

## Teaching Physical Education in an Urban Intensive Environment

By: K. Andrew R. Richards, [Michael A. Hemphill](#), Victoria N. Shiver, Karen Lux Gaudreault, and Victor Ramsey

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this study was to understand the unique stressors faced by physical educators working in New York City schools. Participants included 34 New York City physical educators who participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences teaching in an urban context. Qualitative data analysis resulted in the construction of four themes: (a) working with limited and inconsistent infrastructure, (b) navigating student diversity, (c) coping with marginalization and advocating for quality practices, and (d) managing the sociopolitics of teaching. These themes highlight the intersection between discipline and teaching context and are discussed through the lens of occupational socialization theory.

**Keywords:** occupational socialization theory | marginalization | student diversity | sociopolitics | teacher stress | teaching context

### **Article:**

Scholars in education have sought to understand the processes through which teachers' biographies, initial teacher education, and ongoing socialization influence their beliefs and practices in the classroom (Lacey, 1977; Lortie, 1975; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Despite some notable exceptions (e.g., Achinstein et al., 2004), however, the study of teacher socialization has slowed in recent years. Physical education represents one important exception where scholars have consistently studied teacher socialization for 40 years (Richards et al., 2019). This scholarship examines topics such as teacher recruitment (Curtner-Smith, 2017), the effectiveness of teacher education (Curtner-Smith & Sofo, 2004; Graber et al., 2017), and challenges of teaching a marginalized subject (Laureano et al., 2014).

Although much is known about the socialization of physical educators in general, less is known about the experiences of those working in high-poverty schools and urban schools (Ellison & Woods, 2016). Teachers in urban environments tend to report greater stress in relation

to workload, school disorganization and disfunction, staff relations, and student diversity among other factors (Hanushek et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2012; Shernoff et al., 2011; Smith & Milstein, 1984). These stressors contribute to higher rates of teacher turnover in urban schools (Goldring et al., 2014), which results in notable financial costs as individual urban schools spend approximately US\$70,000 annually replacing teachers, over twice what is spent in other schools (Barnes et al., 2007). The cost to student learning may be even more problematic as children in high-poverty schools are more likely to have less qualified teachers (Ellison & Woods, 2016).

In addition to contextual differences, nuances across teaching disciplines dictate that “instruction is not a generic or monolithic variable but rather a subject specific one” (Spillane & Hopkins, 2013, p. 722). Because of this, teachers’ experiences must be considered both generally and in relation to the specific subject they teach (Ball & Lacey, 2012). Physical educators, for example, encounter added challenges due to the physical nature of content, larger than typical class sizes, and marginality associated with occupying a low status position in schools (Shoval et al., 2010; Spittle et al., 2015). In this study, we sought to account for some of these differences by studying the unique experiences of physical education teachers working in New York City. We ground our arguments in occupational socialization theory as a way to understand the social construction of physical education within school environments.

## **Occupational Socialization Theory**

Occupational socialization theory is a lens used to explain how an individual’s experiences influence their thoughts and beliefs toward teaching physical education through three distinct phases: acculturation (recruitment), professional socialization (professional education), and organizational socialization (ongoing socialization in schools; Lawson, 1986; Richards et al., 2014). The theory posits that socialization is dialectical as involves a back-and-forth exchange between the individual and the culture or socializing agent(s). Accordingly, individuals have a sense of agency and the ability to resist the forces of individuals and institutions that seek to influence them (Schempp & Graber, 1992). This is in contrast to functionalist perspectives on socialization which assumes that individuals passively adapt to meet expectations of the groups into which they sought membership (Merton et al., 1957). Furthermore, socialization is viewed as a nonlinear process experienced differently by each individual at different times and in different ways (Lawson, 1986).

### **Initial Recruitment Into Teaching**

Recruitment begins with an apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) that occurs when potential recruits begin learning what it means to be an educator through interactions with teachers, coaches, and other adult leaders during formative education (Curtner-Smith, 2017). Through this process, individuals develop subjective theories (Grotjahn, 1991), or personal understandings related to what it means to be an effective teacher that are influenced by their

own teachers and classroom experiences. Potential recruits base decisions about entering the teaching profession on these formative experiences and subjective theories. Despite the repositioning of physical education in relation to public health and lifetime physical activity participation (McKenzie & Lounsbury, 2014), many U.S. physical education programs continue to focus on sport content delivered in teacher-centered learning environments (Flory, 2016). Many physical education recruits are also invested in coaching school sport and may prioritize coaching over teaching responsibilities (Konukman et al., 2010).

### Teacher Education Programming

Those individuals who decide to pursue careers in education typically enter university teacher education programs, which conduct professional preparation through a combination of on-campus and field-based learning experience (Lawson, 1983; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Although some evidence supports the effectiveness of teacher education programming (e.g., Graber, 1996; Morris & Hiebert, 2017). Lawson (1986) noted that all socialization, including teacher education, is problematic rather than automatic because of the dialectical nature of the process. Preservice teachers compare their subjective theories to the values espoused by teacher educators and may resist experiences that do not align with their personal values (Graber et al., 2017). Given that teacher educators hold an imbalance of power in the dialectical relationship, however, this resistance is likely to be covert and take the form of strategic compliance. Graber (1991), for example, found that some preservice teachers feign compliance with program expectations and that their core beliefs remain unchallenged and intact through teacher education.

