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## Challenges Facing Chinese PE Curriculum Reform – Teachers’ Talk

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*China has attracted a huge amount of interest from around the world over the last two decades because of its rapid and vigorous development. Rapid economic growth has brought with it significant structural reforms in all trades and professions across China. Within this context of rapid social change, the Chinese basic education system<sup>1</sup> has been subject to considerable reforms. Foremost has been the introduction of a new National Curriculum Standard comprising 18 learning areas in which Physical Education and Health was included in order to better accommodate the contemporary needs of (post)modern China.*

*This study focuses upon the ways physical education teachers interpret and engage with the curriculum reforms advanced in the new National Physical Education and Health Curriculum. Through interviews with 18 practicing physical education teachers, the paper seeks to address some challenge issues facing Chinese physical education reform, especially the factors resisting implementation of the new curriculum. Among the core themes to be discussed in this paper will be the personal, structural and cultural factors that work against teachers taking up the change opportunities.*

### Introduction

The Chinese education system is the largest in the world with approximately 600,000 schools in its basic education system in which over 200,000,000 students are schooled (Ye, 2004). Since the early 1980s China has undergone considerable educational reform aimed at better preparing students for the social changes that have occurred and are occurring throughout China. This reform has involved a reconceptualisation of the fundamental goals of the education system, including a review of the ways schools are managed and administered, and more recently, an overhaul of national curriculum.

According to the principles that guide educational development in China (CNEM, 2001a), there are four core pillars. The four pillars represent educational development of the moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic. Based on one of the pillars being about the development of the physical (CNEM, 2001a), the place of physical education in the Chinese curriculum has been secured as a necessary part of school education from primary school through to university.

There have been seven main physical education curriculum adjustments since 1949 (when the New China was established), but the name *Physical Education* has remained until this most recent reform in 2001. Now *Physical Education* has been changed into *Physical Education and Health*, which is seen as a very important part of the reform. This change represents much more than just adding ‘health’. Along with the new title, the subject content has substantially changed its focus and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese basic education system refers to the Primary and Secondary Education in China.

National data on students' physical wellbeing revealed a recent fall in their physical status, including performances in strength, endurance, speed, and lung function (Chinese Education Ministry, 2001). This data also showed that overweight, obesity and myopia are becoming considerable health issues among young people in the urban areas. Such data has been a powerful force in the development of a new curriculum for physical education, with an emphasis on health. In the new physical education curriculum, there is a noticeable shift in emphasis from a performance-orientated physical education program focusing on physical skill to 'health is the first'. This emphasis is evidenced in the renaming of the curriculum area from Physical Education to *Physical Education and Health*.

The Preface to the New Curriculum states that:

*With the rapid development of science and technology, especially the globalisation of the economy, the quality of the material and cultural life of human beings has greatly improved. But, the modern style of production and life has resulted in work that is less laborious with an increase in psychological pressure, which poses a serious threat to human health. Modern people have gradually realized that health is not only a lack of illness, but also a healthy physical, mental, psychological and social condition..... the health of citizens is essential and indispensable to national development, social improvement and individual happiness; and since physical education is a very important channel to improve health, we must pay more attention to the reform of physical education program, especially in its basic conception (CNEM 2001 b, p.1).*

The increased emphasis on health in the new Physical Education and Health curriculum is challenging the traditional teaching conceptions, in part because there is a corresponding decrease in the previous emphasis on the body and sport skills. The new curriculum focuses on participation, health and well being and social adaptation. The emphasis here is on health-related outcomes rather than performance-related results.

Any school-based curriculum reform as a result of these changes must be carried out by teachers through day-to-day teaching practice. This research employs a case study methodology to investigate physical education teachers' understandings and experiences of the new physical education and health curriculum being implemented. More specifically, it seeks to explore the main challenges and obstacles which serve to resist the reforms.

