with

**Table 1** Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Position	School setting	Years of teaching experience
Adam	Male	45–49	PE specialist	Government	6
Anna	Female	45–49	HPE specialist	Independent	20
Caroline	Female	30–34	General classroom including HPE	Government	10
Charlotte	Female	35–39	PE specialist	Independent	20
Helen	Female	50–54	PE specialist	Government	33 (13 teaching PE)
Ken	Male	45–49	PE specialist	Independent	14
Lawrence	Male	45–49	PE specialist	Government	2
Lisa	Female	25–29	Head of Faculty/PE specialist	Independent	3–6
Max	Male	30–34	PE specialist	Government	2
Noah	Male	25–29	PE specialist	Government	6
Owen	Male	25–29	HPE specialist	Government	2
Rebecca	Female	45–49	General classroom including HPE	Government	25
Robert	Male	35–39	General classroom including HPE	Government	14
Sarah	Female	25–29	PE specialist	Independent	1
Stephen	Male	45–49	PE specialist	Government	17

no consequence if they decided to withdraw from the latter at any stage.

Two follow-up emails were sent by the Author 1 to the schools, 1 week and 2 weeks respectively after the original email. The overall recruitment strategy resulted in 15 teacher participants, all full-time employed, taking part in both the Breakfast symposium and study. The reasons why more teachers did not attend are unknown, but from the few email replies received, people gave personal reasons such as leave and family commitments. In some cases, principals replied they had passed the information onto their Year 5/6 teachers, but then nothing more was heard. One principal indicated she would pass the information on, warning teachers would unlikely show interest from being too busy with Year 6 graduation and providing students with transition to high school support. Similarly, one principal replied they were not prepared to ask teachers to take on any additional work so late in the term.

## Participants

Our 15 participants reflected a breadth of characteristics including sex (54% male and 46% female), mean years teaching experience (9.4 years), number of years teaching experience (spanning 1–25 years), type of school (67% government and 33% independent) and teacher type, generalist classroom teacher (20%) or specialist PE teacher (80%). Despite the relatively small sample size, having additional participants would not have significantly altered our findings. This was because our data collection had reached

saturation, due to the consistency of participant responses that did not offer any new data or insights. Furthermore, small numbers of teacher or student participants have been used reliably in previous ACT PE research (Williams & Pill, 2018; Williams et al., 2020a, 2020b; Williams et al., 2020a, 2020b). Our low participant number is also in the context of a lack of consensus about what is an acceptable number of interview participants, with between five and 50 recommended across a breadth of qualitative research methodology literature (Dworkin, 2012).

## Data collection

Data were collected using relatively formal semi-structured group interviews, as this approach was considered most suitable for answering our research questions. In planning these interviews, Authors 1 and 2 co-designed a set of pre-determined questions. These were supplemented at the actual interviews, by additional spontaneous questions, used to further explore participant responses (Longhurst, 2010). Authors 1 and 2 each collected data at two separate semi-structured group interviews at the Breakfast symposium. Author 1 interviewed six participants, and Author 2 five participants. A further follow-up semi-structured group interview, undertaken by Author 1, was held 2 weeks after the Breakfast. This was for four teachers who were unable to attend the original event. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 min, was audio recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed by the authors. The three resulting

interview transcripts were then combined into a single dataset for ease of analysis.

## Data analysis

The single dataset was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Essentially this is 'bottom-up' inductive analysis, data driven towards answering the research questions. In phase 1, each author independently familiarised themselves with the single dataset by a process of reading and re-reading. In phase 2, we each generated initial code building within the entire single dataset and in phase 3 we separately developed potential themes. During phase 4, all the authors met through a 'Zoom' meeting to discuss and review the relevance of themes to the research questions.

In phase 5, Author 1 reviewed, refined, collapsed and discarded potential themes to reach five final themes: (1) lack of understanding of the curriculum intention of HBPA, (2) implicit restricted teaching of HBPA, (3) explicit restricted teaching of HBPA, (4) constraints on teaching HBPA, and (5) the use of non-evidence-based knowledge sources to teach HBPA. During phase 5, Author 1 also scrutinised meaning within the final themes to ensure a collective narrative. These final themes were then shared with and agreed by all the authors. Lastly, in phase 6, the final themes became the organiser for compiling the '8' section. Author 1 drafted this section which was again reviewed and then edited by each co-author.

