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Producing the well and skilled body: a critical discourse analysis of health and physical education curriculum policy in Aotearoa New Zealand

Jiayuan Deng, Katie Fitzpatrick and Darren Powell

Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Background: Aotearoa New Zealand is about to embark on a re-write of the official, national, health and physical education curriculum for all primary and secondary schools. This is a significant moment in policy history as the previous most recent curriculum updates occurred in 1999 [Ministry of Education. 1999. *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum*] and 2007 [Ministry of Education. 2007. *The New Zealand Curriculum*]. In the latter rewrite, health and physical education was combined with all other learning areas into one policy document called *The New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC). In light of this imminent shift, we have undertaken a discourse analysis of the current 2007 health and physical education curriculum in order to gain insight into what driving concerns, discourses and pedagogical imperatives were privileged in that document, how we might understand those within their related social and political contexts, and what insights such an analysis might offer this moment of curriculum review.

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to examine how the dominant discourses of health and physical education curriculum policy in Aotearoa New Zealand construct particular ‘problems’ of the body and young people related to health, physical ability and schooling. To date, no one has undertaken such an analysis of current Aotearoa New Zealand policy in health and physical education.

Methodology and analyses: Based on Foucauldian concepts of discourse, knowledge/power, and problematisation, we combined Norman Fairclough’s textually oriented discourse analysis and Carol Bacchi’s ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ approach to analyse the health and physical education sections of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Our analyses involved both a focus on lexical choice – in order to analyse the curriculum policy as text – and critical discourse analysis – to analyse the curriculum policy as discourse. While many commentators (including some of the authors of this article) have lauded the curriculum policy for its socio-cultural orientation, the results of this analysis suggest that Aotearoa New Zealand health and physical education curriculum policy is actually dominated by an orientation to enhance young people’s wellbeing, and surprisingly, this is communicated in the text as directly connected to the production of skilled body. We seek to understand this finding in the context of the

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CONTACT Jiayuan Deng  jiayuan.deng@auckland.ac.nz  Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

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positioning of the curriculum policy, as outcomes-focused curriculum policy, and neoliberal discourse.

Conclusions: The health and physical education sections of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MOE 2007) problematises the non-skilled bodies of students and position the development of ‘skilled body’ as a key technique to enhance individual wellbeing. In this context, the emphasis on skills reinforces the notions of success and failure, worthiness and unworthiness. We argued that the writers of the next iteration of the health and physical education curriculum will need to be cognisant of how skills and bodies may be positioned through text, what students should understand, know and do, as well as the dominant ideologies and discourses that shape key concepts. Researchers and policymakers will need to critically examine the complex social, cultural and political contexts that work in this particular polycscape.

Introduction

Health and physical education (HPE) in official curriculum policy in different countries is highly contested (Penney 2008; 2017). In the last 20 years, these curricula have reflected debates about the health and wellbeing of each country’s citizenry and health concerns such as obesity, heart disease, fitness levels and mental health, which have driven policy debate in many places (Evans and Davies 2004; Penney 2017). At the same time, advocacy within the physical education research community for the (re)centralisation of fundamental movement skills (Barnett et al. 2016; Faigenbaum et al. 2015; O’Brien, Belton, and Issartel 2016) and models-based practices (Casey and Kirk 2020; Casey and MacPhail 2018; Kirk 2013) exist alongside calls for more socially just and critical approaches to physical education (e.g. Blackshear and Culp 2021; Fitzpatrick 2019; Landi, Lynch, and Walton-Fisette 2020; Oliver and Kirk 2015; Walton-Fisette et al. 2019). The policy terrain in the discipline reflects both global and local policy levers and, what Junemann, Ball, and Santori (2016) refer to as, polycsapes. The latter takes in both the political and social contexts of policy moves as well as the textual elements of policy documents. As Penney and Alfrey (2022, 216) insist, ‘policy and therefore, curriculum, is both process and product’.

Aotearoa New Zealand is about to embark on a refresh of the official, national health and physical education curriculum for all primary and secondary schools. This is a significant moment in policy history as the previous most recent curriculum updates occurred in 1999 (MOE 1999) and 2007 (MOE 2007). In the latter rewrite, health and physical education was combined with all other learning areas¹ into one policy document called *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MOE 2007). In the last three years, writing groups have revised six of the eight learning areas (Science, Mathematics and Statistics, English, Social Sciences, Technology, and The Arts) with only HPE and Languages now remaining. In light of this imminent shift, we have undertaken a discourse analysis of the current 2007 health and physical education curriculum in order to gain insight into what driving concerns, discourses and pedagogical imperatives were privileged in that document, and how we might understand those within their related social and political contexts, and what insights such an analysis might offer this moment of curriculum review.

