

## PEDAGOGY

# An Analysis of National Physical Education Curriculum Initiatives in Brazil

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## Abstract

*This study examines how curriculum in physical education (PE) in Brazil has evolved in the last 20 years. Since the beginning of the 20th century, PE in the Brazilian schools has been influenced by different conceptual, political, philosophical, scientific, and pedagogical trends. The most influential trends were originated from medical field, military, sports, and pedagogical philosophies. This analysis process consists of (a) a review of the Brazilian PE historical perspective, (b) an overview of the scope of national curriculum guidelines established between 1997 and 2017, and (c) a description and reflection of the transition from national guidelines to a recently established compulsory national curriculum. The findings suggest that the evolution of PE in Brazil resulted in significant positive changes in terms of inclusiveness, cultural diversity, and the expansion of the content using the concept of culture of the body. Multiculturalism, although still a challenge, was indeed considered in the former recommended guidelines and the current compulsory curriculum document.*

In December of 2017, Brazil adopted a compulsory national curriculum (Ministério da Educação [MEC], 2017). It is called National Common Basic Curriculum (aka *Base Nacional Curricular Comum*

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[BNCC]; MEC, 2017). Physical education (PE) is one of the subjects included in the BNCC. PE is considered important in Brazil because it is the only discipline, and in some cases the only place in the community, that offers children opportunities to develop and enrich their movement experiences. According to Brazilian PE literature, the establishment of a national curriculum is critical to raise the level of education, to contribute to the democratization of knowledge, and to make schools accountable for the success and failure of students (Ferraz & Correia, 2012).

Prior to the BNCC, a set of curriculum guidelines called the National Curriculum Parameters (aka *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* [PCN]; Brasil, 1997a) were recommended for approximately 20 years. The PCN provided teachers with suggestions of lesson objectives, content, teaching strategies, and assessments. During this period, 21 out of 26 Brazilian states established their local curriculum guidelines (MEC, 2017). The main reason individual states adopted their local curriculum was because of social and cultural differences among themselves in terms of rural-urban regions, religious, immigration, and colonization background (Lopes, 2001).

The Brazilian Ministry of Education published the Brazilian Curriculum Parameters in 1997. These guidelines delineated a plethora of goals to be met in primary (i.e., first through ninth grades) and secondary (i.e., 10th through 12th grades) school levels. The PCN goals were comprehensive in a sense that schools would have autonomy to develop a curriculum plan to best address the goals according to cultural and socioeconomic needs (Brasil, 1997a). The proposition of the PCN was to ensure that all students in the nation had the same opportunities to receive basic content knowledge, independently of the region where the schools are located.

The PCN documents, in general, were structured in 10 themes. The introductory theme consisted of (a) history and purpose of the curriculum, (b) explanation of elaboration process, (c) information about students and teachers, and (d) trends of pedagogical practices. Subsequent themes involved disciplines such as Portuguese (i.e., Brazilian national language), mathematics, natural sciences, history and geography, arts, and PE. There was also the inclusion of transversal themes. Transversal themes referred to life topics that would go beyond a specific subject matter and should be integrated

across disciplines. The transversal themes were related to (a) ethics, (b) environment and health, and (c) cultural plurality and sexual orientation (Brasil, 1997a, 1998a).

The PCN in PE was based on the concept called the “*culture of the body*.” Culture of the body refers to the combination of biological and cultural dimensions, rather than merely physiological, anatomical, and biomechanical standpoints that used to be part of the traditional PE trends (Ferraz & Correia, 2012). The focus of the *culture of the body* is to provide students with knowledge and skills in a variety of games, sports, dances, martial arts, and gymnastics that can positively influence individuals’ health, leisure, sport performance, communication of ideas, feelings, and emotions (Brasil, 1997b, 1998b). Similar to the concept of physical literacy (Whitehead, 2010), *culture of the body* embraces the development of the whole individual. Nonetheless, the concept of *culture of the body* was part of the PE curriculum evolution in Brazil.

This study intends to contribute to the international PE curriculum literature by analyzing the evolution of the Brazilian curriculum including its multicultural perspective. The analysis of this evolution process includes (a) a review of the Brazilian PE historical perspective, (b) an overview of the scope of PCN in PE, (c) a description and reflection of the transition from national guidelines (i.e., PCN) to a compulsory national curriculum (i.e., BNCC).

