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# The A–Z of Social Justice Physical Education:



## Part 2

DILLON LANDI   
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### Precarity in Physical Education

In his most recent book, physical education scholar David Kirk (2020) noted the rising issue of “precarity” (or vulnerability) in our society. As Kirk (2020) argued, “Poverty, mental health, gender inequality and discrimination, disruptive pupil behaviour, knife crime: these are each referents of precarity. And they are empirical referents that *can* be counted” (p. 1).

The rise of precarity in the United States is evidenced in the concomitant rise of mass shootings (Berkowitz, Alcantara, & Lu, 2019; Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2013), increase in depressive symptoms and suicide completions among youth (Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, & Martin, 2018), and the increase in privatization (and profiteering) of government welfare programs and education (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015; Harvey, 2007). Another indicator of the precarity under which we operate is the economy. In a recent research review by Berkeley economist Gabriel Zucman, tax and survey data are demonstrating that wealth inequality (both globally and even more so domestically) is similar to the wide gap documented directly preceding the great depression (Zucman, 2019). As such, the data are indicating that we live in precarious times.

One may ask, “What is ‘precarity?’” Well, it is important to differentiate between precariousness and precarity. According to Judith Butler,<sup>1</sup> precariousness is a universal human condition that is based on the interdependence that humans have on each other — and all humans are therefore vulnerable. Think of the precariousness we experience when we lose someone we love, or a loss of employment, or perhaps a child waiting on their parent for their

next meal. The interdependence we all require produces a vulnerability that we experience at some point in our lives and is at the heart of meaningful human experience (Brown, 2015). Precarity, on the other hand, produces the same effects of precariousness, but in this case it is due to an unequal (and unfair) distribution across the population. Precarity, in other words, is experienced by marginalized, poor and disenfranchised members of society because of their status as alienated (Butler, 2004). Think of the vulnerability poor youth face in schools that are under-resourced, constant migration of families due to community-based violence, or perhaps a transgender student being assaulted in physical education locker rooms. At the end of the day precarity (and precariousness) are concepts that health and physical educators are already dealing with. As Kirk (2020) noted: “physical education teachers are likely to be teaching children who are suffering its ill effects. These range from anger, anxiety, alienation, and depression to disruptive and sometimes violent behaviour. There are questions about how well teachers are prepared for such work” (p. 2).

This article (the second installment of a two-part series) is an attempt to make an important step in socially just and informed education. More specifically, we aim to illustrate ways teachers and teacher educators can prepare for, and hopefully teach about, precarity in relation to health, physical activity and education. We

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<sup>1</sup>Judith Butler is the Hannah Arendt Chair and Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School and Maxine Elliot Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at UC–Berkeley.

are not claiming the concepts outlined here will produce a better world. We do claim, however, these concepts have worked for us in engaging students and student teachers in critical issues around marginalization, precarity and criticality in physical education. Our main concern in this article is with precarity and making physical education less precarious for all persons — but especially those who are marginalized, thus contributing to a socially just agenda in physical education (Culp, 2016; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018). Below we have outlined concepts N–Z, which explores, problematizes and works through issues of precarity in our teaching for a more socially informed approach. Each letter provides avenues or resources that practitioners and teacher educators could employ.

## The N–Z of Socially Just and Informed Physical Education

*N – Narrative approaches.* One way to connect students to the lived experiences of others is through narratives. According to Fitzpatrick (2013b), storytelling through narratives has multiple advantages. Narratives provide a more “readable” (Fitzpatrick, 2013b, p. 69) way for students to engage with academic mate-

rial. Given this, narratives can act as a compelling and meaningful way for teachers to represent human experiences — especially in relation to precarity. Narratives are not new to physical education (Dowling, Fitzgerald, & Flintoff, 2012; Schaefer, 2013). There is, however, very little evidence to suggest narratives are used in U.S.-based physical education settings. Yet such approaches are used worldwide (Carless, 2012; Chapman, Sykes, & Swedberg, 2003; Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, Fuentes-Miguel, López-Cañada, & Pérez-Samaniego, 2018).