Understanding policy matters. According to Ball (1994, 3), educational policy is an articulation of the ‘authoritative allocation of values’; it may not be a truthful statement of objective fact, but one that is persuasive and argumentative in nature. In this sense, policy assumes a political stance as it ‘contain[s] contested meanings and values, privileging certain positions, whilst silencing others’ (Lancaster and Ritter 2014, 82). A policy can be many things, including an amalgam of the social and political concerns of the moment and a reaction ‘to fixed and identifiable “problems” that are exogenous (outside) the policy process’ (Bacchi 1999, 1). It is inevitable that policy ‘make[s] a

“problem” exist as a particular type of “problem” (Bacchi 2009, 263) and in so doing it rationalises and legitimises the parameters responded to by policymakers. Policies are thus inherently ‘proble-matising activities’ that carry with them the implication that something needs to be changed or fixed. This is not to say that without a policy there would not be any ‘problem’, but rather that problematisation is a discursive way of ‘producing the “real”’ (Bacchi 2012, 7), and that the act of naming particular conditions as ‘problems’ is one that ‘fixes them in ways that need to be interrogated’ (Bacchi 2009, xi). That is, problematisation not only highlights the importance of ‘problem’ but also shapes the way society understands and deals with it. Therefore, it is important to take a critical perspective for us to recognise the underlying discourses and explore what policy really stands for and what it really desires as an effect of power.

While there has been significant commentary about HPE policy in Aotearoa New Zealand (e.g. Culpan 2008; Culpan and Bruce 2007; Fitzpatrick and Burrows 2017; Heaton 2011; Penney, Petrie, and Fellows 2015; Tinning 2009), to date, there has not been a dedicated discourse analysis of the 2007 health and physical education elements of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MOE 2007). In this article, we report the findings of an analysis we have undertaken, which aimed to understand both the textual aspects of the document, and the discursive elements of its construction and effects. The textual analysis draws on the work of Fairclough (2010), while we work with the ideas of Bacchi (2009) and Foucault (2002) to undertake a wider discursive analysis. While the discursive traverses both text and context, undertaking a dedicated textual analysis in the first instance was important for several reasons. Jiayuan is new to Aotearoa New Zealand and this approach allowed her to engage deeply with the document as an object with specific, detailed semantic constructions. Katie and Darren are from Aotearoa New Zealand and have both been involved in different ways in the production of HPE policy over time. Katie was on the original writing team for the 2007 curriculum policy (as part of a group of 10 people).² The textual analysis allowed us all to look anew at the document and gain some distance from our assumptions about the text itself given that it has been in use for over 15 years. Indeed, we were surprised at some of the results of this analysis in terms of the privileging of particular words and concepts. Following the textual analysis we employed Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) approach. This WPR framework is especially productive for this analysis because of the way Bacchi’s (2009) questions require us to locate the policy in the historical and political contexts of its production. These frameworks are explained and justified in more detail below.

We begin this article with a brief background to HPE curriculum policy in Aotearoa New Zealand and present an overview of the theoretical approach and the methods we undertook, detailing both the way we applied textual analysis and the WPR approach. We then share two important findings from this research related to the place of skill in the policy document and how this relates to notions of wellbeing and wider political imperatives. We end with a discussion of the significance of the findings for understanding contemporary HPE curriculum policy.

Background to the NZHPE policy document

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) is defined as ‘a statement of official policy’ (MOE 2007, 6); which sets the direction of what is deemed important in education and what each learning area is about and how its learning is structured (Tinning 2009). The HPE section of the NZC (NZHPE) document begins with the statement that ‘in health and physical education, the focus is on the well-being of the students themselves, of other people, and of society ...’ (MOE 2007, 22). The notion of wellbeing is thus central to the document. The basic document structure consists of four key concepts, four strands and their achievement objectives, three subjects,³ and seven key areas of learning (see Table 1).

Previous commentary about this document – and its predecessor, the 1999 document, *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (MOE 1999) – has several key themes. There is debate about the representation of indigenous Māori concepts, in particular the notion

Table 1. the basic document structure of NZHPE.