## **Brazilian Physical Education From a Historical Perspective**

Since the beginning of the 20th century, PE in the Brazilian schools has been influenced by different conceptual, political, philosophical, scientific, and pedagogical trends. The most influential trends that will be described were originated from the medical field, military, sports, and a pedagogical model called New School (Betti, 1991; Darido, 2003). During the 1920s and 1930s, the medical class assumed a hygienist perspective, which was concerned with the betterment of health habits of the general population. During this period, PE was geared toward nurturing healthy bodies to be less susceptible to diseases. PE also took the responsibility to produce high productive workers during industrialization and urbanization periods. Similar to other nations, military organizations in

Brazil played an important role in emphasizing the importance of healthy and physically fit recruits. Following the Western world trends, German and Swedish gymnastics also became popular in the Brazilian PE curriculum in the mid-20th century (Betti, 1991; Darido, 2003; Siedentop & van der Mars, 2012).

The teaching of sports as a main content in PE curriculum started in the 1970s. During this period, sport became an important and well-recognized practice due to the inclusion of (a) physical fitness as a health component, (b) technique as a skill development component, and (c) cooperation and perseverance as a social component (Betti, 1991). Consequently, German and Swedish gymnastics lost importance in PE. The influence of sport in PE became a significant political aspect in the nation as part of military dictatorship government. This political vision exploited sport as a possibility to increase nationalism and to demobilize students associated with democratic or oppositional activist groups. The main purpose of sport in PE was the detection of elite athletes who would take part in national and international events, including the Olympic Games. An example of this vision occurred during the 1970 Soccer World Cup, in which the military government launched the slogan “Brazil, love it or leave it!” This slogan was followed by a press release of a vainglorious and nationalist chorus that preached the integration of soccer fans for the love of the nation (Betti, 1991; Darido, 2003).

Nonetheless, the sport movement did not produce the expected Olympic outcomes, and physical activity practices did not change the population’s healthy habits as envisioned. In 1980, a new pedagogical perspective called New School changed the education scenario. Inspired by John Dewey’s experiential learning theory, this perspective integrated psychomotor, cognitive, and affective domains to the teaching and learning process. The New School perspective was a consequence of the Brazilian democratization political stage, the reconstitution of public organization groups (e.g., unions, students’ organizations), and the establishment of the first graduate programs in PE in Brazil (Betti, 1991; Darido, 2003). During this period, university professors with international experiences brought to Brazil new perspectives that contributed to the development of national curriculum guidelines.

During the New School period, physical activity became exclusively associated with body movement that could produce substantial energy expenditure during leisure, fitness activities such as sports, and daily tasks such as washing car, gardening, and cleaning (Bouchard & Shephard, 1994; Tani, 1996). While PE became exclusively associated to the *culture of the body*, it targeted students' development of skills, quality of movement, autonomy, potentiality, and possibility for self-regulation to benefit the pursuit of a healthy and active lifestyle. As a result of this new pedagogical perspective, the year of 1996 marked the period in which PE became a compulsory curricular discipline (Brasil, 1996). The purpose of this curriculum was to promote intentional, sequential, and systematic curriculum based on the *culture of the body* found in culturally traditional games, gymnastics, sports, martial arts, and dances (Ferraz & Macedo, 2001b).

### **The Scope of PCN in PE**

The Brazilian Curriculum Parameters (PCN) was an initiative from the Brazilian Ministry of Education (Brasil, 1996). It became a consensus that the curriculum established at that time, which was implemented by individual states and school districts, was excessively vague. It lacked clear elaboration of specific learning outcomes, content, assessment, and alignment with the contemporary advances in education (Sá Barreto, 1995). Therefore, the Ministry of Education, instead of subsidizing the improvement or re-elaboration of curriculum proposals at local level, decided to centralize common curriculum guidelines to produce a national document that would function as a recommendation (aka parameters) to support nationwide school districts (Brasil, 1997a, 1998a).