To use narratives in physical education, we suggest educators could reconstruct a story that highlights precarity in relation to health, physical activity, and/ or education. Such an example could include someone not being able to change for class because they cannot afford athletic clothes or shoes. As a class, the students can engage with the story and debate on the ethical situation that the person(s) are facing in physical education. We argue that if the story can connect to the lived experiences of students — the more powerful the narrative. For example, in the state of Maryland the teacher may connect the story to gender issues in lacrosse. Another example is if you work in a high Hispanic/Latino/a population, framing the narrative around a popular sport from their culture (e.g., soccer, baseball, boxing). In so doing, narratives become one



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avenue to explore precarity that humans face in health and movement contexts. Dowling, Fitzgerald, and Flintoff (2012) provide a great resource in order to do so: <https://www.routledge.com/Equity-and-Difference-in-Physical-Education-Youth-Sport-and-Health-A/Dowling-Fitzgerald-Flintoff/p/book/9780415601498>.

*O – Obesity?* In part one of this series we covered “fat phobia” within physical education. Obesity has been identified as a public health issue in the United States (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). As a response, many physical education professionals aligned their overarching purpose to this issue in order to ease the precarity youth face with obesity (Almond, 1983; Corbin & Pangrazi, 1992; Sallis & McKenzie, 1991). Yet such health-based approaches to physical education have been problematic for (at least) three reasons. To start, one reason researchers/educators aligned their agendas to obesity was not for children, but rather as a response to gaining relevance (Tinning & Kirk, 1991) and receive grant funding. Second, biomedical evidence related to obesity constructs the issue as a highly complex and precarious matter with multiple factors (Lobstein, Baur, & Uauy, 2004). Given how frequently students take physical education, the impact our field can have on this multifaceted social issue has been largely questioned (Gard & Wright, 2001). Lastly, the way obesity is discussed in physical education is often filled with inaccuracies and moral judgments about how the body looks (Powell & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Such moral approaches are based on narrow views of health that neglect biomedical, sociological, psychological and economic research. In so doing, students may leave the classroom space feeling stigmatized, embarrassed, self-loathing and worse than when they entered the space — steepening deeper in precarity.

One example of how obesity is taught with inaccuracies is the “energy in/energy out” equation. Gard and Wright’s (2005) excellent tracking of this research illustrated that such individual approaches are misleading and neglect wider social issues such as social class, genetics and privilege. Given this, we argue that teach-

ers should teach obesity in a pragmatic approach that addresses all the issues that produce precarity. Such an approach disrupts social stereotypes around obesity that connect it to being lazy, immoral or diseased. Instead, teachers should challenge incorrect assumptions such as obesity being an individual problem that is void of social factors. We argue if teachers cannot teach about obesity in the above format, they should just not teach about it at all. It is clear from the research that teaching obesity from strictly a public health promotion stance has detrimental consequences for youth (Burrows, Leahy, & Wright, 2019; Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008; Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Rothblum and Solovay (2009) have written a book that helps deal with obesity and pedagogy: <https://nyupress.org/9780814776315/the-fat-studies-reader/>.

*P – Policies.* Policies in physical education are important. The authors of this article argue that any state, local or national policy that does not explicitly address socio-critical issues such as social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and power actively reproduce precarious settings and structures. Thus we argue that standards-based approaches (to be discussed later) that do not address socio-critical issues actually promote inequity through omission (Apple, 2006; Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton, 1986). Policies therefore need to be robust in promoting health and physical education *and* the multitude of factors that affect a child’s access to health and physical activity. Every school district has some form of policy. These policies more or less govern what is acceptable within schools. Given this, schools should have explicit policies that protect, understand and promote the rights of marginalized groups including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, different ethnic origins, diverse genders and sexualities, and from low social class backgrounds.