### Organizational Socialization in Schools

Organizational socialization begins upon completion of a teacher education program and entry into the workplace. This phase of socialization spans induction into the school environment through retirement or early career attrition (Woods et al., 2017). In some schools, teachers develop positive working relationships with colleagues and feel trusted and supported by administrators (Johnson et al., 2012). Teachers in these schools are more likely to feel as though they matter to those around them and satisfied with their working conditions (Richards, Hemphill, & Templin, 2018). Other schools, however, operate as custodial bureaucracies where the values and perspectives of senior members are afforded higher status. This emphasis on continuity is referred to as the institutional press and represents a strong force for the preservation of the status quo over innovation and change (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

Teachers respond to the institutional press using different socialization strategies (Lacey, 1977). Some teachers overtly challenge the status quo and attempt to strategically redefine their context. This can be difficult, however, particularly for new members of the school community who do not hold the social and political capital to effect change. Some teachers take a gradualist

approach to change by slowly and intentionally introduce change over time (Skelton, 1990). Other teachers take a more covert approach by strategically complying with expectations while maintaining private reservations and waiting for the appropriate time to introduce change without social friction (Lacey, 1977). Finally, some teachers internally adjust by accepting the constraints in their schools. This can result in washout whereby teachers abandon practices learned through teacher education in favor of pedagogies embraced in the school, and represents one way in which the teaching profession becomes rooted in traditionalism (Blankenship & Coleman, 2009).

Although teachers across subject areas experience sociopolitical challenges related to navigating relationships in their schools (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), this is compounded for physical educators who teach a subject that is socially constructed as marginal or peripheral to the primary mission of schooling (Laureano et al., 2014). Given that the social construction of physical education is contextually bound to specific contexts, there schools in which physical educators feel as if they are an integral component of the school culture (e.g., Pennington et al., 2014; Prusak et al., 2010). In other contexts, however, physical educators teach extremely large classes, feel isolated from their colleagues, and are overtly or covertly told that they do not matter to the overall mission of education (Laureano et al., 2014). Physical educators may internalize marginality and believe their subject is not important or that their purpose is to support learning in traditional academic subjects (e.g., the belief that physical activity improves cognitive functioning; Richards, Gaudreault, et al., 2018). Marginalization can result in reduced motivation and impact teaching effectiveness and student learning (Laureano et al., 2014).

### **Teaching Physical Education in Urban Schools**

Educators who teach in urban schools often encounter unique experiences and stressors that merit research attention (Bottiani et al., 2019). For example, residents of urban areas may be exposed to crime more than suburban or rural communities but may also benefit from broader access to public services such as transportation (Milner, 2015). Ennis and Chen (1995) reported that urban physical educators are more likely to emphasize learning in the affective domain to promote cooperation and respect among students. This contrasted those of teachers in rural and suburban areas, who often prioritized physical activity and motor development. Furthermore, the contexts of urban schools include added variability and change, requiring teachers to maintain emotional connections with students or risk losing touch with the realities of students' lives (Chen, 1998; Ennis et al., 1997). A 3-year study of urban physical educators identified five unique challenges: (a) lack of resources, (b) need for culturally and contextually relevant experiences, (c) language barriers, (d) concerns about community violence, and (e) issues engaging students in physical activity (McCaughy et al., 2006). These challenges were all informed by the larger context of urban communities, where the teachers perceived that students were less likely to engage in physical activity outside of school.

Although teachers who work in urban environments experience their jobs differently than those who teach in other contexts (Hanushek et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2012; Shernoff et al.,

2011; Smith & Milstein, 1984), there is also great diversity across urban settings. Milner (2012) offered three descriptors to further differentiate among “urban” schools. Urban intensive schools are those in large cities (e.g., New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles) that have at least 1 million residents, many of whom live in poverty, in a densely populated area (Schaffer et al., 2017). These environments reflect the typical notion the “inner city” where schools are highly diverse and experience challenges in terms of matching resources with needs (Gilley & Aranda, 2019). This is in part because out-of-school factors, such as housing, transportation, and access to technology and the internet that may directly or indirectly affect students’ educational experiences (Neuman & Moland, 2019). As a result, urban intensive schools can be particularly stressful places for teachers, which can lead to high turnover (Mawhinney & Rinke, 2018).

Beyond urban intensive schools, Milner (2012) noted that urban emergent schools are located in cities with fewer than 1 million residents (e.g., Nashville, TN; Columbus, OH; Charlotte, NC). In these contexts, resources remain a challenge, yet not to the same degree as in urban intensive settings. Finally, schools with urban characteristics are located outside of cities typically considered to be urban, but are beginning to experience similar challenges (e.g., large number of English Language Learners). Although these classifications help differentiate between urban contexts, scholars have also cautioned that the use of the term “urban” is not neutral and can be a source of marginalization for students, in part because the term becomes conflated with discussions of race (Schaffer et al., 2017). Accordingly, any analysis of urban education requires scholars to consider the implications for assigning importance to “urban” in school contexts (Gadsden & Roman-Dixon, 2017). Milner’s (2012) typology of urban schools should be looked at as a descriptive rather than theoretical, and provides a way to group schools with common characteristics together and compare across contexts (Irby, 2015).

Urban physical educators often report low levels of administrative support at the beginning of their careers (Flory, 2016). These realities contribute to a more transient teaching force and higher rates of attrition compared with other teaching contexts (Barnes et al., 2007; Ellison & Woods, 2016). There is, however, little research related to how urban physical educators navigate the social context of their work given these unique challenges. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to understand the unique stressors faced by physical educators working in the urban intensive environment of New York City public schools using in-depth qualitative interviewing. Research questions guiding the inquiry included: (a) how do New York City physical education teachers experience their workplace environment? (b) what context-specific stressors do they face in approaching their work? and (c) how does the diversity of New York City public schools influence their ability to teach and build relationships with students?

