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A critical endeavour? Supporting teachers' journeys towards critical engagement with curriculum in physical education through cross-border dialogue

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Abstract

For decades, scholars have advocated for critical perspectives in Physical Education (PE), encouraging more creative and inclusive ways of thinking about and doing PE. Unfortunately, this critical work has had limited impact on how PE is conceptualised - within curricula or by teachers - both in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally. As such, there is a pressing need to consider how we might advance this agenda. Working with PE teachers from across the four home nation of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), we organised a series of workshops to enable PE teachers from across these contexts to reflect on and discuss their respective curricula. This novel approach – of engaging in cross-border dialogue – was found to have potential for fostering critical thinking around PE curricula. Indeed, teachers were supported to begin thinking more critically through learning about other curriculum contexts and considering alternative possibilities for PE and their learners – though persistent challenges around blocks of activity and teaching games were acknowledged. We argue that these teachers are on the (challenging) journey of becoming critical, but time and support is necessary to interrogate prevailing discourses in PE and allow new ways of thinking to emerge.

Key words

Physical Education, Curriculum, Critical thinking, Cross-border dialogue

Introduction

For decades, scholars have explored and advocated for critical perspectives and pedagogies within Physical Education (PE) (Pringle, Larsson & Gerdin, 2020), uncovering social inequalities, and developing more creative and inclusive ways of thinking about and doing PE (Oliver & Kirk, 2015; Hill & Azzarito, 2012). While this thinking aligns with national and global agendas related to inclusion in education more broadly (UNESCO, 2023), critical approaches in PE remain somewhat on the margins (Tinning, 2019), and have had relatively limited impact on how PE is conceptualised across the United Kingdom's (UK) four home nations of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Gray et al., 2022a, 2023) as well as internationally (Philpot et al., 2021). Overall, PE continues to be a rather exclusive space, primarily for those young people who have the physical capacities to engage in competitive sports (Redelius et al., 2009).

One of the factors contributing to the persistence of this narrow conceptualisation of PE is the inherently complex nature of teacher engagement with curriculum (Lambert & O'Connor, 2018). In positioning teachers as policy actors, Ball et al. (2011) highlight the complex ways in which teachers work with (or against) curriculum, shaped by their personal values - while in different positions of authority, at particular times, and in specific institutional circumstances and local contexts. Notably, the experiences and values teachers bring to their reading of curricula are particularly influential in shaping how they teach PE (Alfrey & Welch, 2022). For example, many bring their acquired dispositions around sport, fitness and health to their reading and enactment of curriculum (Wrench & Garret, 2015), resulting in the reproduction of curricula and pedagogies for sport performance or health promotion. However, a shift towards a more critical disposition may be a useful starting point in the process of change in PE. Adopting a more critical position, we argue, has the potential to empower teachers to challenge current conceptualisations of PE, begin to consider more socially inclusive conceptualisations, and explore meaningful ways to develop critical practice.

In the current paper, and building on our previous UK PE cross-border research (Gray et al., 2022a 2022b; 2023; Stirrup et al., 2023), we propose that PE teachers might be supported to think critically about PE curriculum through opportunities to engage in cross-border dialogue. By comparing knowledge and experiences of curriculum across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, exploring similarities and differences and all the complexities around these, teachers might begin collectively to develop new knowledge, or 'alternative vocabularies' (Evans, 2014, p. 555), around the purposes of PE. Importantly, while a collective voice is important, 'alternative vocabularies' could also shift how individual teachers understand themselves and their own curriculum context. This might then provide PE teachers with the knowledge and resources to understand and work within their context in creative ways (Priestley et al., 2013) - a process that we recognise as both challenging and ongoing.

Acknowledging the complexities of becoming critical, and considering critical thinking as a useful entry point for teachers on a journey towards change (Hickey & Mooney, 2019), we planned a series of workshops bringing PE teachers together from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to engage in activities intended to stimulate cross-curriculum discussion, critical thinking and the development of new ideas. To our knowledge, this is the first time that PE teachers from across the four UK home nations have been invited to engage in this form of critical and productive dialogue. Additionally, the UK presents an interesting and somewhat unique research context as each of the four devolved governments is responsible for setting their own educational agenda, which inevitably leads to points of divergence across each system. As such, this context is noteworthy because points of convergence can support collaboration through

initiating and sustaining productive dialogue, while points of divergence can open opportunities to disrupt and re-imagine (O'Connor & Jess, 2020).