Socio-critical concepts should be included in curriculum policy. The study of sport, physical activity or health should include different perspectives. For example, a teacher could highlight the recent discussion on universities profiting from some college sports (e.g.,



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basketball, football) based on the skills, talents and hard work of young athletes of color (Hawkins, 2010). Yet most of the profits go to white coaches and university administrators. Such an approach aligns with Siedentop's (1996) call for the physically literate person to be critical consumers of sport/physical activity and for the inclusion of cultural topics in physical education (O'Sullivan, Kinchin, & Enright, 2013). Other places in the world have policies underpinned by sociocultural perspectives. We suggest health and physical educators take a look at the advanced and progressive policy of New Zealand physical education (Ministry of Education, 2007).

*Q – Queering physical education.* PE is a “straight” place in many ways. For example, the grouping of girls and boys in separate locker rooms makes the assumption that all students are straight. In addition, splitting boys and girls into two distinct groups makes the assumption that everyone identifies with one of two genders, and that the way their body looks is representative of their gender identification (Sykes, 2011). Gender binaries are an explicit part of PE. For example, fitness tests require different scores for boys and girls. Many classes are split by gender. We argue PE taught through a gender binary is precarious for LGBTQ students. Importantly, however, we also argue that PE is a place that can disrupt normative assumptions around gender and sexuality — and potentially be a queer-inclusive place (Iisahunter, 2019).

There are simple ways that we can disrupt gender binaries. One way is to have students introduce themselves by their name and their pronouns. For example, this may look like, “Hi, my name is Dillon and I use he/him/his pronouns.” This is a simple way to show transgender/nonbinary students that you acknowledge their presence. Another way to be inclusive is allowing students to choose their partners for dance units. In Sweden, Larsson, Redelius and Fagrell (2011) found that students felt more comfortable and engagement increased when students danced with their friends, regardless of gender. Lastly, instead of following strict norms around fitness and skills testing, we could make fitness testing the same for all students. If your administration requires you to collect gender/sex information, you should ask the students how they want to be identified. The above examples are some ways to disrupt gender binaries and heterosexuality as the preferred sexual orientation.

*R – Reflexivity.* The concept of reflexivity is markedly different from being reflective (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Being reflective generally means looking back on our actions (or a situation) and critically questioning ourselves in order to become better (as teachers, as parents, as partners, etc.). Being reflexive, on the other hand, considers the way power influences the situation and involves us examining our beliefs and values in relation to the environment. For example, a teacher being reflexive might consider, “How are my beliefs/values influencing the curriculum and teaching in physical education?” In so doing, teachers may (or may not) make changes because they realize their teaching beliefs do not align to their students.

Another important part of reflexivity is considering which knowledge, persons and cultures are (not) represented in physical education. Reflexive practices may ask questions:

- Who wrote/chose this curriculum, and what do they have to gain from physical education being taught in this way?
- Who was not considered in making this curriculum?
- Why would other teachers be against this lesson?
- How does this unit address social issues around health, physical activity and precarity?
- How does this curriculum relate to the students' culture and values?

Reflexivity, then, is situating the teacher, students and content in relation to the historical and political nature of the teaching profession. By critically asking these questions about activities, lessons, units and curricula, teachers recognize that their own beliefs and historical practices heavily structure what happens in the name of physical education. By examining these practices, teachers can bring awareness to social issues within their own field that actually address precarity in physical education. Ian Wellard (2012) has written on ways to conduct such practices in physical education.