## **The Research Method**

It was within a qualitative research framework that I interviewed 18 practicing physical education (PE) teachers in a coastal city in the Northeast of China. The city was neither very developed nor undeveloped but was one of the identified 'experiment zones' for the curriculum reform. Underpinning this qualitative approach was the use of 'thick' descriptions of particular phenomena (events, experiences and the meanings that are attached to them) within an epistemology of the *particular* (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995). All participants were full-time PE teachers with at least ten years teaching experience. Beyond this, participants were chosen with

a view to establishing a degree of gender balance and providing a diversity of school contexts spanning the different socio-economic strata that exist across the city. Among the 18 teachers, ten were male and eight female; 12 were from secondary schools and six from primary schools; five were from relatively prestigious schools, nine were from average schools, while the remaining four were from low social status area schools. It is from this data set that I set out to ‘analyse, interpret and theorise’ teachers’ attitude towards the impact of PE curriculum reform in China (Merriam, 1998).

The research participants were recruited to the project via the regional Education Bureau with the standard university ethics and system approvals. Potential participants were identified and contacted via a letter of invitation to participate in the research. During this initial contact, the purpose of the study, the research process and what would be required of them if they chose to consent was outlined. It was also clarified at this time that any participant who chose to consent had the option to withdraw from the study at any time and that any data gathered up to the point of withdrawal would not be utilised. The letter also emphasised that participants would be encouraged to speak openly, without fear of recrimination. Once participants indicated that they were interesting in partaking in the research project, a statement of informed consent was mailed to them. The informed consent statement clearly outlined how anonymity would be protected throughout the project. In order to encourage frank and open dialogue, I opted for a semi-structured interview format.

During the interviews, participants were encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings towards being a PE teacher in contemporary China and how they perceived the new Physical Education & Health (PE & H) curriculum. Data collection took place at times and locations convenient to the research participants. All interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin) and initially transcribed into Chinese and later translated into English. Before each interview began I introduced myself and explained how the interview would go. All interviews were tape-recorded, with the consent of the informants. Each interview took approximately 60 to 80 minutes, depending on the interest of the participant and the natural pace with which we moved through the interview format. I also kept brief notes during the conversations so that I could track the issues and points raised and refer back to them to explore issues and perspectives being revealed at different stages of the interview. It took an average of four hours to transcribe a 60-minute tape in Mandarin, and further six to eight hours to translate each interview into English.

## **The Findings**

The findings presented here focus on some of the key barriers that the teachers identified to implementing the new PE & H curriculum. In other words, the findings are a representation of the impediments to change. Central to my analysis is the fact that all 18 teachers expressed their strong support for the fundamental goal to put more emphasis on *health* in the new curriculum. While many of the participants tempered their support for the new curriculum over the course of their interview, it is fair to say that, as a collective, the teachers overwhelmingly endorsed its broad direction. To present the research findings, I have organised the barriers to change into three broad categories, namely *personal*, *structural*, and *cultural* factors. I recognize that these distinctions are artificial and that many of the issues that I

describe could be extended across several categories. However, leaning on the scholarship of social theorists such as Fay (1987) and Giddens (1991 & 1984) I use these references as heuristic devices for understanding and interpreting rationality and its limits. In exploring the processes of change both Fay and Giddens help to make sense of some of the inconsistencies, ambiguities and resistances that the teachers revealed during their interviews. Here I am particularly attuned to the ways history, tradition and habit inscribe the perceptions and attitudes that teachers have towards change. To this end, the issues I present here are not a comprehensive representation of the data, but rather projections of some of the recurring themes that emerged from the data.

### ***Personal Factors***

During the interviews all teachers talked about their concern as a PE teacher in schools. Some negative feelings such as exhaustion, frustration, powerlessness and lack of support around implementing the new curriculum have been expressed in different degrees. Their typical working day timetable started between 7:00 to 7:30 am, and for some it was as early as 6:30 and finished around 4:30 pm. On average they taught 13 classes per week with 40 to 45 minutes for each class. Typical class sizes for secondary schools in China are around 60 students, and rarely go below 50. For primary schools the class size averages are around 40 students. As PE teachers, their responsibility typically extends beyond PE classes to include the organization and delivery of daily exercise programs, conducted in the morning and the afternoon. Compounding this load is a PE teacher's involvement in a range of after school activities, such as training school teams and organizing interschool competitions. They also spend a lot of time on non-teaching activities such as meetings, writing reports on practice and performance, writing a teaching diary, assessing each other's teaching, and other administrative duties.