Given the uniqueness of our research approach and context, and uncertainty about what discussions might unfold, this project was 'tentative and exploratory' (Lupton & Leahy 2019, p. 636-637). It is part of a larger proof of concept study focused on the feasibility and possible outcomes of cross-border dialogue (Gray et al., 2022a; 2023). As a result, we were guided by research questions that were intentionally 'open' to allow an emergent research process:

1. What discussions or themes are evident when PE teachers from across the four nations of the UK are invited to share curriculum knowledge and experiences?
2. In what ways (if any) do discussions encourage critical perspectives to emerge?

Becoming critical

Critical thinking can support teachers to understand the relationship between schooling and society, and enable them to question the production and dissemination of knowledge (Fernandez-Balboa, 1995). However, critical thinking can be challenging, and does not always lead to critical action. Williams (2005) describes critical thinking as a disposition and an ability, stating that both are essential, and neither on their own are enough to *become* critical. Teachers have to value *and* learn to think critically through, for example, acquiring knowledge around how society works based on the distribution of power *and* their role in reproducing or challenging power relations (Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2020). In doing so, they can begin to recognise the social inequalities experienced in schools and importantly, discover new possibilities and take action through critical pedagogies for personal and social transformation (Fernandez-Balboa, 1995).

As alluded to earlier, PE has long been associated with competitive sport, physical health and the privileging of masculine/able bodies – often perpetuated through the values, bodies and practices of PE teachers (Flemons et al., 2023). However, although PE teachers are often blamed for these rather narrow and exclusive beliefs and practices, it is important to understand the role of the curriculum in establishing and maintaining them. Curricula are not value free (Giroux, 1982), rather they communicate messages about what and who is valued, and how PE should be taught and experienced, thus serving to reproduce dominant ideologies, maintain power relations and shape behaviours. Previous research has highlighted the dominance of sport and healthism discourses within PE curricula across the UK (Gray et al., 2022a), which encourage practices that privilege those who enter into the PE space with the physical capital necessary to be successful in this context (Redelius, Fagrell & Larsson, 2009). Notably, the PE profession is largely constituted by individuals who have themselves experienced success in PE, thereby informing their beliefs about the subject, their 'uptake' of particular discourses within PE and, thus, their reading and enactment of the subject, creating a cycle that is difficult to break (Alfrey et al., 2012). Furthermore, Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013) suggest that when teachers lack professional discourses beyond those evident within curriculum, opportunities to work more creatively with curriculum become limited. Thus, without critical reading, curriculum risks becoming an instrument of dominant discourses – not something that teachers *do*, but something that *does to* teachers (Ball, 2015; Gray et al., 2023). However, teachers have agency to 'do back' to curriculum (Ball, 2015), acting counter to the social and material constraints placed upon them. This perspective aligns with that of Priestley et al. (2012) who understand teacher agency as part of a wider ecological system, where agency

is not something that teachers have, but emerges from their interactions with their environmental (i.e., social, cultural, material) conditions. Specifically, they draw from the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to conceptualise agency as emerging from interactions between teachers' previous experiences, values and beliefs (the iterational), with their future orientations (the projective), and positioned in the present (the practical-evaluative). From this perspective, teachers can be influenced, but not determined, by their (curricular) context (Priestley et al., 2012). However, resisting dominant discourses within curriculum is challenging, and requires different ways of thinking and the development of new knowledge in order to consider more socially just ways of working in schools.

Drawing on these ideas, we argue that a 'turn' towards the critical (as a starting point) might disrupt teachers' current thinking, and potentially change how they see the world, opening up new possibilities for action, even in contexts where they might perceive there to be limited capacity for agency or change. For example, in their research that explored how teachers enact the curriculum in Scotland, Priestley et al. (2013) describe how one teacher adopted 'alternative' approaches to testing her pupils to protect them from the 'harmful demands' they place on students. While the authors attribute her agency to her beliefs about education and her role within this, it is also important to note that she was positioned in a school that supported professional dialogue across faculties and with external agencies. This collegiate and collaborative culture worked to challenge 'old' ways of thinking and created space for new ways of thinking and doing to emerge – even in a context where regimes of testing and accountability were dominant. How PE teachers think about PE, and the opportunities they have to think differently or critically about PE, therefore, are significant in determining their capacity for change. Indeed, Aldous et al. (2022) suggest that teachers require continued support to engage in 'innovative and sustainable professional learning' (p. 265), recognising that – as previously alluded – becoming critical is a challenging and on-going process.