*S – Standards-based practices.* Standards-based practices is almost seen as the only way to teach physical education in the United States (SHAPE America, 2014). Importantly, however, the United States is unique in its commitment to standards and outcomes-based learning. Outcomes-based approaches, where students are expected to enact “correct performances” (e.g., skills, fitness, health choices) are actually based on behaviorist curriculum theory from the 1940s (Tyler, 1949). In fact, outcomes-based education was critiqued by physical education scholar Cathy Ennis as being a factory model that did not consider the individual differences of students (Ennis, 2003). We argue that when all students are treated the same (as raw materials to be molded), it creates precarious experiences for many students. Rather than seeing standards as an end point (or an outcome to be achieved), we believe that standards should be more of a guideline that aids teachers to achieve greater meaning in physical education.

Dillon once had a conversation with Dr. Philpot of the University of Auckland (New Zealand) around standards. In the conversation, Dr. Philpot said standards are a form of standardization — or the act of standardizing. When we think about standardizing things, as Dr. Philpot offered, then we can think of standardized physical education in comparison to McDonalds. If you go to a McDonalds in Utah, Wyoming, California, Hawai'i or New York — the Big Mac will be the same (two beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, sesame seed bun). The same could be said of outcomes-based physical education — they will all have the same products. Instead of having a McDonalds physical education program (where all students meet the same outcomes), we argue each program should strive to be the best restaurant that meets their population. Physical education in Hawai'i, as an example, *should* look different from physical education in Baltimore. This is because the students, cultures and values are different in these places. As Walton-Fisette and Sutherland (2020) have suggested, we need to critically question the SHAPE America standards in physical education as to why sociocultural topics have not only been missing but have regressed over time. For more on critically questioning curriculum/standards, we recommend David Kirk's (2014) book on curriculum study in physical education: <https://www.routledge.com/Physical-Education-and-Curriculum-Study-Routledge-Revivals-A-Critical/Kirk/p/book/9780415730709>.

*T – Theoretically informed practice.* As noted above, the SHAPE Standards (2014) are listed as a cluster of sequential outcomes. Given this, there is no educational theory that informed the entirety of the document. Rather, the document was developed as a constellation of knowledge that included motor development, personal beliefs, and skill/sport-related outcomes. Outcomes-based approaches to physical education, however, (re-)produce precarity. There is growing literature illustrating that physical education has been precarious to certain students such as girls and women (Fisette, 2011; Oliver & Kirk, 2015), diverse ethnicities (Dagkas, Benn, & Jawad, 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2013a), diverse genders and sexualities (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Landi, 2018, 2019b), and di-

verse disabilities (Fitzgerald, 2006; Haegele & Sutherland, 2015). By listing outcomes that students must achieve, it reproduces the same environment that made this space precarious in the first place.

Educational (and critical) theories, on the other hand, have the ability to shift outcomes away from a conversation of *how* to achieve particular performances (reproduction). Instead, instruction becomes more critical and asks questions such as: *Why* are these outcomes important? Other countries have underpinned their curriculum by diverse learning, indigenous, and critical theories. In so doing, the theories produce different outcomes in human movement in order to broaden the aims of physical education. In New Zealand, for example, the curriculum is underpinned by four underlying concepts that combine to form a critical pedagogical base (Fitzpatrick, 2018a, 2018b; Ministry of Education, 2007). In Australia, the curriculum expects students to investigate their own identities in relation to human movement and culture. In so doing, they adopt a strengths-based approach to health and human movement (Macdonald, 2013). Others from Sweden and Australia have also drawn on salutogenesis as a theory to underpin instruction (McCuaig, Quennerstedt, & Macdonald, 2013). The point here is that educational and critical theories offer us a way to think about health and human movement from an advanced perspective and can potentially shift these precarious physical education settings to inclusive ones. To see an example of critical approaches in practice, we recommend reading Fitzpatrick's (2013b) groundbreaking book on critical pedagogy in physical education: <https://blackwells.co.uk/bookshop/product/Critical-Pedagogy-Physical-Education-and-Urban-Schooling-by-Katie-Fitzpatrick/9781433117411>.