## Results and discussion

Participants provided vague accounts about how they taught the HBPA Focus Area. Connections were inferred rather than explicit, and teaching appeared to be influenced by traditional understandings that were to varying degrees independent of curriculum direction and largely informed by participant 'everyday philosophies'.

### Lack of understanding of the curriculum intention of HBPA

When asked 'what do you think the purpose of the AC: HPE Focus Area is?' participants gave unclear responses showing superficial knowledge of the intent and scope of the AC: HPE definition. There was no mention, or only tacit suggestion of community social and emotional health and well-being, student choice or influences on PA participation. For example, participants stated:

I think it is part of that message around being physically active, as an important thing in life. It's probably

trying to get across to the vast across majority of the students who would not be considered to be good at PE. There's still that importance about being able to participate, to move their body. (Adam)

You are trying to introduce kids to lifelong habits. Preparing them for the future... that's the commencement of their journey for lifelong fitness and health and well-being. (Helen)

Getting the students, particularly the ones who may not enjoy PE to see value in that physical exercise. And it is about setting up healthy habits for life. So that outside of schooling, they will feel the need to continue doing exercise and those sorts of things. (Max)

These responses seem indicative of the participants' individual habitus (Elias, 2012) and social habitus (Elias, 2010) through general notions of fitness and movement being important, and lifelong involvement in PA being good for students' health. How participants spoke about PA and health was consistent with Murphy and Waddington's (1998) observations of the linkage between 'good health' and PA, existing as an ideology unquestioningly and universally accepted as wholesomely beneficial.

Despite teachers having shared habitus about the value of PA through creating healthy children, emphasis tended to be on the individual and devoid of any connection with community social and emotional health and well-being. The suggestion of homo-clausus, or the idea students exist in isolation from other people, is inferred in the following quotes, also in response to the purpose of the AC: HPE Focus Area. The words 'whole child', 'individuality is your strength', 'self-esteem' and 'healthy individuals' seem to particularly emphasise homo-clausus:

About holistic health. So, we're educating the whole child about physical activity as well as the basics of nutrition and well-being... (Charlotte)

... we are trying to teach kids, however you are, your individuality is your strength, so structuring it like that is really valuable, and the self-esteem benefits from that. (Ken)

It would be for me, creating healthy individuals. I would hope that's what we are striving for. I think that's the way the curriculum is written as well. (Robert)

In addition, Robert's comment 'the way the curriculum is written' appeared to show a lack of understanding about what the writers intended in the Focus Area description, an emphasis beyond the individual to involve social and community considerations. Furthermore, when asked 'do you look at the Focus Areas within the curriculum, do you actually look at them for guidance?' significantly none of the participants referred directly to any of the Focus Areas,

including HBPA, in their responses. Typically, they provided what might be described as broad, rather ‘evasive’ answers:

I think it's really important to promote the health benefits... they (the students) will inevitably face challenges... sort of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. (Ken)

I think that if we explain to our kids anything we're doing and the reasons behind why they are doing it, they are more likely to do it. (Stephen)

If you think about anything that we value as important to be sharing with our learners, then you know, connecting meaning for them and developing their own meaning behind what they are doing and why they are doing it. (Caroline)

In Stephen and Caroline's responses, teacher social habitus is suggested through the words ‘we’ and ‘we're’ emphasising shared values and what is important to them. Nonetheless, there is some suggestion in Caroline's statement of learning transferring or extending past the student as an individual. What is concerning about the lack of connection to the AC: HPE, is the participants' perspectives seem informed by ‘everyday philosophies’ (Green, 2002). This was evident through assumptions about what the Focus Area means with limited connection to its definition. Consequently, there is scope for slippage between curriculum intention and what is actually taught.

Instead of the AC: HPE being future focused and enabling opportunities for quality PE (Macdonald, 2013) limited purpose and superficial understandings underpinned participant responses. This slippage between curriculum intention and practice in our study reflects previous observations by the same author, who likened the introduction of new curricula to a flurry of activity in a ‘chook’ (chicken) house, where unfortunately activity soon returns to ‘normal’. The reason being ‘the goals and processes of change are narrowly proscribed by existing structures, resources and traditions...’ (MacDonald, 2003, p. 139).