## **Method**

### Research Design and Participants Selection

The present investigation was designed as an interview study, which relies primarily on qualitative interviewing to understand participants’ experiences within their social world (Hatch, 2002). Accordingly, we adopted a social constructivist epistemology (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) to better understand the urban physical educators’ socialization and the meaning they ascribed to their work life experiences (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009). We recruited participants using a purposeful sampling strategy to identify physical education teachers working in New York City public schools across elementary and secondary teaching levels (Patton, 2015). New York City Public Schools is the largest district in the United States with over 1,800 schools that service over 1.1 million students. The district, which has an annual operating budget of nearly US\$25 billion, covers all five boroughs of New York City. Furthermore, the district serves a diverse city in which 40% of households do not speak English as the primary language; 85% of students in New York City schools identify as non-White. These factors position the district as a target site for this study because it reflects an archetype case for urban intensive schools (Schaffer et al., 2017).

The participants were recruited from a group of 88 New York City teachers who had responded to an online survey as part of a larger study. Of the survey respondents, 45 were willing to participate in interviews. Interviews were scheduled with 34 of those who expressed interest (75.56%). This sample size aligns with recommendations for qualitative research so as to reach data saturation (Patton, 2015). All research procedures were approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at the lead investigator’s university. The 34 New York City physical educators (26 males, eight females) were on average 39.68 years old (SD = 9.13) and had been teaching for 13.71 years (SD = 8.20). The teachers were spread across all five New York City boroughs with 10 (29.41%) in Queens, nine (26.47%) from Manhattan, nine (26.47%) from the Bronx, three (8.82%) from Staten Island, and three (8.82%) from Brooklyn.

Over half of the participants identified as European American (n = 20; 58.82%), and other racial/ethnic affiliations included African American (n = 6; 17.65%), Hispanic (n = 6; 17.65%), Asian (n = 1; 2.94%), and multiple races/ethnicities (n = 1; 2.94%). Most teachers worked in secondary schools (n = 23; 67.65%) with fewer teaching in elementary schools (n = 11; 32.35%). Nearly two thirds of the teachers were currently coaching extracurricular school sports (n = 22; 64.71%) and the rest (n = 12; 35.29%) previously held coaching responsibilities but were not currently coaching. The teachers worked in high-poverty schools in which 76%–100% (n = 22; 64.71%) or 51%–75% (n = 12; 35.29%) of students received free and reduced lunch. Complete participant demographic information is included in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Complete Participant Demographic Information

Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Yrs	Level	FRL(%)	Coach	Borough
Rebecca	Female	European Am	45	20	Secondary	51-75	No	QU

Ward	Male	European Am	30	9	Elementary	76-100	Yes	QU
Alicia	Female	European Am	28	5	Elementary	51-75	No	QU
Mary	Female	European Am	39	14	Elementary	51-75	No	BK
Sandy	Female	European Am	31	14	Secondary	76-100	No	MA
Chad	Male	Asia	31	10	Elementary	76-100	Yes	QU
Jose	Male	Hispanic	31	5	Secondary	76-100	Yes	BK
Fernando	Male	Hispanic	60	35	Elementary	51-75	No	MA
Jeffrey	Male	European Am	28	4	Secondary	51-75	Yes	QU
Tim	Male	European Am	45	12	Secondary	51-75	Yes	SI
Wes	Male	European Am	56	30	Secondary	76-100	No	QU
Justin	Male	African Am	33	5	Secondary	76-100	Yes	BK
David	Male	European Am	37	21	Secondary	76-100	Yes	MA
Patrick	Male	European Am	52	22	Secondary	51-75	Yes	MA
Allison	Female	African Am	48	23	Secondary	51-75	Yes	MA
Oliver	Male	European Am	38	14	Elementary	76-100	Yes	BR
James	Male	European Am	39	13	Secondary	76-100	Yes	BR
Glen	Male	European Am	52	22	Elementary	76-100	No	BR
Santiago	Male	Hispanic	40	12	Secondary	76-100	Yes	BR
Diego	Male	Hispanic	60	29	Secondary	76-100	No	QU
Alejandro	Male	Hispanic	39	10	Secondary	51-75	No	MA
Phil	Male	European Am	46	15	Elementary	76-100	Yes	MA
Xander	Male	African Am	38	8	Secondary	76-100	Yes	BR
Ben	Male	European Am	42	15	Elementary	76-100	Yes	SI
Sofia	Female	Hispanic	31	5	Secondary	76-100	Yes	QU
Randy	Male	European Am	46	4	Secondary	76-100	Yes	SI
Fred	Male	European Am	40	16	Secondary	76-100	No	QU

Chris	Male	European Am	29	6	Secondary	76-100	No	QU
Josh	Male	European Am	25	2	Secondary	76-100	No	MA
Matt	Male	European Am	37	3	Secondary	76-100	Yes	MA
Samuel	Male	European Am	33	17	Elementary	51-75	Yes	BR
Patricia	Female	Multiple	43	16	Secondary	76-100	Yes	BR
Kelly	Female	African Am	35	11	Secondary	51-75	Yes	BR
Tom	Male	African Am	42	19	Elementary	76-100	Yes	BR

Note. Yrs = years of teaching experience; FRL = percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch; Coaching = whether or not the individual was currently coaching extracurricular school sports; European Am = European American; QU = Queens; BK = Brooklyn; MA = Manhattan; SI = Staten Island; BR = Bronx; African Am = African American; Multiple = multiple races or ethnicities.

