

## Teachers' beliefs about the trends of current physical education

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the beliefs among professionals in the field of physical education at the elementary level, more specifically in the context of Thailand. The participants were five exemplary elementary physical education (PE) teachers. All participants signed informed consent prior to data collection. We used semi-structured interviews to gather information on participants' beliefs. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Data collection occurred in two ways: (1) in-depth semi-structured interviews and (2) semi-structured follow-up interviews. Data were analyzed using a thematic coding procedure to find the significant statements related to research questions. Results showed three themes constructed from data analysis, including trends: (1) to teach the foundation of basic skills that moved beyond sport-oriented PE, (2) to consider physical education for Health and integrated physical education, and (3) to perceive limited time to deliver contemporary physical education. We conclude that the beliefs about the trends in physical education have been aligned with the global trends in physical education. These cover topic areas of skill development and health issues with a strong emphasis on physical education that serves the best interests of the children. Relevant stakeholders should then ensure that physical education will be delivered according to the interest of today's children. Future research should seriously focus on this specific area of study, encompassing policy, program, and practice of physical education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Physical education (PE) has thus far been claimed to be an important part of education from kindergarten through 12th grade in the United States ([National Association for Sport and Physical Education \(NASPE\), 2008](#)) and elsewhere. This school subject becomes a school-wide program that teaches basic life skills to all children, particularly skills necessary for active living throughout life. Over several decades, physical education has changed and developed to adapt to the rapid changes in social, cultural, environmental, and political aspects, along with population growth and technological advances ([Kelly & Melograno, 2004](#)). In other words, PE is not a fixed school subject in a vacuum space. This underlines the social construction of physical education through which multiple societal aspects play out in defining what constitutes PE ([Kirk, 1992, 2011](#)). This is not to mention the impacts of the global pandemic, such as COVID-19, on how we experienced PE practice ([Howley, 2022](#)) which could lead us to rethink PE policy and program.

Contemporary physical education now surely differs greatly from the past, which ranges from its underpinning philosophy to its actual classroom practices. In many other countries, including Thailand and Indonesia, today's PE curriculum tends to cover a variety of move-

ment skills, team, and individual sports, recreational activities, outdoor-adventure pursuits, physical games, dancing, swimming, and fitness. In terms of pedagogy, the PE teaching approach has become increasingly more student-centered. More teachers prefer to design PE programs with respect to students' needs, leading to a variety of instructional strategies. Various instructional strategies help develop a high-quality physical education curriculum and make participating in physical education classes more enjoyable for children (Graham et al., 2020). With this holistic approach, PE could be expected to help children learn to become self-directed movers (Claver et al., 2020).

The government of Thailand has realized that education is imperative to developing a high quality of life and assisting people in keeping pace with a rapidly changing society. Physical education programs (PE) are one of the core subjects that aim to develop the quality of life and health of children. The programs are recognized as a foundation for balancing life's development, including physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual (Ministry of Education of Thailand, 2008). Thailand is now at an important crossroads in its management of education reform (International Business Publication, 2011). The government, led by the Ministry of Education of Thailand, recognized the value and necessity of physical education as a school program, especially at the preschool and primary school levels (Ranasut & Lohitsatiant, 2014). The Ministry of Education of Thailand also stated that education in the school systems should not only focus on academic achievement but should also place importance on children's health because if children are not healthy, they cannot learn well (Ranasut & Lohitsatiant, 2014).

However, some challenges have affected the implementation and outcomes of the PE programs. For example, Kwanboonchan (2015) identified the challenges of physical education in Thailand and found that physical education teachers applied the same teaching methods to teach sports skills and sports for competition. A study by Schut (2014) reported that the style of instruction at the elementary level in Thailand is traditional. It means there was a focus on direct instruction and teaching sports skills more than fundamental movement skills. Of course, teaching sports skills is not prohibited in PE. However, heavy emphasis on the sport will prevent PE from its rich potential. Scholars have identified the social justice issues in sports, which could potentially be reproduced in PE classes (Walton-Fisette et al., 2019).