### Implicit restricted teaching of HBPA

Implicit limited teaching of HBPA through sports and games was suggested by some participants. For example, Lisa remarked in response to ‘do you explicitly plan for and teach the AC: HPE HBPA Focus Area?’.

.... when we come back (from doing PE generally), we'll talk about how that makes you feel, how'd your body feel... were you exerted or were you not?

Similarly, Adam commented:

... it's probably more implicitly taught throughout. But it would be... around the reason we do PE is it keeps you healthy.

And:

Often it will be done incidentally I suppose... Teaching the kids to be mindful of how they feel, after exercise and talking about the benefits. How that can be transferred into other parts of their life (Ken).

Participant remarks again were restricted to the health of the individual, or the impact of PA with the exception perhaps of Ken who made some suggestion of transferability. It is perhaps unsurprising, with restricted information about HBPA within the AC: HPE, that participants provided limited information about how they planned for and taught this Focus Area. Their ideas also seemed to align with notions of fitness in ACT schools as a long-term process and as privileged knowledge (Tinning, 2004). For example, concerning historical understandings of ACT PE ‘a general appreciation of how the body works is part of the process of education and the need is to inculcate early in life an attitude of mind to the body’ (ACT Interim Education Authority, 1975, p. 8). The words ‘general appreciation of how the body works’ emphasise a focus on the individual as well as inferring exercise physiology, motor skills and biomechanics in addition to fitness, as privileged knowledge (Tinning, 2004).

### Explicit restricted teaching of HBPA

Concerning how the HBPA Focus Area was explicitly taught, although with a narrow focus in comparison to its intended scope, and in response to ‘how many health and fitness type lessons do you do, typically for your Year 5/6 class?’.

Yeah, well once a fortnight is an extra session, for 50 minutes. On top of what's classed as sport (Anna).

Other teachers, Owen, Charlotte, Max, Robert, Lisa, Sarah and Anna, used fitness testing while emphasising student self-improvement and ‘personal bests’ in purposefully teaching fitness in their lessons. Sarah for example commented:

We run a different fitness test each term so that they (students) can see their progression over the year. And then... they write a reflection of how they've seen their fitness develop.

Similarly:

... in Year 6 we have a... fitness unit, where sometimes I might encompass a ‘beep test’ and just some 1K running and see if they can improve their time and lots of

things where you can look and see an improvement in a couple of weeks (Anna).

The emphasis on fitness and fitness testing again aligns with the literature about their widespread and historical use in PE (Alfrey & Gard, 2014; Hopple & Graham, 1995). Similar to fitness, fitness testing was recommended in the 1970s ‘... for the benefit of the child as a guide to progress and as an incentive to improve performance’ (ACT Interim Education Authority, 1975, p. 13). This narrow traditional stance views fitness testing as a means through which students can be motivated to become healthier and physically active (Alfrey & Gard, 2014; Hopple & Graham, 1995). However, such a narrow perspective fails to consider limitations of school-based fitness testing. For some students, it can be demotivating and a form of public humiliation leading them to disengage from PA from being considered ‘unfit’ or ‘unhealthy’ (Alfrey & Gard, 2019; Williams, 2015). Also, when our participants spoke about fitness testing, it seemed to be from an uncritical standpoint portraying such measurement as a universal ‘good approach’ (Murphy & Waddington, 1998). Nonetheless, it is possible the teachers’ ideas about, and value placed on PA, can be considered enablers for teaching this Focus Area. That said, those perspectives and beliefs need to be supplemented by broader knowledge and approaches to realise the full scope of the HBPA Focus Area.

### Constraints on teaching HBPA

The extent to which participants taught HBPA appeared to be affected by several constraints, including how they were impacted upon by others with whom they shared a wider school figuration. This extended figuration included school principals, or other staff in positions of authority who made decisions affecting how PE was taught. In addition to what was captured in interview data, limited teacher attendance to the Breakfast symposium, 15 participants from four private schools and seven government schools out of a total of 70 invited schools, reflects the literature about restricted opportunities for PE teachers to attend CPD (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). In our study, the school principals as ‘CPD guardians’ exercised relative social power by controlling and prioritising budget expenditure for CPD across all KLAs including HPE. It is possible many principals did not consider the Breakfast symposium as valuable enough CPD for teachers to attend.