### Data Collection

The first three authors collected all study data through one in-depth, semi-structured interview with each of the 34 study participants. This approach combined the structure of a formal interview guide with the flexibility to deviate from the list of preplanned questions and pursue theoretically relevant topics introduced by the participants (Patton, 2015). Each interview began with a review of informed consent in accordance with the approved IRB protocol, and questions focused on the unique experiences of teaching physical education in an urban intensive environment. Interview questions were influenced by literature-related urban schools (Flory, 2016; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2018; Shernoff et al., 2011) and occupational socialization theory (Curtner-Smith, 2017; Richards et al., 2014; Woods et al., 2017). Example interview questions included: (a) “what is it like to teach at your school?” (b) “based on your experience or perception, how is teaching in New York City different than teaching in other environments?” and (c) “how do you work through the student diversity you experience in your classes?” All interviews were conducted over the phone at a time convenient for the participants, lasted between 60 and 75 min, were audio recorded with permission, and transcribed for analysis. The participants were asked to provide a contact phone number for the interview and were contacted by members of the research team at an agreed upon time. Although telephone interviews have become common in qualitative research, we recognize challenges with the inability to read nonverbal communication and that should be viewed as a study limitation (Irvine et al., 2012).

### Data Analysis and Trustworthiness



Data were analyzed by two members of the research team using a multiphase collaborative approach (Richards & Hemphill, 2018) grounded in inductive and deductive analysis as well as the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). The process had deductive elements as we used occupational socialization theory as a framework through which to interpret the participants' experiences, but was also inductive as we intentionally sought data that challenged or extended theory (Patton, 2015). The initial phase of analysis involved open coding to identify initial themes as well as axial coding to make connections among themes as we independently reviewed transcripts and wrote analytical memos. These initial themes were discussed during weekly research meetings. After three iterations of open and axial coding, we developed an initial codebook to reflect the themes that had been developed (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). This codebook was shared with other members of the research team who served as peer debriefers by reviewing and providing feedback (Strauss & Corbin, 2015).

In the next phase of analysis, the initial codebook was pilot tested using previously uncoded data. Following the constant comparative method, we made updates to the codebook during weekly research meetings to reflect newly coded data (Patton, 2015). After three iterations of pilot testing, we met for a second peer debriefing session to further modify the codebook. During the final phase of analysis, we split the data set into two groups and separately coded the data set into the codebook. Regular research meetings were conducted to check in on the coding process and to discuss theoretically relevant data that did not fit neatly into any of the themes. In some cases, this led to modifications to the codebook (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Once all of the data had been coded, we had another peer debriefing meeting to develop the codebook into a final set of themes that we believe best described the data (Patton, 2015).

Trustworthiness was enhanced through a series of methodological decisions that were intended to enhance the quality of the research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to peer debriefing, researcher triangulation was facilitated by including multiple researchers in the data analysis process. Member checks were conducted by inviting participants to provide feedback on their interview transcripts. Minor changes were made to the transcripts based on the feedback that was provided. We intentionally sought negative cases by documenting data that did not fit with the primary themes. These data are discussed during the presentation of results. Finally, we maintained an audit trail in a shared researcher journal through the data collection and analysis processes to maintain a record of all research decisions and promote transparency.

## **Results**

The results of qualitative data analysis indicated that the New York City physical education teachers in this study experienced several forms of stress that were unique to the high-poverty, urban intensive environment in which they taught. Specifically, the following four themes were constructed to highlight the participants' experiences: (a) working with limited and inconsistent infrastructure, (b) navigating student diversity, (c) coping with marginalization and advocating for quality practices, and (d) managing the sociopolitics of teaching. These themes highlight the

intersection between the discipline the teachers taught and the context in which they worked. One overall representative quotation that illustrates this intersection came from Jose who explained, as a physical educator “you’re paid the same [as other teachers]. It’s not like you are paid any more to have a way tougher experience. . . I was half prison guard and half [physical education] teacher.” As the themes are introduced, representative quotations from the data set are provided to support researcher assertions and all participants are introduced using pseudonyms.

### Working with Limited and Inconsistent Infrastructure

Consistent with previous research with urban physical educators (McCaughtry et al., 2006), New York City physical educators discussed challenges associated with limited space and infrastructure to accomplish their teaching and learning objectives. For example, elementary physical educators struggled to differentiate instruction for relatively large age ranges between kindergarten and fifth grade. Chad highlighted this challenge and connected it to space limitations. The transition time between classes along with the diversity in student learning needs made it difficult to differentiate instruction in a meaningful way, “unless you taught in a gymnasium the size of Madison Square Garden where you can have all the equipment for different classes set up at the start of the day.” Alicia added to this perspective and explained,

my colleague has a kindergarten class and I have a fifth-grade class. If it’s a nice day we can take the older kids outside and then the kindergartners would stay in the gym. On a day that it’s raining we have to be very creative because you have fifth graders and then five-year-olds in the same space doing completely different activities.

Although many physical educators face challenges related to space and transition time between classes, in New York City the space issues were exacerbated by a movement to integrate several schools into single buildings. Ben explained the city now “has many buildings that are multi-school buildings where the schools are disconnected from each other, but they do have shared space.” He went on to add, “I have a physical education class that has 60 kids in it and the other school has a class that has 70 kids and we share the gym—so it’s like 130 kids in one gym.” Tim explained, “there are times when the guy that I teach with and I have 100 kids in that room. . . they’re literally sitting on top of each other.” Jeffrey added, “we have classes where we have 120 kids and two teachers, and the gym is not equipped for more than 50 kids.” For many of the teachers, limited space was one of the most stressful issues in their work. Chris explained that city policy mandated a student–teacher ratio of 50 to 1 for physical education, but limited space often led to combining classes, “50 to 1 is not the same as 150 to 3.” He explained that they coped with this by “co-teaching or dividing [the children] up and teaching separate lessons.” Josh initially struggled with limited space he described as “a multi-purpose room with columns down the middle.” This led him to search for and secure another job, and he described his current situation as more enjoyable because “I’m in a massive gym