For example Zhang said,

*I think only half of my energy has been used on teaching, and the other half is just for so many odd jobs and things, including meetings, term summary reports, teaching quality analysis, ranking teachers and students.*

Some teachers do think about how to fulfil their duty better in the course of curriculum reform. Though some creative new ideas came to them occasionally, they were often too tired to actually act on what they thought was necessary. A recent investigation revealed that PE teachers have a normal work-load that is 15 to 20 per cent heavier than other subject teachers (Dong, Zhang & Guo, 2002). The same research also indicated that prolonged overwork created heavy psychological pressure that was a major source of burnout amongst PE teachers.

The interview data also revealed that the Chinese system of ranking teachers is a major source of frustration and stress for PE teachers. Here, a teacher's rank is seen to be highly correlated with the examination scores achieved by his/her students. Quite simply, the higher the student scores the higher the rank given to the teacher. Given that PE is not a subject required for higher education entrance examination, PE teachers often got low rankings and felt undervalued in schools. For example Xue complained that '*[N]o matter how hard we work, PE teachers are very seldom rated as excellent or even good. We are always ranked in the latter half or even at the*

*end....*’ As a main vector for promotion and dismissal ,the teachers generally felt they were more vulnerable than teachers in other disciplines.

The interview process also revealed that the PE teachers felt inadequate in terms of implementing the new curriculum. They were in broad agreement that the discipline knowledge and teaching skills that they had developed through their training was out of step with the demands of the new curriculum reform. Most of them mentioned, to lesser and greater extents, that their lack of appropriate training was an obstacle to them implementing the new curriculum. Yu commented that:

*[M]y knowledge structure lacks a lot for today’s PE teaching and today’s community health... I need to learn new knowledge and skills that I didn’t learn in the university in order to achieve what I am going to be expected to do in the New PE and Health curriculum.*

She added that ‘[T]he capacities of teachers do not match the demands of the new curriculum, so I see an urgent need for reform to PE teacher education programs’.

### ***Systematic and Structural Factors***

In the Chinese education system today, the two important educational events are the entrance examination from junior high to senior high school and the entrance examination from senior high school to university. These events are very powerful in forming and maintaining the direction of school development because the promotion or success rates in these two examinations are used as the key standards for school evaluations. Under this arrangement the promotion rate has become the key focus of school leaders, teachers, students and parents. Unfortunately, PE is not currently a component of the higher education entrance examination process. In lieu of the heavy focus given to the promotion rates, what happens in PE attracts only marginal attention in schools. Liu said, ‘*PE classes are sometimes replaced by other classes in order to guarantee high examination results and high promotion rates*’. This situation appeared to be a deep source of frustration to the PE teachers. Qu, a PE teacher worried that, ‘*[S]tudents now are developing quite an imbalance between the mental and physical levels. They work too much on their brain and too little on their body.*’

During the interviews all teachers raised concerns about pre- and in-service teacher training programs for PE teachers. The general consensus here was that the training that was offered through these programs was not well aligned to the needs of today’s teachers. Further, they generally felt that they had not been effectively prepared to deal with change. Ma, for example conveyed the limited and specialised nature of his teacher training, stating that,

*My major was volleyball when I was studying in the university so I become very good at teaching volleyball and not so good at other activities’. The situation is really embarrassing now for me faced with the new curriculum reform.*

Li described her experiences during her undergraduate studies as follows:

*The huge social change and basic education reform demand urgent reform to higher education and PE teacher training programs... Too much emphasis was put on track and field, basketball, volleyball, football and gymnastics when I was a student in the university, we didn’t learn much about tennis, bowling, golf, preparation exercises and other fun activities that are in high demand today. So our knowledge structure is insufficient for today’s PE teaching.*

Three decades after the implementation of the national policy of family planning (one couple, one child) China's first-generation of 'only children' have grown up and have become young adults. In today's schools almost all students are the only child in their family. This unique situation brings with it a number of challenges to today's Chinese education system. During the interviews all teachers raised concerns around the negative aspects the 'only child' brings to their daily teaching and the process of educational reform. Their negative opinions towards the 'one child' generation were enlightening. Pejorative descriptors, such as 'selfish', 'spoilt', 'lazy', and 'disrespectful' were littered across the transcripts. Teachers generally felt that today's parents pay far too much attention to their only child's academic performance and do little to develop their personal and social abilities, which make PE teachers' work even harder. Wang expressed his concern about the only child generation saying '*The only child in the family has been loved blindly and spoilt and is called the 'sun' or the 'little emperor' of the family. They become very selfish, don't care about others. They are too self-centred.*' Xu rendered this issue more problematic when trying to reconcile her competing interests as a teacher and also a mother.