*U – Urban schooling, teachers and teacher educators.* There are differences in cultures and schooling practices between urban, suburban and rural schools (Tyack, 1974). Each of these spaces are precarious for differing reasons for students, teachers and teacher educators. Yet teacher education programs provide very little (if any) experiences in multiple settings (Flory, 2016). Without appropriate experiences in varied settings, future teachers may not develop the skills necessary to build cultural bridges with diverse populations (Cothran & Ennis, 1999). As such, our students may not understand the precarity that different groups of people face. This is especially true for white teachers who teach in majority non-white schools (Flory, 2015). We argue the best way to address this gap is by providing teacher candidates with internship experiences in diverse settings. We also argue that teachers should draw on different pedagogical approaches that have worked with diverse students in the past such as critical (Fitzpatrick, 2013b), culturally relevant (Flory & McCaughy, 2011), transformative (Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019), sociocultural (Cliff, 2012; Cliff, Wright, & Clarke, 2009), and social justice (Walton-Fisette et al., 2018) pedagogical approaches. In so doing, teachers will be ready to confront the precarity that multiple students face — rather than just the privileged few. We think that Chris Emdin's (2016) book would be a good start: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/237679/for-white-folks-who-teach-in-the-hood-and-the-rest-of-yall-too-by-christopher-emdin/>.

*V – Values-based instruction.* According to Kirk (2010), the future of physical education should invest considerable effort in understanding, critiquing and forming cultural values. Indeed, the notion that values are interconnected to physical education is not new. For example, Morgan (1973) argued: “in a modern context, although it is possible to distinguish the processes of physical education from the rest of a child's schooling... it is not possible to completely distinguish its values” (p. 86).

Morgan (1973) argued that PE cannot be extracted from the values of education (and the community) more broadly. This is especially true in physical education. For example, the values of the teacher affects curriculum development (Jewett & Bain, 1985), decision making (Ennis, Ross, & Chen, 1992), and how teachers teach (Green, 2000). Yet many teachers are actively taught to teach in a “value-free” way because they may offend some people. We argue this is folly.

Values are a natural part of education, and so is critical inquiry. We believe that like other countries, values should be embedded in the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). We argue this because knowledge can never be considered value-free (Foucault, 2002). Given this, we argue that physical education should offer a space where students can reflect on and challenge their personal and community values in relation to health and physical activity. In so doing, they can critically question the role that precarity plays in access to health and human movement. By openly accepting that values influence knowledge, students can interrogate — and possibly change — the precarious settings by which some people have access to health and physical activity while others do not. Again, we recommend checking out the New Zealand curriculum for this (see above).

*W – Whiteness.* Physical education has predominantly been taught and led by white teachers and professionals (Verbrugge, 2012). In the United States, however, this is changing, and one reason is the changing demographics in teacher education programs (Harrison & Clark, 2016). Despite the changing dynamics of teacher education programs, the teachers who are bestowed with awards and teaching honors are consistently and overwhelmingly white (Blackshear, 2020). More worrying is that there is a dearth of literature on teaching multiculturalism and inclusivity in physical education (Pang & Soong, 2016). Having so few teachers and teacher educators of color as leaders and such little research on inclusivity may produce a precarious environment for people of color in physical education. As such, Hodge (2014) has argued we need a philosophical repositioning from a model of integration in favor of a model of inclusion. Culp (2016) agreed and progressed on Hodge's work by drawing on critical theoretical viewpoints and incorporating a call for social justice. Such calls have been mirrored by others in the field as well (Hill et al., 2018; Walton-Fisette, Richards, Centeio, Pennington, & Hopper, 2019; Walton-Fisette, Sutherland, & Hill, 2019).