The conditions required to develop critical thinking (and action) underscore the idea that becoming critical is not an end point, but a journey (Hickey & Mooney, 2019). Importantly, Hickey and Mooney highlight that although teachers will be on different stages of this journey, accepting the 'invitations to criticality' (p. 152) is a fundamental first step. Once on this journey, teachers might be supported in various ways, from being 'gently' invited to think in different ways, to engaging in confrontational and disruptive approaches designed to intentionally provoke and unsettle in the 'pursuit of [their learners'] deep critical engagement' (Hickey & Mooney, 2019, p. 153). In the present study, we worked toward the 'gentle' end of this continuum, inviting teachers to explore different perspectives and, importantly, consider those perspectives in their own context. As all of the teachers willingly accepted our invitation to be part of this project, we suggest they had started their journey towards criticality. However, we remained unclear about what the workshops might do to/for the teachers and their thinking around curriculum. We were interested to note if and how different perspectives might open opportunities to thinking critically about curriculum, extending existing scholarship that seeks to involve teachers in collaborative and democratic approaches to re-imagining PE (Evans, 2014).

Methododology

This research forms part of a larger proof of concept study exploring the potential of cross-border work (Gray et al., 2023) by analysing the PE curricula from across the four nations of the UK. In the final phase of this study, reported here, we planned a series of participatory workshops bringing together PE teachers from across the four nations to discuss curriculum,

pedagogy, and to re-imagine PE. Specifically, we organised a workshop series consisting of two workshops, which we repeated three times with different groups of teachers. In this paper, we report on the data from the first workshop for each group, which took place between February and April 2023. During this workshop, we shared select findings from our previous curricula analysis (Gray et al., 2022a) before tasks and discussions centred around the teachers' curriculum knowledge and experiences. Drawing from participatory methods, the workshops were designed as an opportunity for teachers to engage in productive dialogue, where they could learn with and from each other, and develop new ideas (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Like others who have adopted participatory approaches when engaging with teachers (see Quarmby et al., 2023), we used a variety of techniques aimed to encourage critical and innovative thought, such as Word Clouds and blue skies thinking activities (see below for further detail).

Participants and sampling

A total of seventeen participants (n=8 male and n=9 female) attended the first workshops across each of the three series (see Table 1). Participants were recruited through social media (Twitter/X), with a message inviting teachers from across the four nations of the UK to express interest in participating in the workshops. Interested teachers were offered a series of dates that they could select according to their availability. They were also sent an email which included a detailed information sheet about the workshops, what participating in the associated research would involve, as well as a consent form. Out of the forty teachers who expressed an interest in taking part in the workshops, twenty-five teachers returned a consent form and seventeen attended the first workshops. During the workshops, the teachers were invited to introduce themselves and their contexts. We present some of this information in table 1, pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity.

Table 1: Participant information**Series 1 n=5**

England	
David	Head of PE in a Secondary state school for 7 years. PE teacher for 16 years.
John	PE consultant - previously primary PE teacher for 12 years.
Scotland	
Susan	Head of PE in a 3-18 Private school
Northern Ireland	
Stuart	Taught PE for 36 years in Secondary state schools and is now retired.
Wales	
Malcolm	Director of Sport and Wellbeing at a State secondary school for 3 years. PE teacher for 14 years.

Series 2 n=5

England	
Carrie	Secondary Academy Trust for 4 years. PE teacher for 9 years.
Carly	Head of PE in a 3-18 Private school for 10 years. PE teacher for 21 years.
Scotland	
Sarah	State secondary PE teacher for 4 years, 3 years in current school.
Eleanor	PE teacher in a State primary school for 14 years.
Ian	PE teacher in a 3-18 Private school.

Series 3 n=7

Northern Ireland	
Colin	PE teacher in a Primary state school for 10 years.
Scotland	
Luke	PE teacher in a State secondary school.
Andrea	Head of PE in a 3-18 Private school.
Brian	PE teacher in a State secondary school.
Wales	
Jane	Health and Wellbeing coordinator in a Welsh medium Primary school.
Rebecca	PE teacher in a State secondary school.
Teresa	Assistant Head Teacher and previously a PE teacher in a Secondary state school.

Notably, Carrie and Carly from the schools in England in series 2 both completed their Initial Teacher Education in Scotland, and taught in schools in Scotland before moving to teach in their current schools. Additionally, John from England in series 1 had previously worked as a primary PE teacher but, at the time of the workshop, worked for a company offering PE provision in primary schools in England.