*Parents hope their only son will be a 'dragon' and their only daughter will be a 'phoenix'. My daughter, who is only nine years old, has to attend some classes outside normal school education. These are English, dancing, fine art and piano ....I hope she would have a better life in the future not like me .... In fact, most parents are willing to give what they can to their only child's education no matter what kind of situation they are in. They invest too much on the child's education.*

### **Cultural Factors**

Traditional Chinese culture enshrined the teacher as a person of wisdom and honour, to be respected and trusted. Though teachers were never rewarded well materially, their nourishment was said to be in nurturing the growth of others. In traditional Chinese culture students were expected to be obedient and tractable. The cultural passing on of the discipline to self-regulate meant that teachers were rarely challenged. Today, under the huge impact of the market and an abundant access to goods or products, a competing set of cultural values have emerging within Chinese culture. Emanating from this is pressure to establish a new/different relational order between teacher and their students. While *generations* are difficult constructs to apply, it is fair to say that decidedly different discourses pervaded Chinese cultural practices each side of the 1970s. The emergence of China in market economics and the one child policy produced a sort of cultural transformation that penetrated all aspects of Chinese existence.

All 18 teachers employed the notion of generational change to describe attitudes and behaviours that they felt were typical of young people in today's China. While there was some positive comments such as resourceful, imaginative, creative and open-minded, teachers were unanimous in the view that today's students are much harder to manage than those that have gone before them. Indeed, a number of the teachers identified the attitudes and behaviours of today's youth as the biggest challenge to teachers. Liu explained, "*...it is much more difficult to manage and organize today's students because they don't obey their teachers like before, they don't respect their teachers - not like they did before*". At the heart of their disenchantment with young people was a seeming inability to manage or control their

behaviours. In describing his current discontent with teaching Cong highlighted the difficulties in dealing with today's youth. *"Today's students are much more difficult to manage and organize.....Being a teacher now is much harder and much less satisfying, I would much prefer to teach the students of 10 years ago."*

The discord between the generations had its most tangible impact on the teachers in the implementation of pedagogy. At the forefront of this was an increasing realisation that the pedagogical practices they defaulted to were not proving effective in dealing with today's students. Xu explained, *"today's students are not of a tractable generation, therefore, it is really necessary for teachers to learn and master new strategies to handle new situations"*. For most of the teachers, the attitudes and practices of today's youth were interpreted as a violation of culture, rather than an evolution of culture.

Further complicating the implementation of the new curriculum is the demand for teachers to employ more inclusive and creative forms of pedagogy. The shift in curriculum emphasis toward participation is progressed around a demand to get young people involved and active. While at a surface level this change appeared to have the support of the PE teachers, its implementation requires a fundamental pedagogic shift that they felt uncertain about. Wang believed that the current uncertainty about how PE teachers should implement the new curriculum was at least in part due to the lack of direction that they had received. *'We hoped the experts of curriculum reform could offer us the framework or plan on how to teach the new PE curriculum ... but we have had no direction and we do not know how to teach now'*. Zhang was another who expressed this concern: *'The new curriculum reform calls for the creative work of teachers. But the fact is that some teachers are not capable of doing creative work, they need a lot of help'*. One of the tensions that emerged in the discussions about the teaching demands associated with the new curriculum was a perceived lack of connection between the curriculum aspirations and teacher training. Prominent here were concerns among the teachers that they don't have the cultural dispositions required to implement the new curriculum. Having grown up and been schooled in a traditional Chinese context has meant that some teachers are not prepared enough for some of the demands that are bought forth in the new curriculum. At the heart of this was a recognition that the pedagogic demands of the new curriculum were in direct conflict with some of the conventions and sensibilities that framed their commonsense.