The PCN documents were written by a panel of professionals, including mainly public university professors influenced by disciplinary groups. Ball and Bowe (1992) defined disciplinary groups as a panel of experts in specific curriculum subjects. Although the disciplinary groups possessed diverse academic expertise, recognized scholarship, and national credibility, this panel agreed to utilize the concept of the *culture of the body* as a central purpose in PE curriculum. The notoriety of these guidelines received attention from international funding agencies, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; Brasil, 1997a, 1998a). These partnerships

strengthened the development of curriculum guidelines and possibilities for standardized assessment.

Although the PCN documents were revised by different governmental sectors, private and public universities and also professional and scientific associations demonstrated criticism toward the final version of the document, because its review process was short and lacked public debate (Lopes, 2006). The educational audience perceived this quick elaboration process as a political strategy to accelerate the document approval, as opposed to a better paced democratic process of discussion and development of a national document (Lopes, 2006).

### **Cultural Plurality as a Transversal Theme**

Cultural plurality refers to the integration of pedagogical content with different disciplines, without the need of creating of new subject areas. Transversal themes consisted of essential topics that presented social urgency in an interdisciplinary form, such as ethics, health, environment, sexual orientation, and cultural plurality (Brasil, 1997c, 1998c). For example, urban communities present higher risks of automobile accidents than rural ones. In this case, traffic education could be considered a transversal theme at a local level. On the other side, transversal themes such as deforestation and drug and alcohol addictions could be considered nationwide transversal themes.

Cultural plurality addressed knowledge, respect, value of cultural and social diversity, identification of social and cultural inequalities, and discriminatory actions (Brasil, 1997c, 1998c). The incorporation of cultural plurality as transversal theme was a result of conflicts and disputes among different Brazilian cultural and ethnic groups, such as the exclusion of Native Brazilian groups' social and political decisions. Sacristán (1992) and Lopes (2006) called attention to a possible misconception associated with these types of conflicts and disputes. They argued that tolerance and respect caused by conflicts and disputes may disguise a sentiment cultural superiority. This interpretation clarifies that cultural plurality cannot be seen separated from power relations, but it certainly can be included in the political and educational agenda. Cultural plurality brought to the school curriculum social justice aspects such as inclusion, acceptance, and respect for socioeconomic and culturally diverse communities.

## **Cultural Plurality in PE: Learning Outcomes**

The learning outcomes related to cultural plurality stated that students would be able to value sociocultural differences and stand against discrimination regarding social class, beliefs, sex, ethnicity, or other individual identities. It reflected everyday practices of civil rights, political and social responsibilities, feelings of solidarity, cooperation and rejection of injustice, and treating others in the same way that one wants to be treated (Brasil, 1997b). The infusion of cultural plurality to the PE learning outcomes received support from federal law (Brasil, 1996, 2013) and from the international community, for example, the Jacques Delors' International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century report created by UNESCO in 1996 (Delors, 1996) and the Intercultural Education Guidelines (UNESCO, 2006). Both documents indicated the need to prepare citizens who respect differences and can positively influence globalization.

Unquestionably, the inclusion of cultural plurality in PE was well received by the academic and educational communities. It explicitly suggested a shift from pedagogical practices that exclusively focused on physical abilities and sport skills to more meaningful and inclusive practices (Ferraz, 2001). This aspect reflected a fragile deficiency in the discourse of power relations in which "traditional sports" typically addressed as PE content were basketball, volleyball, soccer, and handball. It was acknowledged that was not enough to exclusively include nontraditional content in the curriculum, but enough to be thoughtful of why some content was included and other content neglected.

## **The Missing Content in the PCN in Physical Education**

The PCN in PE proposed three criteria to address the selection of content that warranted cultural plurality: (a) social relevance, (b) students' developmental levels, and (c) contextual variables. Even though cultural diversity was contemplated in the development of the PCN, it is surprising that it did not emphasize African and Native Brazilian games, dances, and martial arts. Currently, the Brazilian population is approximately 204,450,649 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2015). Significantly, the African Brazilians represent 53% of the population. With a smaller

population, but with no less significance, Native Brazilians represent less than 1%, but they are present in all five regions of the country. Native Brazilians consist of 305 different ethnicities and 274 languages (IBGE, 2015).