Interview data revealed that the teachers believed the lack of appropriate infrastructure influenced students' experiences in physical education. Many teachers expressed frustration with the limited curriculum that could be offered in this context. Phil explained, "the focus a lot is on exercise and fitness and things like that. For a lot of kids that can be dry and boring. You know, kids want to play sports, but we don't have the space." A common response to the lack of space was to set up "fitness spaces" (Jeffrey) in auditoriums, cafeteria, and hallways. A few participants were able to partner with local institutions, such as commercial gyms, where basketball courts were underutilized during the school day. "We went in there and used the basketball courts during the day when we could . . . not just for basketball, but for other activities, just to have space" (Phil). When limited to a classroom, some teachers described "using workout videos" and doing "lessons on the desks and chairs" (Randy). Things like "Nintendo Wii . . . [and] yoga" (Kelly) were often mentioned as activities conducive to limited spaces. Beyond instructional space, participants such as Sandy noted that they lacked a dedicated and private office space "we can't get any work done . . . I need workspace like the other teachers do." She continued by explaining that her office desk was situated in a "place to make copies and teacher's lounge . . . so I don't really have my own area." Although space was an issue, some teachers reported that they received support for equipment purchases through parent-teacher organizations and a city initiative to improve physical education. Fred explained, "one thing I'll say is that whenever I ask for equipment my administration always gets it for us . . . it is really needed to help us with the space that is just very limited here."

### Navigating Student Diversity

Although diversity in public schools is a topic of national interest (Bryant et al., 2017), the physical educators in New York City discussed some unique challenges and believed that teachers from other contexts could not relate to their experiences. Randy lamented, "when I go [home to the suburbs and talk to my teaching friends], those guys don't even know what a lockdown is . . . they don't know what it's like when [a student] takes his sweatpants off and a knife falls out" (Randy). The most cited challenge was related to language and cultural diversity of the students who attended New York City schools. Wes explained,

we have students from different countries. . . we have Afghanistan, we have India, we have Penn Dutch, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, the Caribbean Islands. . . We have a large portion of Chinese, a bunch of students from Russia. When we have these standardized tests distributed there are glossaries from eight to 12 different languages.

Physical educators cited as many as "48 languages" (Diego) represented in their schools, which led to complex challenges as many students did not speak English as a primary language. According to Wes, "the problem we are running into . . . we have a class of 90 students and

many of them are limited in English. We give directions, we have students translate, and it takes time.” Examples of ethnic diversity and issues with foreign language were common among the physical educators, and Chris explained, “there are new students that come in everyday . . . it seems like once a week we are getting a new admit to the school and they don’t speak one word of English.” Other teachers, such as Mary, seemed less challenged by language barriers: “it’s a challenge at times as far as the language barrier, but sport is a language that everybody speaks.”

The physical educators expressed several efforts to overcome language and cultural challenges, but often did not know whether or not their efforts were successful. Fred explained,

I don’t speak any Chinese. I have a class where every kid in the class only speaks Chinese. . . maybe five or six kids can speak just a couple words of English. I’m using Google Translate a lot. I’m translating all my slides into Chinese for them, using pictures, I’m trying everything I can, but you know you wonder how much is actually sinking in.

The physical educators also noted that some students could speak English but preferred to converse in their native language. Phil insisted that his students “can speak English” and became frustrated when they spoke a different language in his class:

you are in an English-speaking class, you know, show a little respect. I am not trying to take away your language or your culture but just as if you were at work there is a requirement to speak the language.

While the teachers described language barriers, they also encountered challenges related to cultural diversity and social norms. Sofia explained, “[diversity] influences my teaching because I have to be culturally aware.” When asked to elaborate, she provided the following example: “last year we had a girl move from India. . . in her culture she’s not supposed to be around boys. I made sure I put her between the girls if we play tag and let the boys know.” Similarly, Wes noted, “we have a large Muslim population. The girls do not change out of their traditional clothing, which is not a problem, but their clothing is not very conducive to the gym. . . In warmer weather it becomes impossible for them.”

While several of the teachers did note challenges associated with the integrative nature of diversity, this was not a ubiquitous experience. James described his perception of diversity in New York City as “a melting pot, but all the ingredients haven’t been mixed together yet. . . my experience was I didn’t see much diversity with a mix of students of different race necessarily.” Justin suggested that the experience of urban physical educators can only be understood by the diversity—or lack thereof—in their specific school context: “working with a lower income community is going to be different than working with gifted students.” Rebecca was frustrated by the lack of diversity in some schools. She explained,

there really is a lack of diversity in New York City schools even though we have a very diverse city. I think that you've got you know awesome schools and then you've got failing schools and very little in between.

When working in underserved schools, the teachers felt a strong need to build trust and relationships with students. From their perspective, students from New York City did not always have stable home lives and it was part of their responsibility to develop a sense of trust and connection with students in their classes. Josh spent considerable time on relationship building in his teaching: "it took a solid seven months for my high schoolers to trust me because they don't really have adults in their lives that stick around very often. . . building rapport with the students is the number one thing." Other teachers were frustrated when school administrators did not empathize with students. Justin explained, "the administration doesn't take time to relate to these students. . . Marcus, his cousin got killed two weeks ago. . . Marcus is walking around the school trying to pick a fight with everybody. They don't care and just want to suspend him."

### Coping with Marginalization and Advocating for Quality Practices

Consistent with previous research (Laureano et al., 2014), participants discussed the challenges of teaching a subject that was viewed as marginal to the primary mission of schooling and the associated isolation from colleagues and other adults. Comments such as "I wish people would legitimize our subject and call it physical education instead of gym class" (Mary) and "I feel like we don't get enough respect because we only teach 'gym'" (Sofia) were common. Chad, who taught in an elementary school, explained how this marginalized status and the view of physical education as "just gym class" influenced his teaching: "I feel frustrated when teachers don't have the proper view of physical education. They bring the kids late and that always annoys me. . . We are all equal. I expect the kids to get dropped off on time." At a previous job, Ben recalled "feeling isolated as the only physical educator in my school. It got lonely."