The workshops

In the first workshops, participants were encouraged to explore the four UK PE curricula. To do so, participants created Word Clouds and engaged in discussions that focused on the purposes and defining strengths of their respective curricula. To support these discussions, we presented a summary of our previous research that had analysed PE curricula across the UK (Gray et al., 2022a). Using Padlet¹ (anonymously), participants noted their responses to this presentation, which further guided discussions. The discussions in each workshop were recorded using Microsoft Teams and transcribed for analysis. Text from the chat function on Teams was copied onto a Word document and analysed along with the artefacts produced from the workshop activities (e.g., posts on Padlet). All data were stored securely and anonymised to protect the identity of the participants. Ethical approval was granted by the research Ethics Committee of the lead author (approval reference: SGRA03102022).

Analysis

To make sense of the data generated in the workshops, we engaged in a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In doing so, we adopted a collaborative and reflexive approach, working closely and iteratively with the data. More specifically, we engaged in a process of reading, discussing and reviewing to create accessible and coherent themes that reflected the teachers' perspectives/experiences. Our analysis focused on what teachers said, but was also influenced by some of the key ideas driving the research, for example, how PE is conceptualised, differences across borders and evidence of teacher learning/criticality.

Analysis began with the three workshop leads (the first three authors) discussing their initial reflections after each session. The next phase of analysis involved further discussion amongst the workshop leads around the raw data generated across the sessions (i.e., discussion transcripts, Teams chat text, Word Clouds and Padlet notes) to identify the main ideas that arose in each workshop. This process led to the generation of tentative and preliminary themes (Braun & Clark, 2019) around the impact of examinations on curriculum decision-making, perceptions of autonomy and the persistence of performance/sports discourses. Guided by these discussions, the lead author then engaged in a more systematic process of generating codes and themes. This involved assigning phrases to relevant units of texts to summarise meaning, and then grouping similar units of meaning (codes) together to generate themes. This was firstly carried out with the workshop transcriptions and then with the data from the Teams chat, Word Clouds and Padlet notes. This process was carried out for each workshop separately, before identifying shared themes across the three sessions which were then grouped within broader, overarching themes, as outlined below.

Findings

Guided by our research questions, we sought to explore the discussions that unfold when PE teachers from across the four nations of the UK were invited to share their curriculum experiences and to understand if and how opportunities for critical perspectives might be

fostered from those discussions. The main themes and sub-themes derived from the analysis process described above are presented below (Table 2):

Table 2: Main themes and subthemes

<p>Theme 1: Curriculum strengths and opportunities</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to develop broad and learner-centred PE curricula • Curriculum reform as an opportunity for learning – a Welsh perspective
<p>Theme 2: Curriculum challenges and constraints</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External pressures – school inspections • External pressures - the influence of examination PE and a narrowing of the curriculum
<p>Theme 3: Developing critical perspectives</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding similarities and differences across contexts • Becoming critical • Challenges to becoming critical

Curriculum strengths and opportunities

Freedom to develop broad and learner-centred PE curricula

In the discussions following the creation of Word Clouds that depicted the defining strengths of their curricula, all of the teachers suggested that there was ‘freedom’ to apply ‘professional judgement’ to make decisions about what to teach and how to teach. On this, Susan (Scotland, series 1) said: “I would say the Scottish curriculum gives us actually a lot of freedom in regards to what we deliver”.

Having this perceived ‘freedom’ was viewed positively as teachers felt it enabled them to develop a broad curriculum that catered to the needs of their learners. This was reflected in the Word Clouds that included words such as ‘broad’, ‘varied’, ‘flexible’, ‘opportunities’, ‘open-ended’, as well as ‘learner-centred’. These ideas were discussed further in the workshops. For example:

Certainly, in our department, we have the freedom to sort of decide what it is that we want to do, which kind of aligns with what you were supposed to do in Scotland when you made it individual and teachers had the autonomy to use our professional judgement to base the curriculum around the school and what the pupils want. (Carrie, England, series 2)

Having freedom to shape the curriculum was a shared experience across each context and, therefore, an important discussion topic to bring the PE teachers together to facilitate cross-border dialogue – especially in the context of change and innovation. Interestingly, in the quotation above, Carrie, a PE teacher who has taught in both Scotland and England, makes a cross border and *critical* comparison as she notes the freedom that teachers in Scotland were ‘supposed’ to experience, suggesting that, at least from her perspective, this freedom may not have been realised. Indeed, the idea of having freedom within the curriculum was not straightforward for the teachers, as highlighted in later discussions around some of the challenges they faced working with the curriculum.