One aspect that defines social relevance within the *culture of the body* perspective is the presence of sports or games that are considered popular. Popularity can be triggered by the cultural industry, which frequently shows interest in marketing products that stimulate cravings and preferences. For example, the hegemony of sport in Brazil can be identified through a massive broadcasting of American basketball and football (e.g., NBA, NFL) and European soccer leagues (e.g., Champions League, Euro Cup). Individual sports such as track and field, swimming, gymnastics, dance, and capoeira are typically neglected. It is important to reaffirm that the perspective of the *culture of the body* was and still is not to ban traditional or popular sports from PE, but to consider the inclusion of physical activities that are valued by the least favored social groups while recognizing their resilience and endurance throughout history.

The inclusion of physical activities of the most and least favored social-cultural groups provides students with opportunities to value their own background and to comprehend others' differences. The perspective of incorporating the most and least favored social-cultural groups proposes to decolonize the curriculum. This idea contradicts the exportation of cultural models that exclusively aim to maintain the economic and cultural influence of sovereign countries, which are established by the dominant groups within the country (Apple, 1996, 2008; Young, 2014).

This section of the paper intended to show that the era of the PCN in PE left unresolved questions about the relationship between cultures and subcultures, and doubts regarding the effectiveness of the curriculum. Despite questions, doubts, and learned lessons, a new curriculum era in Brazil has started and new inquiries and challenges are to come.

After 20 years of dissemination, it is still unknown the effect of the PCN on teachers' content knowledge. In addition, there is no evidence on how teachers implemented these guidelines into their curriculum and no records about the effect of the PCN on student learning. This lack of interest in conducting research could

be attributed to inefficient dissemination of the document and the absence of curriculum accountability in schools. Another fact that could have limited the accountability of the PCN was that the educational system at local and national levels did not provide enough professional development to certified PE teachers. In contrast, positive aspects that fostered the utilization of the PCN were (a) they were included in the PE teacher education curriculum; (b) they were a required knowledge base on the exams that teachers take to be employed in public schools; and (c) they were distributed and available, at no cost, to all schools in the nation (Brasil, 1997a).

### **The Transition From Guidelines to a Compulsory National Curriculum**

Brazil is a country characterized by a vast cultural diversity and deep social inequalities. Although federal law protects and emphasizes individual state's autonomy in organizing their educational system and building their own curriculum (Brasil, 2013), the current BNCC (MEC, 2017), plays a fundamental role in giving directions to the nation. The BNCC describes essential competences in PE that all students should develop. In addition, it conveys equality as a principle in which contextual peculiarities should be addressed.

Inequality has been present throughout the Brazilian educational history, in terms of access to school for all, student retention, and learning. Among the student population, inequalities are noticed in relation to race, sex, and family socioeconomic background. Yet, more recently, the percentage of schooling in Brazil has advanced and is providing more opportunities to all Brazilians. National statistics agencies (IBGE, 2015) reported the following ratios for school enrollment in Brazil: (a) 82.7% for children between 4 and 5 years old, (b) 98.5% between 6 and 14 years old, and (c) 84.3% for adolescents between 15 and 17 years old.

In light of this circumstance, the challenge of developing a curriculum and making pedagogical decisions is how to overcome socioeconomic inequalities. It is necessary that planning and implementation focus on equity, which presumably would help diverse students' success. The commitment to equity would revoke the historical exclusion and marginalization of low-income individuals in urban and rural areas, Native Brazilians and their descendants,

Afro-descendants, individuals with disabilities, and people who could not finish school within a certain average age.

Based on these issues, during the process of development of the BNCC, disciplinary groups decided to more effectively include feedback from teachers, parents, social organizations, and the general population (MEC, 2017). This process occurred through comments posted via the Internet, a public hearing, public debates, and an invited panel of professionals during different phases of the elaboration of the curriculum between September 2015 and December 2017.

### **BNCC and Competency-Based Learning**

The strategy adopted by the BNCC was the use of a more objective language in the document. For example, compared with PCN, the BNCC document has short and more precise learning outcomes across different school grade levels. Even though the *culture of the body* perspective was carried over as a major purpose of the BNCC in PE, the development of learning competencies was the major difference from the previous PCN. The concept of competencies had already been contemplated in Brazilian legislation (Brasil, 1996). Competencies have been part of pedagogical discussion throughout the years in curriculum development in different states and has been used in the international scenario. This approach has been addressed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which coordinates the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), and UNESCO (MEC, 2017).