Again, consistent with the literature (Tinning et al., 2001), a lack of time was a strong theme amongst the participants. More than half of the teachers expressed they were under constant time pressure to teach PE generally. Time shortage was experienced in different ways. For example, not enough time with each class (Max, Lawrence, Anna, Max, Charlotte,

Owen, Robert and Adam) and for Adam and Ken, PE lessons were regularly cancelled in their schools, with Ken noting:

I suppose when you have school concerts and other activities, PE at our school is usually one that often gets changed or moved around.

And:

It's just the busyness of the school. So, there will be an event on a Wednesday... and it could be two out of three Wednesday's and all of a sudden you haven't seen the Year 1's! You're the only one that notices that no-one else is factoring it in (Adam).

The PE specialist teachers, amounting to two-thirds of the participants, spoke about how health teaching was the responsibility of classroom generalist teachers. For example, Charlotte commented:

I do not teach the health component, that has been absorbed by Well-being (as a subject) which has taken over the class that used to be, I believe Health prior to arriving... So that has changed for this year for the classroom teacher to report on it (health). In honest conversations with them, they will say they don't do it well enough. So, I don't believe our students are getting the ACARA outcomes and are not learning them.

And:

I solely focus on the PE aspects of the curriculum and the classroom teachers have absorbed the health... So, I guess... PE and the achievement standards that go along with PE is done quite well. Whether or not the health achievement standards are, it varies from teacher to teacher (Max).

And:

I only have responsibility for teaching PE. The classroom teachers teach the health... So, I know that PE is consistently done... And then you know health is going to be like every other subject at the school. Done brilliantly in some classes and not so brilliantly in others (Adam).

Similarly:

The health side of things is more done with the classroom teachers and the physical education teacher focuses more specifically on the fundamental motor skills (Stephen).

It would seem a potential issue and unintended outcome (Elias, 2009) from schools appointing specialist PE teachers is the dislocation to a greater or lesser extent of health from PE. This separation has possible impact on the teaching of HBPA through the interconnection of health with PA in this



Focus Area. In other words, we have a concern specialist PE teachers do not consider the health aspect of this Focus Area to be their responsibility.

### The use of non-evidence-based knowledge sources to teach HBPA

In common with previous PE research in the ACT (Williams & Pill, 2018; Williams et al., 2020a, 2020b), participants were found to rely mainly on personal experience and colleagues to teach the HBPA Focus Area. There were no examples of participants using evidence-based texts or recognised quality teaching resources.

We often reach out to each other... ‘how did you address this particular standard?’ Or just bouncing ideas off each other. So yeah, I can go to them for advice (Max).

Similarly:

I’m fortunate... I sit with the high school HPE staff. So there is continuous discussion going both ways... about ideas for lessons... But do we narrow it down to this particular topic? No, it quite often is ad hoc... building on ideas... (Helen).

In each quote, the influence of social habitus is emphasised through the valuing of shared knowledge and there is a strong suggestion of ‘everyday philosophies’ guiding teacher practice. The problem in not using evidence-based approaches, is scope for out of date, or unsafe content to be taught, or for lessons that lack educative purpose (Williams & Pill, 2018). Similarly, Adam commented:

... sports carnivals, that’s where we get to meet other specialist teachers or sports co-coordinators... which is a wealth of knowledge. The thing in Canberra, the really good specialists... have been around for a while... You are often at the discretion of new management that can come in and change things pretty quickly.

Adam’s remark suggests capacity for knowledge, such as the historical use of fitness testing to be replicated, in addition to circumstances potentially changing through an excess of social power in favour of school management. Several of the participants (Charlotte, Lawrence, Noah, Caroline, Stephen and Anna) were cognisant of a lack of materials for teaching HBPA and thought quality evidence-based resources would benefit all teachers in delivering this Focus Area. Anna remarked:

... I think maybe there is a lack of actual resources out there to draw upon.

And:

I think how we teach PE is very traditional and I think it’s time to start looking at modern-ways through research into what actually works, and what is actually beneficial for the new generation coming through (Lisa).