Teaching practices among student teachers and PE teachers are, in one way or another, influenced by their beliefs. PE scholars have long paid attention to this area of study (see, for example, González-Calvo et al., 2022; Harvey & O'Donovan, 2013; Hodge et al., 2018; Keating et al., 2021; Prior & Curtner-Smith, 2020) despite the challenge of conducting the research. This is mainly because the definition of belief is deeply rooted in each person. Tsangaridou (2006) stated that measuring beliefs is hard because researchers would need to focus on inferring the participants' statements or actions, which in any way reflect tacit knowledge of themselves, social, and professional truths that have been obtained from their prolonged experiences, particularly educational experiences. Additionally, educational beliefs encompass widespread areas ranging from teachers' beliefs about the origin of knowledge to teachers' decisions to perform specific instruction. This current study considers the definition that focuses on teachers' beliefs about specific subject matters. Tsangaridou (2006, p. 487) continued to describe that "teachers' beliefs may have been acquired and formed (1) during their experiences as pupils, (2) from life experience, (3) by their teacher education professional preparation program."

Altogether, the importance of PE makes it imperative for schools and institutions worldwide to develop a PE curriculum that attempts to promote children's health and wellness. PE is one of the essential core parts of the Ministry of Education, focused on developing a more modern and cosmopolitan educational system. Meanwhile, the actual teaching of PE in the real classroom remains sensitive to the influence of teachers' beliefs. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate beliefs regarding physical education at the elementary level. To further

examine the purpose of this study, two research questions have been developed to guide the study: (1) how do professionals in the field identify current trends in elementary physical education? (2) How do they take that identification into their beliefs?

## RESEARCH METHOD

The methodological approach was inspired by phenomenology. This means we did not faithfully conduct the procedures in a phenomenological study. Instead, we took into account the concept of phenomenology, which is “a study of people’s conscious experience of their life-world, that is, their everyday life and social action” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) and modified the method to focus on the participants’ experience. More specifically, we used this approach because participants used their knowledge and experiences to construct the narrative information about their beliefs.

Derived from this approach, the theoretical underpinning of this study was social constructionism. Social constructionism is a “view of all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of the interaction between human being and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 2003, p. 42). It also emphasizes that human beings actively and creatively produce society (Crotty, 2003). Therefore, based on social constructivism, we aimed to investigate professionals’ beliefs in PE to understand what they think about PE at the elementary level. In the interviews, the participants used their experience and knowledge gained from the past until the present and from interaction with materials and other people to construct the meaning of the trends of physical education that were significant to their beliefs.

### Participants

Our participants included two females and three males aged 40 to 50. They were exemplary PE teachers who had met pre-determined criteria, including those with an elementary PE licensure and at least eight years of PE teaching experience. All participants were given informed consent on which they agreed to the terms of the consent form and signed it before data collection began. They were contacted via email, and addresses were obtained from school websites. After contacting them, we scheduled an appointment for interviews. They decided on the date and place for the interviews. Despite formal informed consent, we practiced process consent (Lahman et al., 2011) during the interview. We continued to ask about participants’ voluntary participation in the study informally. If there were any questions that participants did not want to answer or did not feel comfortable answering, they had the opportunity to say so.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection technique was in-depth interviews. As open-ended interviews, our informal conversations with the participants were guided by major questions. These questions were the beliefs about (1) the overall purpose of elementary PE, (2) current trends in PE curriculum, (3) the changes of current PE from the past, and (4) appropriate contents and pedagogy for today’s children. Interviews were digitally recorded and took approximately 45 minutes for each participant. Our interviewing strategies included: (1) interviews with professional physical education teachers and (2) informal conversational interviews (Patton, 2002). The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Data were analyzed thematically through the initial coding process and then categorizing those codes. We assessed the categories and looked for common themes emerging from this advanced analysis. The findings are presented based on emergent themes with quotes from empirical data to illustrate the main points. We performed the analysis by taking into account some phenomenological analy-

sis. By using the approaches reviewed by Moustakas (1994), Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest several steps that include describing personal experience, developing significant statements, grouping these statements into larger units, and writing descriptions of participants' experiences. The experience of our focus was the teachers' beliefs.

### Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the rigor of this qualitative study, we established some trustworthiness criteria. Two key elements of these criteria included credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Often being paralleled with validity, credibility refers to the researcher's efforts to ensure that the results of the analysis represent reality (Schwandt, 2007). Our strategies for achieving credibility of the study included triangulation of the collected data, member checks, and peer examination. Besides, dependability equals reliability, defined by Schwandt (2007) as the accountability of research in terms of its logical, traceable, and documented process. We kept a log book to document all research steps and decisions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

After transcribing the interviews, we initiated data analysis. Three themes of teachers' beliefs about the current trends in the physical education for elementary level are identified by professionals in the field: (1) physical education that taught the foundation of basic skills and moved beyond the sport-oriented subject matter, (2) physical education provided learning opportunity about health and cross-curricular subjects, (3) and limited time for physical education classes to accomplish it. The following sub-headings describe each constructed theme.

#### ***Foundation of Basic Skills: Moving beyond Sport-Oriented PE***

The participants identified the current trends of physical education at the elementary level. They said physical education has improved since the past and brought many activities, new games, and new sports to the students. Teachers in this study believed that teaching contemporary PE should not be oriented toward high-performance sports like in the past. They realized that elite athletes were exclusive in nature and only for highly gifted individuals. For example, a female participant said,

*Physical education is a lot better now than it was years ago because I think people finally realize that as little kids, you can't teach them to all [to] be athletes because they are not all athletes; you need to teach them to have skills in everything, then at least they can decide what they want to do later on. (Pimnarin)*

Participants' beliefs here include PE as a subject matter that teaches students to be physically active throughout their lifespan. This would require activities that were of students' interest. Furthermore, it was demanded that teachers should be creative. Participants believed that Physical education in the present day gave a lot more freedom for teachers to be creative in deciding activities for the needs of children. Pimnarin continued to say, "I think that's an important part, having that creativity for the teacher. I think keeping that ability to be [creative] is important as a teacher." According to some of them, it was now in the hands of the individual teachers whether or not they wanted to be creative.

Analysis showed the beliefs among teachers in this study that building a foundation of basic skills was important for children at the elementary level. PE should deliver a lesson that helps students learn all the basic skills they need when they go to the next grade level, such as middle school or high school. Students were expected to have the basic skills required to do whatever physical activity they liked and continue doing it as they aged. Thus, physical education teachers should introduce students to various activities, not just sports skills. This also

included initiative, team-building, problem-solving, and other games. Participants considered that it might be beneficial for them in the future. Moreover, learning skill themes and movement concepts is important to lead children to basic knowledge and perform good skill movements. Ultimately, these will help them have more overall balance in their bodies. Participants also identified various activities, basic skill movements, and sports skills that will make physical education class fun and help them be active and excited during activities. One of the male teachers described what he believed as foundationally important in contemporary PE,

*Building the foundation skills, body awareness, instilling some creative movements, starting some sport development, but not getting so sport-focused in elementary, expose [students] to so many different sports, try to teach as many different activities as possible... I try to get the kids to do physical activity every day on their own, but we need to help them be active and fun; it is easy for us to understand this. (Somsuk)*

Participants tended to agree that basic motor skills were not only applicable across different types of physical activities, but they also provided a solid foundation for becoming a competent mover. This was especially apparent in the data that it was important to provide students with as many opportunities as possible to try out various activities. Equally important, teaching PE with limited types of activities would inhibit the possibility of lifetime engagement in physical activity. After all, participants believed that teachers would need to include the enjoyment aspect of learning those contents. Otherwise, what they believed about the value of PE as the subject matter could be jeopardized.

### ***Moving beyond Physical Skills: Health and the Integrated Physical Education***

Sport and physical activity have long been associated with health benefits. Consequently, physical education contents filled with physical activities deemed to be responsible also include health education. This association between physical education and health seems to be persisted in the current trends of physical education. Teachers who participated in this study agreed that physical education should be designed to help students stay healthy and maintain a healthy lifestyle. This could be achieved by emphasizing fitness activities and exposing students to many different sports, outdoor activities, and physical fitness. The instruction then would need to address three major components: muscular strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular endurance. Moreover, participants believed that they should teach students the value of physical fitness and physical activity to promote their health and teach them how to eat right. They expected today's students to learn about physical fitness and to have a good attitude in physical education class. A female teacher described her belief about the connection between physical education and health outcomes,

*I think, now, it's not so much training for sports later in their life. It is just more of complete health education, so [there is] more of an emphasis on 'let's talk about how to eat healthily, and how exercise is good for your body and doesn't just train you for a sport. (Tida)*