Based on the learning competency approach, the BNCC indicates what student should know and be able to do to authentically prepare them for life and for the workplace. The BNCC PE competencies integrate different dimensions of skills and knowledge such as (a) movement experience and movement competence; (b) appreciation of movement activities as a performer and as a spectator; (c) reflection in action regarding challenges, novel activities, and adjustments of own interests in relation to others; (d) building values in the context of physical activity and a democratic society; (e) analysis of concepts and principles embedded in sports and physical activities, including fitness; (f) comprehension associated with the process of movement activities across the globe within a sociocultural context; and (g) active participation in a democratic

community by finding and/or creating opportunities to participate in physical activities.

### **The Scope of the BNCC in PE**

According to the BNCC (MEC, 2017), the growth of globalization requires the development of competencies to prepare individuals to learn how to learn, to be collaborative, resilient, and open to new ideas. Built on this proposition, the BNCC in PE intends to advance the curriculum to an era of global awareness, in which psychomotor domain should not be neglected in favor of only affective and cognitive outcomes. Instead, the BNCC claims for a vision where human endeavors are mediated by verbal, physical (i.e., body movement or expression), visual, sound, and more contemporaneously, digital sources of communication. Physical education, now included in the language arts field, endorses a curriculum based on the concept of the *culture of the body*, which is not limited to human movement in space and time, in athleticism, or in exercise science, but in human movement as means to self-expression, communication, and codification of social values that occur throughout a person's history.

Not surprisingly, it is important to emphasize that PE, per se, has the potential to offer students a plethora of experiences to foster their cultural awareness. Based on this potential, the BNCC competencies strengthen that a PE lesson should be taught as a cultural-dynamic phenomenon. This means that it would incorporate elements of diversity that can help all students to reconstruct knowledge to expand their body awareness, self-care, care of others, autonomy, and confidence to adopt a healthy and active lifestyle in society (MEC, 2017).

### **Final Considerations**

This analysis suggests that evolution of PE in Brazil resulted in significant positive changes in terms of inclusiveness, cultural diversity, and the expansion of the content through the concept of *culture of the body*. Multiculturalism, although still a challenge, was indeed considered in both PCN and BNCC documents. This fact can be seen as an advance in the Brazilian educational history, which used to be limited to development of physical skills and to the search for talents in sports as main targets.

The BNCC marketing campaigns seem to be more assertive in increasing the awareness of the public that the new compulsory

curriculum has been established for all students. Multiple media sources have promoted the existence and benefits of the BNCC. The BNCC proposes that students should have access to a common content knowledge, independently from their geographic area. It is important to comment that although experts in the PE disciplinary groups elaborated the BNCC aiming for common content knowledge, they intentionally left space for negotiations that occur in the relationships among teachers and students in the classroom, legitimizing teachers as the curriculum designers, since they have the ability to perceive, create, and assess what is relevant to the students.

Despite all the efforts made to produce an effective compulsory curriculum, the Brazilian legislation still needs to evolve toward an effective education system. A certified physical education teacher, for example, is not required in early childhood, kindergarten, and primary school levels. Research has shown that general education teachers are not qualified to teach PE because they lack understanding of appropriate common and specific content knowledge (Ferraz & Macedo, 2001a). Similar to teacher education programs in the United States (Schneider & Lounsbery, 2008; Siedentop, 2009), typical Brazilian elementary teacher education programs focus mainly on reading, writing, and mathematics, leaving physical education and arts in a less important educational category (Ferraz & Macedo, 2001a, 2001b).

Future studies in Brazilian curriculum could examine how physical educators implement and adapt the BNCC to their specific contexts. This could be conducted (a) quantitatively, via survey in which physical educators identify adaptations and challenges related to the selection of learning outcomes and content that are meaningful to their students, and (b) qualitatively, via interviews in which physical educators identify their perceptions of their implementation and their difficulties related to the pedagogical content knowledge, selection criteria of the content, and teaching strategies.

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