Key concepts	Hauora ^a , attitudes and values, socio-ecological perspective, and health promotion
Four strands	Personal health and physical development, movement concepts and motor skills, relationships with other people, and healthy communities and environments
Three subjects	Health education, physical education, and home economics
Seven key areas of learning	Mental health, sexuality education, food and nutrition, body care and physical safety, physical activity, sport studies, and outdoor education

Note: ^aHauora is an indigenous Māori concept of wellbeing.

of hauora. While the inclusion of the concept in a Eurocentric policy is acknowledged as significant, there are also concerns about appropriation and the use of the concept outside the context from which it emerged (e.g. Heaton 2011; Hokowhitu 2004; Ross 2001; Salter 2000). The document was also recognised as significant internationally for its socio-cultural and critical orientation to the subjects of health and PE (Burrows 2004; Culpan 1996; Culpan 2008; Tasker 1996). Tinning (2002), for example, noted that critical approaches to education have been taken up in policy in New Zealand and Penney and Harris (2004) argued that critical discourses are, most notably, visible rather than excluded or subordinated in New Zealand health and physical education policy.

While a critical orientation was acknowledged, NZHPE policy has also been critiqued for neo-liberal leanings and health-related agendas that market-driven approaches and individual responsibility have affected the concerning of health issues (Evans and Davies 2004; Petrie, Penney, and Fellows 2014). Tinning (2002; 2009) also questioned the claims in the policy in terms of how realistic they were, and whether there was any strong articulation with practice; he argues that such aims are severely complicated by wider social and political contexts and the subjectivities of teachers (Tinning 2002). Space here does not allow us to provide commentary on the those wider political, social and historical policy contexts but several scholars have commented on the importance of this in any policy production (see, for example, Culpan 1996; Fitzpatrick and Powell 2019; Tasker 1996).

In this article, we aimed to re-visit and re-examine, through critical discourse analysis, the desires of health and physical education as represented in the NZC (2007) curriculum policy. In order to do this, we focus first on what the text itself actually privileged, and then on what kinds of ‘problems’ the NZHPE of 2007 sought to raise and address.

Theoretical framework

According to Foucault (1988a, 257), problematisation is ‘the ensemble of discursive and nondiscursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)’. Foucault is stating here that ‘problems’ are constructed by discourse, rather than ‘existing’ before or in discourse. By pre-determining the categories of reason by which statements are accepted as knowledge, discourse creates an epistemic ‘reality’ and becomes a technique of discipline (Foucault 1981). That is, discourse shapes what we think is ‘knowledge’ and what is consistent with that ‘knowledge’ (Foucault 2002). For this point, Foucault (1994, 456) is concerned with ‘seeing on what types of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking, the accepted practices are based’; because discourse is ‘the socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what is possible to think, write or speak about’ (Bacchi 2009, 35). In other words, the NZHPE policy produces, through discourse, what Foucault called ‘problems’ waiting to be ‘solved’. This ‘problem-solving’ process can be seen as a process of discipline with regard to young people’s bodies, as some scholars argue that the NZHPE has the function of controlling and disciplining the body (Kirk 2004a; 2004b; Tinning 2010). Through the discipline of young people’s bodies, the actions of the body, and even everyday behaviours are made more subservient to the demands of power, making the body ‘more obedient as it becomes more useful’ (Foucault 1979, 138).

Methodology

As Ball (2006, 43) states, ‘in the analysis of complex social issues – like policy – two theories are probably better than one’, which means that ‘what we need in policy analysis is a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories’. In this project, we have employed both conceptualisations of policy proposed by Ball (2006, 44), which are ‘policy as text and policy as discourse’. Policy as text and policy as discourse are not two opposing concepts, they are implicit in each other because ‘text refers to a particular concrete manifestation of practices organised within a particular discourse’ (Lewis and Simon 1986, 485; also see Terdiman 1985). So, we choose to analyse NZHPE policy with these two conceptualisations in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the policy. In doing so, we combined two methods, both of which have connections to Foucauldian theory, namely Fairclough’s (2003) textually-oriented discourse analyses, and Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) approach.