Curriculum reform as an opportunity for learning – a Welsh perspective

Currently, all teachers across Wales are working with the new Curriculum for Wales², a curriculum that explicitly gives them the freedom to develop a unique curriculum according to their local contexts and needs (Welsh Government, 2020). It is unsurprising, therefore, that curriculum reform dominated the Welsh teachers' contributions to discussions during the workshops (series 1 and 3). All of the teachers from Wales understood the new Curriculum for Wales as an opportunity to rethink the purpose of, and assessment in PE. For example, Rebecca (Wales, series 3) described how the new Curriculum for Wales has offered her department the freedom to 'trial' new ideas. This had resulted in some experimentation around how they assess their pupils in PE:

I started looking at assessment because we were in Wales so and because we haven't got those performance indicators anymore, they've taken away the levels. It's become very open. So what we've started to look at is looking at ASK assessment where you have the Attitude, Skills and Knowledge. So you're trying to take in that holistic approach of the child.

Teresa (Wales, series 3) also noted how curriculum reform was an opportunity to reflect on the role of the PE teacher, stating: "I think it's an opportunity, isn't it... when we're, you know, reforming curriculum, to also redesign physical education teachers."

The teachers from Wales also understood the introduction of the new curriculum as a learning opportunity through engaging with teachers across different subjects and schools - in particular working across primary and secondary schools to learn together and to broaden perspectives. Teresa (Wales, series 3) described her work in this area:

One of the really good things we did, we worked with all our cluster feeder schools when altogether as all the [curriculum] areas of learning, but also in the health and well-being². And we developed a shared vision and we developed our vision first...so we did it together and I think that was a real strength for us.

While teachers in Scotland experienced similar curriculum reform in 2010, there has been no change to the PE curriculum in Northern Ireland since 2007 and only minor changes to the curriculum in England in 2014 (Herold, 2020). Interestingly, and perhaps relatedly, there was no mention by these teachers of opportunities within their context to think differently about PE. However, as will be revealed in the section below entitled 'developing critical perspectives', listening to the experiences of the teachers from Wales seemed to encourage the teachers from the other home nations to begin to think differently – and critically - about their own curriculum.

Curriculum challenges and constraints

External pressures – school inspections

Notably, while all the teachers felt they had some freedom to develop a curriculum that met the needs of their learners, they also recognised that there were limits to this. For example, teachers from England and Wales talked about the pressures they felt as a result of school inspections. For example, Carrie (England, series 2) stated:

I only feel under pressure with Ofsted [school inspectorate in England], which is a whole different kettle of fish, but that's the only pressure that we feel. And then you know what,

it's not even in your teaching and learning and all the background stuff, but the only pressure that I think that we feel and the only freedom that I don't think we really have is when it comes to Ofsted.

In relation to the different ways in which schools in Wales are developing their curricula (because of the autonomy afforded to teachers), Malcolm (Wales, series 1) highlighted a concern he had around Estyn (school inspectorate in Wales). This particular concern was about evaluating and comparing learning across schools. He stated:

...in terms of when we get started to ask questions by Estyn about where we are and you know self evaluating our performance against other schools, how on earth do you do that at the moment with that range of flexibility? So it's good, you know, having some idea of what it should look like because it can be really diverse, like ours at the moment, which is the only worry I've got. (Malcolm, Wales)

Evidently, this highlights the challenges of 'doing critical' in neoliberal contexts, even in Wales where teachers are currently grappling with curriculum reform and exploring new ideas for curriculum enactment (Aldous et al., 2022). While the teachers were highly aware and judicious of the impact that external pressures could have on their practice, they seemed unsure about how to respond to this in line with their critical perspectives.

External pressures - the influence of examination PE and a narrowing of the curriculum

An important discussion that took place across all of the workshops was around the way in which examination PE can constrain the curriculum in the early years of secondary school. Most of the participants recognised that examination PE could lead to a narrow curriculum, one that focused on developing pupils' performance (and knowledge) in particular activities:

I don't really buy into preparing pupils [for exams] and you know younger year groups for exam PE because as we've just highlighted, not many kids go on to do it. (Carrie, England, series 2)

Like Carrie, most of the teachers adopted a critical stance related to the impact of examination PE on PE curricula. For example, there was a discussion in the series 3 workshop about how a narrow focus on performance, driven by a focus on examinations, can influence how PE teachers understand success or failure in PE, which ultimately privileges some learners (and their learning) over others:

The idea of performance is maybe looking at like an elitist view...You're good at PE if you're good at sport and if you're performing to a high standard for your age group, then you're succeeding in PE. So the flip side to that is if you're not performing well...then you're not doing well in the subject (Colin, Northern Ireland, series 3).