### ***Discussion***

Major curriculum changes are understood to be complex undertakings no matter where they are embarked on around the world (Fullan, 1999; 2001). The data presented in this paper confirms many aspects of the complex nature of this process. Foremost here is the need for some level of personal commitment to the espoused changes. While systems and structures can be put in place to encourage, even force, teachers to engage with new curriculum offerings, the absence of a personal commitment to the change will inevitably dilute or undermine its carriage. In the case of PE in China, it seems that despite their apparent recognition of the need for change, teachers lack a personal commitment to its delivery. For most of the teachers that I spoke to during this research, the lack of personal commitment to implementing the new curriculum stemmed from their inability to transport new rhetoric into new practice. General feelings of being over-worked and under-valued have been shown to



undermine a teacher's willingness to take up the challenges associated with widespread curriculum change

Further complicating the curriculum change process in China is a lack of support and recognition given to PE in schools. As a subject that sits outside of the entrance examination process, the status of PE in the school curriculum is at best marginal. School leaders were widely condemned within the data set for failing to provide the necessary conditions that would support and encourage PE teachers in the processes of change. Provoked by a system that greatly privileges academic results over personal development, the contributions that PE makes to the educative process is destined for marginality. Of course the lack of commitment to PE on behalf of school leaders is symptomatic of the highly competitive situation that distinguishes winners and losers in the Chinese education system. While schools and individuals continue to be recognised solely for their academic achievements, of which PE is seen to make no contribution, the impetus for nurturing change is currently only partial.

It is around issues of culture that the pursuit of curriculum change in PE becomes more nuanced to the Chinese context. Prominent here is the depth of the generational divide that was shown to exist between the expectations of teachers and their students. The transcripts revealed a shift in the fundamental values and attitudes from those who grew up and were educated under the old (egalitarian) regime and those who have grown up within the new (market) regime. While most teachers revealed a surface level of support for the need for curriculum change they were far less accepting of the generational characteristics of the young people. It was here that their commitment to the new PE & H curriculum was strained. In the absence of pedagogic direction on how to implement it, the practical translation of the new curriculum was seen as a further diminution of the status of PE teachers. At a time when PE teachers are calling out for respect and recognition for the work they do, the decentring of their discipline expertise is intensely problematic. In seeking to understand the struggle for curriculum change in PE in China, it is important to situate it within the wider context of socio-political discourse. Inherent in this is a broad recognition that some aspects of traditional Chinese culture are in a process of transition. In the process of social change, old and new cultural identity appear to exist simultaneously. Unparalleled levels of social and economic change coupled with a unique family planning policy (one couple, one child) make China a unique and arguably difficult context for such curriculum reform.

Though the teachers I spoke to had intentions of honouring their professional obligations to the new curriculum, there were some aspects of this process that seemed to run counter to their fundamental beliefs about the educative process and their roles as teachers. Prominent here was their personal commitment to traditional cultural values such as respect for elders, deference to authority, collectivism over individualism, uniformity over pluralism and the Confucian ideals of self-restraint and self-discipline. The teachers I spoke to revealed little inclination that they were ready to compromise or depart from these cultural values to progress the new PE & H curriculum. While many aspects of the curriculum change process in China appear comparable to the experiences elsewhere in the world, the struggle for cultural values between the generations appears magnified in contemporary China. The new physical education and health curriculum is calling for greater versatility in physical education teachers who are required to develop new teaching practices that engage with new

learning philosophies of the new cultural context. To accommodate this, there is arguably an urgent need for physical education teacher education programs to provide undergraduate students with the basic pedagogic building blocks around which they can take up the demands of the new curriculum. Therefore, better alignment between the school physical education curriculum and undergraduate physical education teacher education programs would serve to better prepare student teachers for contemporary and future demands of the profession

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, the extant literature built up and curriculum change in PE indicates that it is reasonable to expect a degree of teacher resistance. To this end, the expressions of teacher resistance to the introduction of the new PE & H curriculum in China are in no way exceptional. Rather than being viewed as roadblocks, the expressions of teacher resistance uncovered in this research provide valuable insights into the sorts of interventions needed to support its carriage. If the passage of the new curriculum is going to progress from rhetoric to reality there is clearly a need for targeted support for teachers. Central to this is the need for strategic in-service training. In the absence of a clear and coherent frameworks to guide the practical translation of the goals of the new curriculum, it is hard to see the reform being implemented or successful. In providing PE teachers with the pedagogic resources to implement the participatory agenda of new PE & H curriculum, specific attention should be directed to providing them with the socio-cultural lenses necessary to reconcile the strong and continuing grip of Chinese tradition.

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