Policy as text – Fairclough’s textually oriented discourse analysis

Fairclough (2010) draws on Foucauldian notions of discourse and states that discourse has a constructive role in that it does not just reflect or represent social relations, but also constructs or ‘constitutes’ them. Fairclough (2010, 25) describes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a ‘framework for studying connections between language and power’; and argues that when we consider CDA, we should focus on both linguistic analyses of texts and social constructions of discourse, which he proposes as ‘textually oriented discourse analyses’ (Fairclough 2003, 2). Textually oriented discourse analysis aims to ‘transcend the division between work inspired by social theories which tend not to analyse texts, and work which focuses upon the language of texts but tends not to engage with social theoretical issues’ (Fairclough 2003, 2–3). That is, textual analysis and discourse theory are not a dichotomy, they need to be attended to together. One of the features of text, lexical choice, helps users both express ideas and construct discourse concepts and it is the most obvious way in which the particular field, or ideational meanings, of discourse, are signified (Halliday 1989). The analysis of lexical choice can, therefore, reveal the desires the text reflects because ‘discourse is not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire – it is also the object of desire’ (Foucault 1981, 52).

For this study, we used Nvivo 14 to assist our textual analysis. Focusing on the policy pages on health and physical education, we conducted a word frequency search and then formed a word cloud. Word clouds are the visualisation of text in which more frequently used words are effectively highlighted by occupying a more prominent place in the representation. Considering that this study is based on CDA rather than a linguistic orientation, the results of the word cloud are filtered to eliminate dummy words such as conjunctions, prepositions, coronals, as well as gerunds, pronouns (when, his, it) that are not useful for the analysis. We also run analyses on specific words using the text search function of Nvivo 14 to locate these words in the document and their associated collocations.

Policy as discourse – Bacchi’s What’s the Problem Represented to Be? Approach

Bacchi’s ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) approach is the central analytical method we focus on in this article. Bacchi (2009) suggests that, before analysing any policy, it is important to return to the question of why governments formulate policies in the first place. Bacchi (2009) suggests that discourses created by policy documents limit the possibilities of thinking about particular social problems by precluding consideration of anything other than the ‘reality’ that they constitute and reflect. Because discourses constitute practices which construct the objects of which they speak and therefore also shape perceptions and understandings of ‘reality’ (Markula-Denison and Pringle 2006), NZHPE policy may not be the best effort to solve any ‘problem’. Rather, it produces ‘problems’ with particular meanings that ‘affect what gets done or not done, and how people live their lives’ (Bacchi 2012, 5). So, taking the WPR approach to examine the NZHPE policy

encouraged us to reflect upon why and how ‘problems’ are represented and constructed in HPE curriculum. Bacchi (2009, xiii) proposes six questions⁴ to conduct CDA and argues that in order to ‘understand how we are governed, we need to examine the problem representations that lodge within policies ... interrogate the kinds of ‘problems’ that are presumed to exist and how these are thought about’. For reasons of space here, we can only present a small part of our study and so we only discuss our findings in relation to the first two questions in Bacchi’s WPR model. The first question is what’s the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?, and the second question is what presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?. Together with the textual analysis which we present first, these two questions allowed us to explore the assumptions and conceptual logic that have contributed to constructing the ‘problem’ of how NZHPE policy constructs ‘problems’ related to young people’s bodies.

Findings

Figure 1 shows the word cloud generated to reflect the top 50 high-frequency words in the NZHPE curriculum policy document. This was derived from our analysis using Nvivo 14 (the top 14 words are listed with exact number of frequency in the endnotes⁵). The word cloud indicates that the terms ‘physical’, ‘people’, and ‘students’ (in descending order of frequency) are centrally located in the word cloud. The centrality of these three words is interesting. Both ‘people’ and ‘students’ being in the top three aligns with claims that the curriculum is human-centered or student-centred. The term ‘physical’ implies the body and the term ‘student’ also implies learning. So, the learning bodies of students are centralised in this policy by word frequency. Then, these three words are surrounded by ‘skills’, ‘development’, ‘personal’, ‘community’, ‘health’, ‘environments’, and ‘activity’ (in descending order of frequency). Of these words, the word ‘skills (or skill)’ is the one that appears the next (4th) most frequently in the text. Importantly, ‘development’ and ‘skills’ are typically situated in close proximity to each other in the text, most typically with the verb form ‘develop’ connected to skill. For example, the definition of health education includes the imperative for students to ‘develop skills that enhance relationships’ (MOE 2007, 23). Likewise, the definition of PE states that this subject ‘encourages students to engage in movement experiences that promote and support the development of physical and social skills’ (MOE 2007, 23). In the achievement objectives we find ‘develop skills to manage changes’ (level 3), ‘develop skills and responsible attitudes in challenging physical situations’ (level 5), and ‘develop skills and behaviour for managing responsible action’ (level 7). Skill appears in the document, a total of 51 times. In 25 of these instances, there is a specific link between the term ‘skill’ and ‘motor’ or ‘movement’, referring to the interaction of bodies in the