However, although the teachers were critical of the impact of examination PE on PE curriculum and pedagogy, they also understood the pressures that teachers are under to prepare their learners for examinations and, indeed, some admitted to yielding to this pressure in their own practice. For example, David (England, series 1) stated:

Now part of the issue I've had when like designing a curriculum...the pressure that the scene at Key Stage Four [ages 14-16] can create and around the actual examination qualification...there has to be an element of sort of preparation, if you

like, as you would in any other subject during Key Stage Three [ages 11-14]... it's really challenging to do that.

Similar to the discussions noted above about the pressures felt by school inspections, the teachers recognised the pressure created by examination PE and how it influenced their curriculum and their practice. However, while they were critical of it, they did not – or perhaps could not, at this stage – propose any solutions to this problem.

Developing critical perspectives

Understanding similarities and differences across contexts

Evidence from the Padlet notes and from the workshop discussions suggest that the teachers found it interesting and, at times, surprising to learn about the curricula across the four home nations of the UK. Several of the teachers highlighted the curriculum in England as being different from the other curricula in terms of the limited detail presented within the curriculum document and the focus on developing pupils' performance within this. For example, in sharing their reactions to their cross-border curriculum learning during the workshop, teachers from series 1 noted on Padlet: "Lack of pedagogy in England against other nations. Still too traditional?" and "English curriculum heavy on physical discourse/competence. What about 'softer' skills, still achieving?". The teachers also found it interesting to note how schools across Wales were engaging with the new curriculum in different ways, producing different curricula and forms of assessment, as one teacher in the series 1 workshop noted on Padlet: "Interesting to see the move of the Welsh curriculum away from the 'traditional approach'".

As alluded to earlier, there was some evidence to suggest that recognising the similarities and differences across the four PE curricula helped teachers to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their own curriculum. For example, in comparing his PE curriculum to the experiences of the teachers from Wales, David (England, series 1) described the limitations of his curriculum, and how these are shaped by environmental constraints (weather and facilities):

It was really interesting reading some of those things and I'm like, totally here just to hear about the Welsh curriculum really, because I'm sat here designing an English PE curriculum, which looks – despite my best efforts – incredibly traditional and blocked and based around what facilities are available and the weather at the time of year in the Northeast of England.

These findings provide some evidence to suggest that recognising and exploring both similarities and differences between curricula have the potential to initiate/develop critical thinking, with differences in particular creating dissonance from which new knowledge and new ideas might emerge (O'Connor & Jess, 2020). As one teacher from series 3 noted on Padlet: "Really interesting to hear how each nation approaches their curriculum differently".

Becoming critical

Through the discussions that the teachers had about the different UK PE curricula, evidence of critical thinking began to emerge in relation to their own curriculum and, at times, the other UK PE curricula. As mentioned above, the teachers were able to reflect on curricula from other contexts and use this as a basis to consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of their own curriculum. For example, many of the teachers, including those from England, were critical of the idea that all young people should 'excel in sport'. This was evidenced in David's (England) contribution to the discussion in series 1:

But there's the first aim of the curriculum to develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities, it's like mind blowing...I don't know, I mean, the word excel sounds - you're the top level in that area...And I don't 100% know that that's a really suitable aim for the children that we're dealing with now... I don't know, it just seems like the other three countries are gathering a bit of traction in terms of improvement and moving things forward.

It was also through the cross-border learning activities and discussions that the teachers seemed to become more aware of how health was positioned in PE across the curricula. During the series 3 workshop, and after hearing about how health was conceptualised across the four nations of the UK, Andrea (Scotland) began to question the role of PE in relation to developing pupils' physical health. She said:

Lots of us have mentioned health in one guise or another, and I think it's something that we say, but how we actually do it is quite different. Do we have discussions about how much we actually influence a person, a pupil's health in the two hours that we see them in a week? And does that get blurred with trying to make someone physically fit in that time? And what does that really mean?