Lisa’s remarks again suggest PE exists as a long-term process retaining some historical features. Nonetheless, Lisa notes the need for change towards more contemporary reality-congruent and curriculum aligned instruction.

### Conclusion

In answering ‘How do ACT Year 5/6 primary teachers understand the AC: HPE HBPA Focus Area?’ we found HBPA was understood in superficial ways informed by individual and social habitus, everyday philosophies and ideology about what this Focus Area meant. While teachers had personal and collective values and beliefs recognising the connection between PA and a healthy lifestyle, the ways their dispositions translated into teaching were restricted. Specifically, the Focus Area was taught implicitly and explicitly in limited ways emphasising fitness, fitness testing and the individual. As such teaching and learning failed to encapsulate the broader intention of the targeted Focus Area about community social and emotional health and well-being, choices about and influences on PA participation. Whilst we have acknowledged the sample size of this research may be a limitation, the consistency of responses from participants indicated common themes which may be useful for curriculum writers and other professionals to be cognisant of.

By participants teaching this Focus Area in such limited ways, there is no appreciation or understanding that students are interdependent with others in their broader communities. Specifically, there was no mention of connecting with health professionals or community health initiatives in their teaching, from which their students can learn from about the social aspects of PA. Furthermore, there was a strong sense in some responses of an emphasis on physical movement at the expense of students’ thinking and decision making, as if their bodies existed in isolation from the minds. Such emphasis suggested limited teaching regarding choices about, and influences on PA participation, other than what might be done incidentally within a given PE lesson. The restricted approaches to delivering this Focus Area also seem to also be attributable to a lack of information within the AC: HPE, with a definition included near the end of the document rather than when it is first introduced.

Concerning our second research question ‘What enablers and constraints exist for teaching this Focus Area?’ about ‘enablers,’ it would appear a more reality-congruent enactment of this Focus Area would be for teachers to extend

their passion for teaching PA and traditional ways they teach related content. In so doing, we would encourage them to work towards more educative, socially inclusive and supportive teaching. A practical example reflecting the HPS framework, involving school environment, teachers and students, is delivering quality PE through the Physical Education and Physical Literacy (PEPL) initiative, a version of which is about to be trialled in ACT primary schools (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5NKbSXmOm0>). Central to this approach is the ‘Ideal Week’ that includes at least two quality PE lessons, classroom activity breaks and a sport session delivered by a community sports organisation.

The constraints expressed were participants feeling time poor and lacking in support to teach the Focus Area, with PE, and HPE more broadly, perceived as having limited worth by others within their wider school figurations. Therefore, our recommendation above for teachers to attend CPD will have limited effect if senior school staff are not supportive of and/or do not facilitate this kind of teacher development. Perhaps an additional solution then would be the development of an evidence-based teaching resource, suggested by some of the participants that could be developed by an organisation such as ACHPER. Such a resource may also support teachers in shifting their habitus from old ways of *doing* to more reality-congruent approaches. We also found that the intended full scope of teaching the HBPA Focus Area was compromised, through a dislocation of health from PE, amongst ten participants employed as PE, rather than HPE teachers. This seemingly unplanned outcome of school management to have PE rather than HPE specialists suggests a continuation of the privileging of PE as a long-term process. The latter can be considered so, as it was only from the early 1990s the ‘H’ was added to PE in most Australian states and territories (Williams, 2014). Finally, restricted delivery of HBPA seemed to be because of restricted evidence-based resources to draw upon.

In summary, our research used figurational sociology and the extant literature to interpret teachers’ experiences of teaching the HBPA curriculum. Using figurational ideas about human relationships, long-term processes such as the persistence of historical and traditional ways of *doing* PE, and theories of individual habitus (Elias, 2012) and social habitus (Elias, 2010), we have shown how teachers understand the HBPA Focus Area. Finally, we have identified enablers and constraints for teaching this Focus Area and have provided recommendations for teaching it with greater reality congruence.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Research involving human participants** Ethics approval (file reference HREC 2110) was granted by the Human Ethics Committee at Author 1’s University, by the ACT Government Education Directorate and by school management at independent schools where some of our 15 teacher participants attended.

**Informed consent** was provided by all participants involved in the study.

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