Figure 1. Word cloud of top 50 high-frequency words for the NZHPE curriculum policy document.

physical situations. In addition, we also find the statements that ‘develop skills and responsible attitudes in challenging physical situations’ (level 5), and ‘adapt skills and appraise responsible attitudes in challenging physical situations and unfamiliar environments’ (level 7). As ‘the body is as much a social as it is a biological phenomenon, existing simultaneously in culture and nature’ (Kirk 2004b, 52), there is a consideration that policy is asking for a skilled body – one that is not just physically capable but also attuned to the demands and expectations of its social environment. In the above statements, skills are paired with attitudes (skills and responsible attitudes) and with behaviour (skills and behaviour). In this sense, the skill is positioned as knowledge, as embodied knowing that is developed by students. Skill then is explicitly linked to physicality and, therefore, to the performance of the body. This privileging of skill in the document suggests that the NZHPE reflects a strong interest in developing skilled bodies. Given that a great deal of commentary on this policy relates to wellbeing, indigenous concepts, critical thinking, and the socio-cultural orientation of the document, our finding that skill is actually one of the most privileged concepts surprised us. In one sense, the notion of skill is hiding in plain sight and may be a taken-for-granted, but is a rarely acknowledged or debated concept in HPE policy in Aotearoa New Zealand. If skill is then indeed central to the policy, how is the skilled body constructed in the NZHPE curriculum text? In other words, how does the skilled body logically become the purpose of HPE curriculum? To follow this inquiry, we employ Bacchi’s (2009) WPR approach to ask, if skill is the dominant idea in the NZHPE then, what is the problem represented to be?

What’s the problem represented to be in the NZHPE curriculum policy? Young people’s bodies as unskilled

The NZHPE curriculum policy, as noted earlier, actually starts with a statement about wellbeing being the overall purpose of the disciplines of health and physical education. It states that ‘in health and physical education, the focus is on the well-being of the students themselves, of other people, and of society through learning in health-related and movement contexts’ (MOE 2007, 22). The section headed ‘why study in this learning area’ then states that ‘through learning and by accepting challenges in health-related and movement contexts, students reflect on the nature of well-being and how to promote it’ (MOE 2007, 22). Bacchi (2009) suggests that identifying and clarifying problem representations can involve looking at both the explicit problematising language of the policy as well as ‘working backwards’ from policy proposals to identify implicit problematisations. Specifically, ‘if a policy presents proposals for change or recommendations for action, what are the implied problems these act as solutions to?’ (Bacchi 2009, 3–4). If the purpose of the NZHPE curriculum policy is ultimately presented as an intervention to improve young people’s wellbeing, then skill is positioned as the means for such an improvement.

As noted earlier, NZHPE intentions are realised in the policy with reference to three different subjects: physical education, health education, and home economics. In health education, the document states that students will ‘develop skills that enhance relationships’ and they will ‘use these skills and understandings to take critical action to promote personal, interpersonal, and societal wellbeing’ (MOE 2007, 23). Here, skill is positioned as fundamental for promoting wellbeing. The statement about physical education avoids the word wellbeing but also centralises the development of skill for purposes of life enhancement. The PE statement begins with the sentence ‘in physical education, the focus is on movement and its contribution to the development of individuals and communities’ Movement is positioned as ‘integral to human expression and ... can contribute to people’s pleasure and enhance their lives’ (MOE 2007, 23). The penultimate sentence about PE reads ‘physical education encourages students to engage in movement experiences that promote and support the development of physical and social skills’(MOE 2007, 23). There are related wider references here to skill including move their bodies, relate positively to others, and demonstrate constructive attitudes and values. There is thus an inherent link between wellbeing and skill, and the implication that skill development and demonstration leads to a ‘better life’. The final

subject, home economics, has much overlap with health education and states that, in this subject, students ‘develop personal and interpersonal understandings and skills that contribute to well-being’ (MOE 2007, 23).