This then led to a discussion about the concept of health, where it became evident that the teachers from Scotland and Wales had a broad conceptualisation of health. Indeed, they referred to 'health and well-being' that included physical well-being *and* social, emotional and mental well-being, interestingly, reflecting the 'health' discourses evident in both the Curriculum for Wales and the Curriculum for Excellence (Gray et al., 2022b). Not only does this discussion highlight the impact that curriculum (reform) can have on teachers (Ball, 2015), but also the impact that the opportunity for cross-border discussion can have on teachers' ongoing development of critical thinking. While it is likely that Andrea had already considered these questions prior to attending the workshop – possibly due to her experiences of curriculum reform in Scotland – being presented with 'different' curricula appears to have (re)stimulated these reflections. They served to provide alternative perspectives for her (and others) to engage with, provoking critical questions, and subsequently a critical discussion about what health means, and the role that PE might play in developing young people's health.

Challenges to becoming critical

Overall, our analysis of the data produced from the workshops suggests that the teachers were able to think critically about curricula. However, our analysis also hinted at the persistence of traditional – and somewhat restrictive - PE discourses around, for example, organising curricula in blocks of activity, developing motor skills, and assessing performance. As previously mentioned, this was evidenced in David's (England, series 1) admission that, "despite my best efforts", his PE curriculum still looked very traditional. At this stage, he was unable to consider how his facilities might be used in creative ways . Similarly, Malcolm (Wales, series 1) indicated that, even through a period of major curriculum reform, the curriculum he has developed focuses on teaching games, so his department is "not losing that sort of traditional approach, but we are changing how we measure success".

In the series 2 workshop, Sarah alluded to the view that a move away from the traditional focus in PE of developing sports skills and improving performance might have a negative impact on elite sport more broadly. She said:

I'm talking a lot more in my lessons about kind of the personal qualities and very little about what it means to be like a competitive athlete and how to develop as an athlete.... I mean Scottish sport, a lot of time we lose to England, so does that have a like an effect on us? (Sarah, Scotland, series 2)

Sarah also suggests that to cater for the needs of a group of boys she teaches, she focuses more on developing their performance, or what she understands as meeting their “personal needs and what they want outside of school”.

Further indicative of the strength and persistence of performance in sport as a core purpose of PE, Carly suggests that the PE national qualifications in Scotland are “better” than in England because more weighting is given to pupils’ practical performance (50% of the overall mark):

The breakdown in the practical grades [for A-Level PE in England], you're only getting a 30-35% performance grade... I just think that's wrong down here in that sense, that we're going the other way. Whereas, as Carrie said, and going back 10 years ago in Scotland, to me it was going the better way. (Carly, England, series 2)

As we have already alluded, teacher change is difficult. To suggest a need for ‘change’ not only brings into question the effectiveness of current practice, but also necessitates a shift in beliefs and values. These have usually been established and reinforced over a significant period of time – often within a (neoliberal) context that may not have changed in that time. The teachers’ references to sport and performance noted above suggest that, although they are somewhere on their journey to becoming critical, more time and space is required to interrogate and disrupt the prevailing discourses in PE to allow new ways of thinking, seeing and acting on the world to emerge (Priestley et al., 2012).

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that critical thinking (and critical reading of curricula) might be a useful starting point on a journey towards becoming critical (Hickey & Mooney, 2019). Over time, critical thinking might open up different ways of reading and engaging with curriculum, providing teachers with the knowledge and capacities to act on the world to change it for the better (Standal & Moe, 2013). Based on this premise, and guided by our research questions, we aimed to explore the discussions that took place when PE teachers from across the four nations of the UK were invited to share their curriculum experiences, and to understand if and how opportunities for critical perspectives might be fostered through those discussions. Our findings make a valuable contribute to the field by suggesting that cross-border and collaborative dialogue is a useful starting point for PE teachers on their journey towards becoming critical.