Being viewed as a marginal discipline had implications for resource allocations, class sizes, and professional development opportunities. Oliver said that his principal "won't spend equipment money on physical education. . . they have other priorities, so we just have to deal with what we have or buy things ourselves." Ben pointed out that "most elementary schools in New York City have upwards of 800 or 900 students and two PE teachers." This presented challenges because "we're looking at a 1 to 400 ratio whereas a classroom teacher is only doing assessments and grading and parent outreach and caring for 32 students." Ward believed that "classroom teachers are able to get more professional development. . . physical education is kind of left to their own devices to get professional development whereas other teachers are more able to get into different programs." As a result of this marginality, Justin insisted that students were

Losing out on a quality, well-rounded education because they cancel physical education for testing, assemblies, and a lot of other things. We have kids in this school that need to

learn about health, physical activity, and their bodies, but they do not get those opportunities because my school does not take physical education seriously.

Although physical education is marginalized in many schools, the participants believed that working in an urban intensive environment created additional challenges. Jose lamented, “New York City is a huge district with a lot of challenges and priorities. . . Physical education gets lost in the shuffle sometimes. . . there is just too much else going on.” Ben explained, “I think physical education is undervalued because of the system that New York City’s had in place for so long. At the elementary level, there was no focus put on physical education.” When asked to elaborate, he added how New York City had not required teachers to have a specialized license for teaching physical education: “the classroom teachers could provide the instruction and there wasn’t a real understanding of the difference between physical education and physical activity.” Patrick provided a concrete example illustrating what he believed to be deprioritization of the discipline: “As of 2014, New York City has not filed a plan for physical education with the state since 1982. In a district this large with so many challenges and priorities, it’s just not viewed as important.”

In response to the challenges related to marginalization, many teachers in this study took it upon themselves to advocate for the discipline in an attempt to raise the status of physical education. When asked what she wanted her students to learn, Mary’s immediate reaction was “physical education is just as important as math, science, and literacy. . . I am working hard to rebuild the reputation of my subject in my school.” Alicia shared “some research articles and stuff about the positive effects of exercise on the brain and how it can actually raise test scores with my colleagues and administrators so they can see the contribution we make.” Rebecca wanted to help her colleagues “look beyond the negatives that are sometimes thrown at physical education, so I am proactive to change people’s mindset by being an advocate.”

Although participants believed that New York City had not supported physical education in the past, many also appreciated recent efforts to improve the standing of the discipline. Teachers were now being offered “more relevant professional development that is just for physical education. That has been a great change” (Samuel). David agreed and explained that the professional development addressed isolation because it brought together teachers from different schools to learn in communities: “I am excited about the professional development because it will help us all get together and learn from one another. This is especially important for teachers who are on their own.” Several teachers reported that the district had recently made a US\$100 million investment in physical education which was being used to “meet the New York state requirement for 120 minutes of physical education for every student by hiring qualified physical education teachers at the elementary level” (Ward). Xander elaborated explaining the impact that the investment would lead to the “hiring [of] licensed PE teachers in elementary schools. Hopefully, we can really get the administrators in schools to buy into the benefits to having a licensed physical education teacher delivering instruction.” Several teachers described how this investment helped to elevate the status of physical education. Patrick, for example, noted:

There is a revolution going on in physical education where the focus is on physical education being an academic subject and the focus on student learning. The support that the city is providing helps us feel that what we are doing is valuable and important. That message is getting out there and that message is starting to change the way people think about physical education in a positive way.

### Managing the Sociopolitics of Teaching

In concert with the larger body of literature related to sociopolitical challenges that physical education teachers face (Fernandez-Balboa, 2000), participants discussed their experiences managing relationships with other individuals and entities at the school level, which were often framed at least in part through larger city and state government initiatives. At the school level, building administrators were viewed as essential for setting a positive tone. Although some participants noted that they had “a very positive relationship” with administrators (Phil) that “set a positive and supportive tone for all of the teachers in my school” (Fred), others expressed more prominent challenges that framed their work. Fernando described his experiences working for several different administrators commenting: “the good ones make the whole school feel like a nice place to work, but the bad ones make it really hard on teachers.” He was frustrated by his current principal who “micromanaged everyone. . . he wants to know what lesson we are teaching and what equipment we are using. . . how often we talk to parents. . . it’s overwhelming.” Diego explained that his principal created a combative environment by “blaming teachers for the problems in our school. . . she pits the teachers against one another and none of us trust her. No one ever talks to her because they get treated like trash.”

Although principals were viewed as critical in framing the social environment within a school, the teachers also recognized the role of their colleagues in creating or preventing hospitable working conditions. Some of the teachers “get along very well with my colleagues” (Fred) and “couldn’t think of a better group of teachers with whom to work” (Matt). Kelly, however, represented other teachers who were frustrated with their colleagues: “my [physical education] colleague is frustrating because he doesn’t want to use best practices. . . we argue a lot. . . it’s about being a good neighbor and being respectful of what the other person’s trying to do.” Alicia discussed challenges interacting with teachers outside of her discipline: “honestly, I get more frustrated with the adults in this school than the children.” She went on to explain, “a lot of the teachers have negative attitudes. I’m not like that so I have to try every day not to fall into the hole of complaining about everything.”