From the description of the three subjects, it is possible to conclude that the problem represented in the document is the unskilled bodies of students, which, it is implied, leads to diminished well-being. This is reinforced in the descriptions of the four strands. The first strand, personal health and physical development, which ‘students develop the knowledge, understandings, skills, and attitudes that they need in order to maintain and enhance their personal well-being and physical development’ (MOE 2007, 22). The second strand, movement concepts and motor skills, emphasises the need to ‘develop motor skills’ (MOE 2007, 22). The third strand, relationships with other people, states that students will ‘develop understandings, skills, and attitudes that enhance their interactions and relationships with others’ (MOE 2007, 22). Although there is no mention of skill development in the fourth strand, healthy communities and environments, it perhaps relies on skill development pursued in the other strands. The focus on skills as a solution to wellbeing problems also plays out in the achievement objectives (the statements of what students should learn at each level of the curriculum). For example, level 3 notes that ‘students will ... develop skills to manage changes’ and at level 7 they ‘develop skills for managing responsible action in facing risks in physical and social environments’ (MOE 2007). Skills are, therefore, not only positioned as for the purpose of relationships and physical competence but also to cope with change, and manage risk. Here, the document produces young people’s bodies as both unskilled and at risk. Foucault (1979, 199) states that ‘the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder’. Foucault argues that it is the rulers who envisage the state of ‘disorder’, which, as it is constantly parsed and distributed, gradually produces a disciplined society. Policy then, as the official statement of intent of the State, produces, through discourse, a ‘plague’ of skillless and unwell young people.

The NZHPE curriculum policy, of course, also contains other ‘solutions’, because policies are complex and contain multiple problem representations that may sometimes conflict, and sometimes overlap or are ‘nested’ one within the other (Bacchi 2009, 21). This means other ‘problems’ are also raised in the text. Space here does not allow us a broad discussion of all the ‘problems’ raised in the NZHPE document.

What assumptions underlie the representation of the ‘problem’ in the NZHPE curriculum policy?

From the above analyses of problem representation, young people’s unskilled bodies are the ‘problem’. It is worth thinking about then why the claims for wellbeing seem to be transferred to demands for skills. That is, what is the background ‘knowledge’ that is taken for granted in the process of linking wellbeing directly to skills?

In many countries, outcome-focused reforms have become an increasingly common feature in educational policy (Maurisio 2005) and New Zealand is widely regarded as offering one of the clearest examples globally of an outcomes-focused curriculum (Priestley and Sinnema 2014). The positioning of HPE as outcomes-focused was noted in both the 1999 HPE curriculum policy (MOE 1999) and the 2007 curriculum policy (MOE 2007). Outcomes-focused curriculums are often perceived as tending to privilege skills over content by being structured around more open-ended learning objectives (Priestley and Biesta 2013), which is consistent with NZHPE policy text (which contains a two-page summary and eight pages of achievement objectives). The document insists that students ‘develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes that they need in order to maintain and enhance their personal well-being’ (MOE 2007, 22). However, the attention to outcomes-focused curriculum rationalises the privileging of skilled bodies, because skills are ‘knowing how to do things and how to apply those things and knowing that’ (Birch 2016, 248). This means that skills are more focused on being able to do and do well, which is more consistent with the measurement of outcomes than understanding and attitudes.

The emphasis on the skilled body is also inseparable from neoliberal discourse. Davies and Bansel (2007, 247) point out that neoliberalism has been installed in New Zealand education in a ‘remarkable and concerted fashion’. Despite Ball’s (2012, 3) warnings that neoliberalism ‘is one of those terms that is used so widely and so loosely that it is in danger of becoming meaningless’, we are compelled to accept the claims that neoliberalism is the ‘specific defining political/economic paradigm of the age in which we live ...’ (Apple 2006, 14). Harvey (2007, 22) defines neoliberalism as ‘a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can be best advanced by the maximisation of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterised by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade’. These freedoms are often disguised as giving ‘choice’ to individuals and portrayed as a pseudo-freedom strategically located and shaped in the social context (Pope 2014). In this manner, students are liberated from their passive roles and transformed into active citizens who consciously realise self-management, which figures the process of learning as one of self-benefit. In this context, the development of skills is again prioritised in the ‘solution’ of enhancing students’ wellbeing, as NZHPE policy describes skills as managing changes and responsible actions (MOE 2007).