From the discussions that unfolded, we uncovered that the teachers perceived they had freedom to work with their curricula in ways that align with the needs of their learners, indicating that they had some room to manoeuvre in their contexts (Biesta & Tedder, 2006) and can – at least, in theory – work in different ways. There was also some evidence to suggest that they were beginning to think more critically about their own curriculum through learning about other curriculum contexts and considering alternative possibilities for PE and their learners. For example, several of the teachers were especially interested in the recent curriculum developments in Wales, and the different ways in which the teachers were working with curriculum – and each other. This seemed to act as a catalyst for critical discussions where some teachers began to reflect on their own curriculum contexts and the perceived limitations. Relatedly, Lambert and O’Connor (2018) describe the ‘productive potential’ (p. 160) of policy

reform for teachers. Our findings tentatively extend this idea and suggest that, when policy reform experiences and learning are shared across borders, 'other' PE teachers might begin to understand their own curriculum from a different perspective. That said, while all the teachers perceived that they had some freedom within their curriculum, particularly those from Wales, it is important to note that they were also aware, and critical of, the ways in which they were constrained by accountability measures such as school inspections and examinations, as well as their context, for example, the weather and facilities (David, England, series 1). This points towards an openness to criticality, although the difficulties the teachers had in responding to such measures and constraints suggest that more time might be necessary to develop the tools to work creatively around, or even counter to them. Thorburn (2019) previously noted that high stakes PE examinations in the senior years can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test and stifle creative pedagogies. This was reflected in the present study with some of the teachers resigned to the fact that certain practices would endure - specifically those that focus on the development of sports performance – despite them being critical of this.

This endurance may also be attributed to their early socialisation experiences in PE (Everley & Flemons, 2020), allied with the prevalence of performance discourses within PE curricula (Gray et al., 2022a). In our previous research that mapped out the discourses evident in the UK PE curricula, we found that, with the exception of the Curriculum for Wales, a discourse of performance (in sport) 'continue[s] to dominate as the main purpose of physical education' (Gray et al., 2022a, p. 576). Clearly, when the curriculum aligns with teachers' beliefs about the purpose of PE, it becomes even more difficult to understand or enact curriculum in other ways – which may partly explain some of the contradictions and tensions that emerged (at times) through the workshop discussions. However, here again we see the 'productive potential' (Lambert & O'Connor; 2018, p. 160) of curricular reform, reflected in the different ways in which the teachers from Wales were working with their new curriculum, through opportunities to reflect, collaborate, and trial new ideas. These opportunities are vital to support teachers' engagements with curriculum reform, where without them, new policy is unlikely to have any impact on teachers or their practice (Herold, 2020). Indeed, several researchers have called for more time and space for teachers to work collaboratively across borders, to push boundaries and develop different ways of knowing and working with curriculum, thereby affording them greater agency to operate, even in neoliberal contexts (Brown & Penney, 2018). As Evans (2014) reminds us, neoliberal measures do not determine teachers' subjectivities – that teachers are neither 'dopes or dupes' (p. 553) and they can resist or adapt neoliberal requirements to local contexts. However, in recognising the challenges this presents, he also asks: "What and where, then, are the spaces wherein counter-hegemonic or, indeed, any new innovative or even conservative ideas can emerge" (p. 553). We argue that these spaces might be created when PE teachers from across the four nations of the UK come together to share their experiences and explore curricula – something that has not previously been proposed or investigated. Crucially, this collaborative and cross-border approach positions teachers as central to the change process where, over time and with support, they begin to question their past experiences and current beliefs (the iterational), re-direct their future imaginings of PE (the projective) and begin to explore opportunities for working in their context in different, more critical and socially just ways (the practical-evaluative) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Importantly, given the collaborative approach suggested here, PE teachers might also begin to construct 'alternative vocabularies' about the purposes of PE (Evans, 2014, p. 555) that have some influence beyond their own school context. However, more research is necessary, working with teachers across borders – and over time – to support them as they build their

capacities/dispositions for critical thinking and to determine with greater certainty the impact that this might have on opportunities for critical action. Given the precarious nature of contemporary social life and education (Kirk, 2020), supporting teachers to develop their capacities for criticality is perhaps more timely than ever before and something that might be considered a critical endeavour for the field. With this in mind, and since conducting the workshops outlined in the present paper, we have continued to create spaces for cross-border discussions through online presentations, panel discussions and informal 'catch-up' sessions with PE teachers from across the four nations. Furthermore, our future research seeks to work in the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) context to collaborate with ITE practitioners and pre-service teachers to explore the opportunities that cross-border dialogue (across the UK and beyond) might afford them for critical and innovative thinking. We hope that, in the long-term, such efforts might support teachers as they embark on - and continue - the challenging journey of becoming critical.

Footnotes:

1. Padlet is an online post-it wall where participants can share their comments related to a given task/question.
2. In 2020, Wales a new curriculum was published, intended to guide curriculum planning, pedagogy and assessment by 2022. In this curriculum, PE has been integrated into the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience.

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