Beyond the social relationships and culture within their immediate schools, several teachers discussed how political factors and school reform initiatives at the district and state levels influenced their work. Patrick was frustrated with the consistently changing and fluid landscape of education reform in the district noting, “New York City is constantly dealing with buzz word of the day. . . right now, everything is about a ‘growth mindset.’ I feel as if we are just

constantly chasing the newest fad in education.” Several teachers were critical of the district’s adoption of the Danielson Model for Teacher Evaluation (Danielson, 2011) because they believed “there was just no understanding of how to correlate the Danielson to physical education” (Randy). For Jeffrey, the Danielson framework created a division between him and his principal. When asked about the relationship with his principal, Jeffrey said, “it’s not the best anymore. Good people, but the whole Danielson rubric is a joke when it comes to physical education. They don’t know how to evaluate us and that causes a problem.”

Several of the teachers also expressed frustration with district policies that pushed the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS; Muscott et al., 2008). Teachers, such as Samuel, felt as if PBIS dismissed traditional forms of discipline, which “made it more difficult to do my job because the kids now have more power in the school than the teacher. I cannot discipline students in a way that they will respect.” Allison elaborated on this when asked to compare teaching in New York City to other teaching contexts. She believed that other school districts had “more consequences if students do something wrong. . . with PBIS it’s like literally you have to do something like totally crazy in order for there to be some disciplining. I don’t know if that’s the right way to go.” Alejandro described PBIS as deprofessionalizing teachers: “it means I can’t teach the way I used to . . . I don’t like to be micro-managed by people that don’t have a degree in physical education.” Although acknowledging challenges associated with the Danielson Framework and PBIS, Randy’s perspective suggests that it may be a lack of preparation to use these systems rather than the systems themselves. He elaborated,

It gets better once you get the experience and you “speak the city language.” I understand PBIS and I understand Danielson and how the observations work and it takes a few years to get that down. It’s all about understanding the system, and that just gets hard when educational reform changes what we are doing every year. It is even harder when you have a principal that does not understand how these things relate to physical education.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the unique stressors faced by physical educators working in the urban intensive environment of New York City public schools. Qualitative data analysis indicated that the participants experienced stressors commonly cited in physical education literature (e.g., marginalization, isolation, large class sizes; Blankenship & Coleman, 2009; Laureano et al., 2014), but that their experiences of these stressors was framed by the urban nature of their teaching assignment and the diversity of the schools in which they taught. The stress noted by the participants was consistent with experiences of teachers in urban settings in more generally (Bottiani et al., 2019; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2018; Shernoff et al., 2011), but were contextualized to the realities of teaching physical education. The teachers lamented working with limited space and equipment; being confronted with challenges associated with teaching diverse students in terms of language, culture, and social norms; teaching a



marginalized discipline and having to advocating for themselves and their subject; and working through school-, district-, and state-level sociopolitics. This is consistent with the existing literature related to teaching physical education in urban schools (e.g., Ellison & Woods, 2016; Ennis & Chen, 1995; Ennis et al., 1997), and relates to and extends occupational socialization theory (Lawson, 1986; Richards et al., 2014).

Physical education is often positioned as a marginalized subject matter (Laureano et al., 2014) and the teachers in our study expressed this in various ways. Consistent with previous research (McCaughy et al., 2006), the physical educators in this study coped with large class sizes, limited resource allocation, and the devaluing of physical education within their school communities. These challenges were compounded by the urban intensive context in which they taught. This was particularly the case relative to sharing gymnasium space within multi-school buildings. Following criticism related to the size and condition of schools (Durán-Narucki, 2008), New York City schools reorganized by placing multiple school communities within one large building (Allen & Steinberg, 2004). Although this arrangement may have addressed the larger issue of school size, it created challenging circumstances for physical educators who had to share gym space with teachers who work for different schools. This was further complicated as each physical educator reported to a different school administrator and safe outdoor space is a difficult commodity in New York City. We recognize this variable is specific to the teachers and context in this study and may not apply to physical educators in all urban contexts.

Several of the participants in the study felt as if physical education was undervalued in the urban intensive district. In several instances, this marginalization was institutionalized as the participants reported that the district had not required a subject-specific license to teach elementary physical education and was not current in filing a district-wide plan for physical education instruction. As a response, several of the teachers discussed their advocacy efforts. Such attempts have proven successful at local levels (Lux & McCullick, 2011; Richards, Gaudreault, et al., 2018), but the challenges of working in an urban center may make such efforts more difficult as teachers seek to assert the value of their discipline in schools that have competing priorities for time, space, and resources (Ellison & Woods, 2016).

Some initiatives discussed by the teachers (e.g., influx of resources to support physical education and hire elementary physical education specialists) were viewed positively as the district was taking strides toward repositioning the value of physical education. The participants were excited about these initiatives and perceived them as positive messages about the importance of the physical education discipline. Such efforts are important given that prior research has indicated feelings of marginalization can become internalized as physical educators begin to accept the notion they are not as important as other teachers in their schools (Richards, Gaudreault, et al., 2018). This reality has implications for teacher motivation, the quality of instructional practices, and student learning outcomes (Kougioumtzis et al., 2011). If marginalization is magnified rather than challenged in urban intensive environments it may exacerbate already high attrition rates among urban teachers (Barnes et al., 2007).

The teachers in this study explicitly described the role colleagues and school administrators played in creating either supportive or limiting contexts relative to the marginality of physical education. Consistent with previous research, environments were constraining when the teachers felt as if their colleagues and administrators misunderstood them or failed to support their efforts. Alternatively, colleagues described as supportive helped these teachers develop resilience to persevere through stressful situations (Richards, Hemphill, & Templin, 2018). The development of such a supportive environment may be particularly important in urban intensive environments where teachers face additional challenges of different type and intensity than those experienced in other contexts (Ellison & Woods, 2016; Yonezawa et al., 2011).