There are some who believe race and ethnicity have no place in physical education. We believe this to be a shortsighted and misguided view of education and culture. Ways to address race/ethnicity are multiple. For example, one could integrate indigenous games into their models-based practices, like what is done in Australia and Aboriginal games (Williams & Pill, 2019). Another example is to teach about the history of particular sports and their relation to culture — for example, teaching the history of lacrosse and its roots to the indigenous people of America. Other ways to address race/ethnicity is to use a sociocultural perspective in games education (Cliff, 2012; Cliff et al., 2009). Lastly, a simple step that should be taken is to examine the curricular and policy documents to see if they are aligned to Western perspectives of health, physical activity and movement. If it is, you could draw on non-Western perspectives of health and physical activity when teaching. For accessible ideas, see Milne (2019).

*X – Xenophobia.* According to Merriam-Webster (“Xenophobia,” 2019), xenophobia is defined as “fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign” (online).



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The United States (and other Western countries) are currently dealing with heightened xenophobic sentiments (especially around race and anti-immigration) because of the increased globalization of the world (Hjerm, 2005; Yakushko, 2018). According to Suleman, Garber and Rutkow's (2018) review of health determinants, the increase in xenophobic sentiment produces precarious settings and poor health outcomes for disadvantaged persons in our society. Indeed, many of the students physical education teachers are expected to teach are already experiencing xenophobic sentiments if they do not look a particular way or were not born in the United States. Given this, it is important that physical educators take the time to create an environment that is not only welcoming of all different cultures but promotes the appreciation and learning of cultures different from our own. In so doing, students who may be immigrants (or have immigrant parents) may be given the opportunity to share their culture within a space that is dominated heavily by Western values.

*Y – Youth centered and empowering.* As stated in part 1, co-constructing your curriculum with a community of learners (your students) is essential in moving away from a top-down pedagogical approach. A top-down approach usually means national standards dictate curricular policies, curricular policies dictate subject matter, subject matter dictates what gets taught, to whom, and when. Such an approach neglects the views of youth and may produce a precarious space. In Dillon's doctoral thesis (Landi, 2019a),<sup>2</sup> one of the main results he found was that the youth of today are innovative, resilient and capable of making health and PE relevant. One way to get youth involved in making PE a less precarious space is by promoting an activist approach (Luguetti, Kirk, & Oliver, 2019; Oliver & Kirk, 2015). Activist approaches to PE are student-centered and promote positive student interdependence (Oliver & Kirk, 2015). Furthermore, an activist approach is aligned to socially critical approaches that are embodied and that promote reflection and social responsibility (Fitzpatrick, 2013b, 2018b). In so doing, an activist approach is considered one way to promote student advocacy about current

youth issues. Therefore, the subject matter (or content) is not created elsewhere and dropped into the class — rather, the students become agents and advocates for health, physical activity and education in their own social space. As such, PE is developed for youth and by youth. In so doing, a youth-driven approach can help relieve the precarity that students face in their everyday lives. We suggest taking a look at Oliver and Kirk's (2015) book on activist physical education: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781315796239>.

*Z – Zeal.* To conclude this article, we leave the reader with the word *zeal*. The word *zeal* is often used in relation to zealous, or a great passion and energy for a particular cause. We believe that the only way for students' lived experiences in physical education to be less precarious is if teachers continue to have a zeal for youth and social progress. Being a physical educator is one of the most amazing and rewarding careers. In many ways we affect the lives of youth, instill and promote values in our communities, and build strong

lasting relationships with many stakeholders. Physical educators are often asked to do too much: teach about health, character, discipline and physical activity; be a mentor and coach; and do administrative tasks. Indeed, we are in precarious times — and we know it is precarious for physical educators as well. The salaries of teachers are not enough, the responsibilities consistently increase, and budgets are constantly slashed. Yet we have zeal and hope that we are uniquely positioned to make social progress in our communities and improve things for the next generation of physical educators. As Siedentop (1996) said, our goal should be to cultivate students who value the physically active life. In so doing, health and physical activity are not just individual endeavors, but social rights that we all deserve. By exploring the above issues, we hope to cultivate an ethic of value, care and zeal for others — so the next generation can be even more passionate about health and physical activity as well as all-around socially conscious individuals.

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