Further, participants also believed that current trends in physical education were merely about developing physical skills. However, physical education contents could be integrated into other subject matters. Teachers aspired to use science, math, and language concepts and integrate them with physical education activities. They believed linking coordination activities to each subject would facilitate children to think critically and help children's brains stay energized. A male participant named Pongthep said, "Movement gets the brain moving; it helps the brain and helps everything else." Furthermore, various situations and activities such as team-building games, problem-solving games, and sports games have been believed to lead students to social interaction. More specifically, participants presupposed that students would learn how to solve problems, respect others, and deal with others. Pongthep stated, "[In physical education, students] learn not only sports skills but also how to be better in social skills, personalities, and responsibility."

### *The Limited Time for Physical Education Classes*

The previous two themes constructed knowledge of teachers' beliefs about their aspiration to adopt the current trends in PE. Although they have strongly aspired, teachers in this study believed that articulating those beliefs would require more time allocated for PE classes. The last theme depicted in this analysis of empirical evidence is that teachers felt PE class once a week was not enough for development or for children to be fit or healthy, referring to the trends in current PE. They identified that the PE curriculum has recently been designed by considering contemporary development in this subject matter with high-quality standards. The curriculum was perceived to cover all the necessary materials about physical activities, but the problem was that there was not enough time to accomplish the coverage. Napol complained about what he believed to be limited time for current PE trends, "I need to see them more often. I want PE every day. I want them [the students] every day. I can't implement the total curriculum because of the time we're allowed; I can't enhance your health; I can just tell you how to be healthy." Under this situation, some of the teachers gave up the trends and continued to teach physical education, resembling the old days. Some others, however, tried some strategies by incorporating more skills themes, movement concepts, sports games, and physical activities during lunchtime and after school whenever they could.

### **Discussion**

Analysis indicated that their beliefs are relatively different from the past despite some resembling aspects that have been apparent. One of these aspects was sport-oriented content. This was understandable, considering the seemingly inseparable relationship between sport and physical education. It is especially apparent among teachers who believed that physical education was an arena in which teaching about competition has been highly regarded as effective (Harvey & O'Donovan, 2013).

Furthermore, the difference in current physical education from the past may indicate changes in their life experience. A longitudinal study by Matanin and Collier (2003) has informed that PE teachers' beliefs tend to be constructed from a prolonged process in the life span. Their research revealed that teachers' pre-service training played out in constructing beliefs regarding content, effective teaching, and planning. However, many fundamental beliefs, such as the aim of physical education, were more likely to be influenced by teachers' life histories. One of these fundamental beliefs includes the beliefs about what this study has investigated, which was the trends of current physical education.

Physical education professionals also demonstrated that teaching various kinds of skills and activities at elementary levels were believed to enhance children's activity and gain knowledge to decide what they want to do in the future regarding physically active lifestyle. These desired outcomes are in line with Barney and Deutsch (2009) research on classroom teachers' attitudes and perspectives on elementary physical education. They found that classroom teachers' beliefs in physical education were important for students and it has an important role in students' academic education, including assisting them in the learning process.

Participants also thought that their subject matter could potentially help children with skill development, improvement of physical fitness, self-discipline, leadership, cooperative competencies, self-efficacy, stress and anxiety reductions, social relationships, and self-confidence and self-esteem. However, professionals identify the amount of time in physical education class (once a week) as a problem; that is not enough time to get children to be fit and healthy, and they need to see children more often than once per week. The inability to fulfilling what has been claimed to be worthwhile would leave physical education with an empty promise. This belief was possible if there was the interaction of teachers and teacher educators' professional preparation and development. One enabling factor included the messages that tended to view the subject matters as influenced by societal factors and survival.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate beliefs about the current trends in physical education among elementary physical education teachers. From the results, the analysis showed three themes, including the beliefs that (1) physical education taught the foundation of basic skills and moved beyond the sport-oriented subject matter, (2) physical education provided learning opportunities about health and cross-curricular subjects, and (3) limited time for physical education classes to accomplish what they believed to be. The results are meaningful for education professionals, specifically at the elementary level. It is especially beneficial for administrators and physical education teachers who can promote this cause and bring attention to physical education's importance to children's future health. If physical education teachers can teach children the value and benefits of physical education and make it an enjoyable experience, children will be better equipped to live healthier life.

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