Government mandates and priorities at state and district levels further influenced the sociopolitics encountered by the teachers in this study. For several teachers, the constantly shifting landscape of education (Grek & Ozga, 2010) within New York City provided additional complications as they were presented with new initiatives for which they felt underprepared, including the Danielson Model for teacher evaluation (Danielson, 2011) and PBIS (Muscott et al., 2008). Although reform initiatives can help to advance educational practices, they should be responsive to the needs and interests of the teachers who will be implementing them. Evidence suggests teachers are more likely to embrace educational reform initiatives consistently and with fidelity when: (a) they feel as if they have a voice in reform targets, are provided with professional development to support implementation, (b) when they see evidence of student learning, and (c) when initiatives are viewed as relevant to their discipline (Fullan, 2007). This was certainly not the case for the physical educators in this study as they described feeling as if the educational reforms did not address their main needs, which led some of them to resist.

Findings relative to the teachers' response to student diversity pose interesting connections to occupational socialization theory. The teachers' subjective theories (Grotjahn, 1991) about teaching, schools, and students formed during acculturation and professional socialization appeared incompatible with what they encountered in schools. The notions and conceptions they held were met with opposition and the teachers felt unprepared to address the cultural, social, linguistic, and ethnic/racial diversity they encountered. Although all school contexts are increasingly diversifying (Bryant et al., 2017), this diversity is more pronounced in urban intensive environments such as New York City. This significant diversity left many of the teachers feeling frustrated and ill equipped to meet the challenges they faced when working with students. In some cases, the teachers' personal definitions of appropriate or inappropriate student conduct with respect to language and social norms was inconsistent with what students presented in the classroom. Although some teachers viewed this an opportunity, others took more of a deficits-based approach (McCuaig et al., 2013). The teachers' frustrations were exacerbated by their working conditions, marginalization, lack of support, and professional development surrounding diverse populations, but tones of racism were present in their conceptualization of how students should act and languages they should speak (Cowley & Smith, 2015; Sleeter, 2017).

Based on our findings, we offer recommendations for preservice and inservice teacher education and learning interventions. It is imperative that teacher education programs better prepare future teachers for urban environments by shaping their skills and subjective theories toward more inclusive practices (Sleeter, 2017). Where possible, physical education teacher education (PETE) faculty members should coordinate field placements within urban teaching environments and discuss the realities of such contexts with preservice teachers (Flory, 2017). Furthermore, PETE programming should include approaches to curriculum and instructional delivery that are better suited for urban contexts and students. The teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR) pedagogical model (Hellison, 2011) has much to offer in this respect. Practicing teachers should have the time and space to engage in discipline-specific professional development related to both the shifting cultural and linguistic diversity of their schools as well as reform initiatives that require teacher change. Furthermore, teachers should be given a voice in such efforts to align their professional practice and motivation toward reform (Fullan, 2007). For example, physical educators would benefit from interventions focused on enhancing perceived mattering and reducing marginality (Richards, Gaudreault, et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the primary contribution of this study lies in the illustration of how the discipline of physical education interacts with the urban intense context of New York City schools. It is important to note that our intention was to present and discuss the perceptions of the participants in this study to provide insights into the phenomenon of teaching physical education in an urban intensive environment. Accordingly, we do not offer that the specific views of teachers in this study are reflective of all urban teachers. Importantly, researchers and practitioners should note the complexities that exist within urban contexts, where poverty often exists alongside wealth (Gadsden & Roman-Dixon, 2017), and complexities abound. Given that there is great gradation across urban contexts (Milner, 2012), further research is needed to understand the range of experiences of physical educators across a variety of different urban environments. Beyond context, this work should also account for differences teaching urban schools based on other demographic variables, such as elementary and secondary settings.

Among other things, future research with urban physical educators should focus on developing interventions, both at the preservice and inservice level, to better prepare teachers to navigate the challenges of working in urban environments while building their cultural competency to address the needs of students who are linguistically and culturally different from them (Flory, 2017). These initiatives should attend to the unique needs of physical educators related to sociopolitical learning (Fernandez-Balboa, 2000) by helping them to understand how commonly reported experiences such as marginalization, isolation, and limited resource allocation manifest in urban environments and how these challenges can be navigated effectively. The goal of such teacher learning initiatives should be to socialize teachers that will better prepare them for the realities of their work and possibly reduce issues related to early career attrition in urban contexts.

### **Author's Note**

Victoria N. Shiver is now affiliated with Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, USA.

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### **ORCID iD**

K. Andrew R. Richards <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3045-6001>

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### **Author Biographies**

**K. Andrew R. Richards** is an assistant professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Community Health at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research focuses on teachers' work-life experiences and socialization, primarily in physical education, as well as teaching personal and social responsibility through physical activity.

**Michael A. Hemphill** is an assistant professor of Kinesiology at UNC Greensboro. His research focuses on teaching personal and social responsibility through sport and physical education with specific applications to urban communities and professional development programs for physical activity providers.

**Victoria N. Shiver** is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Northern Illinois University. Her research focuses on teaching personal and social responsibility in physical education and out of school time programming, as well as guiding teacher candidates through culturally responsive pedagogies.

**Karen Lux Gaudreault** is an assistant professor in Physical Education Teacher Education with specific expertise in elementary physical education pedagogy and content. Her research involves teacher socialization, schools as workplaces, and how the structure of schools impacts teachers' agency and how teaching a marginalized subject impacts physical educators' lives.

**Victor Ramsey** is an educational administrator with the New York City Department of Education Office of School Wellness Programs and an Adjunct Assistant Professor with City University of New York, York College. His research interests are with girls' attitudes about and physical activity patterns in physical education.