At this point, skill is a technology of the self, those which will

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988b, 18)

These technologies involve disciplinary techniques and methods that intertwine power, morality and knowledge. Indeed, as Foucault and Blasius (1993, 203) argued, modern government relies on the interactions between technologies of power and technologies of the self, ‘the points where the technologies of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves’. In this way, technologies of the self assist in the endeavour to direct ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Gordon 1991, 2) of individuals and populations; to lead (rather than force) individuals to gain knowledge of self, regulate their behaviour and bodies, and transform themselves (Powell and Plum 2020). This is a type of self-knowledge that is socially constructed and shapes our ‘desire to be the kind of person idealised by a particular discourse’ (Wright, O’Flynn, and Macdonald 2006, 709). Importantly, the overemphasis on young people’s skilled bodies stigmatises ‘unskilled bodies’ and ‘unwelled bodies’ as the bodies that needs to be transformed. In the case of health and physical education in the NZC, the discursive production of ‘skilled bodies’ is inextricably tied to the self.

Conclusion

Policy analysis enable us to better understand how discourses operate through HPE curricula, and their impact ‘in shaping the relationship between students, their bodies, and broader society’ (Petherick and Norman 2022, 345). In this article, we argue that NZHPE policy problematises the non-skilled bodies of students and positions the development of the ‘skilled body’ as a key technique to enhance individual wellbeing. The prevalence of the skill discourse in current policy reflects broader societal values and expectations regarding bodies. In this context, skill acquisition becomes a manifestation of the desired traits and attributes promoted by the society at large. As policies shape the educational landscape, they contribute to the construction of specific narratives surrounding HPE – one of these prioritises the development of skills as a tactic to ‘enhance’ students’ bodies and wellbeing. This narrative, in turn, establishes certain criteria for deserving and undeserving attributes associated with young people’s bodies. It operates as a socio-cultural framework that categorises individuals, reinforcing notions of success and failure, worthiness and unworthiness.

As our critical discourse analysis demonstrates, the development of the next curriculum requires far closer attention being paid to text. Although the current official health and physical education curriculum in New Zealand is described (and praised) by some for its critical orientation, criticality

does not strongly feature in the text. Rather, the text focuses on discourses of skill, skill development, and the (un)skilled, (un)well body. As we have argued, this is also problematic when it is intrinsically tied to the ‘logic’ of neoliberalism which (re)produces certain types of bodies, knowledges and citizens. Furthermore, the forthcoming curriculum refresh is based on ‘progress outcomes’ that describe what students should understand, know, and do: ‘Students deepen their understanding of the big ideas (understand), as they explore the context (know), using critical practices (do)’ (MOE 2024). It also aims to put ‘students – their voices, wellbeing, and aspirations – at the centre of learning’ (MOE 2024). The writers of the next iteration of the health and physical education curriculum will therefore need to be cognisant of how skills and bodies may be positioned through text, what students should understand, know and do, as well as the dominant ideologies and discourses that shape key concepts. There is a risk here for health and physical education that skill will be located in relation to the verb ‘do’ rather than represented as a manifestation of all three verbs (understand, know, do) as it currently stands in this (2007) document. Researchers and policymakers will need to critically examine the complex social, cultural and political contexts that work in this particular polycscape. Key values and meanings in HPE (such as the concepts of skill, wellbeing, and bodies) can be contested through this policymaking process. This is critical in order to resist both the privileging of certain bodies, behaviours, and knowledge, and the subjugation of marginalised groups and individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Notes

1. The New Zealand Curriculum specifies eight learning areas: English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social science, and technology.
2. Our intention in this article is not to critique the process or people involved in the writing, and we very much acknowledge that policy writing is both complex and difficult. We are using some historical distance here to comment on the actual product of the policy as text.
3. In the New Zealand health and physical education curriculum, health education, physical education, and home economics are referred to as three different but related subjects because they encompass different domains of knowledge, skills, and values that contribute to the overall learning area of health and physical education.
4. Six questions of Bacchi’s (2009, xiii) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ approach:
 - 1) What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
 - 2) What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?
 - 3) How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
 - 4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
 - 5) What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
 - 6) How/where is this representation of the ‘problem’ produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?
5. Word frequency for the first 14 words (stop at ‘wellbeing’):

Word	Count	Similar words within counting
physical	76	physical, physically
people	56	people
students	53	student, students
skills	51	skill, skills
development	45	develop, developing, development
personal	45	personal, personally
community	43	communities, community
health	43	health
environments	41	environment, environments
activity	37	activities, activity
movement	34	movement
attitudes	31	attitude, attitudes
wellbeing	31	wellbeing

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