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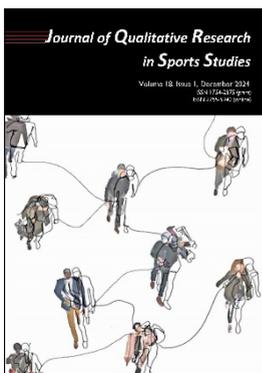
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A New Era for Physical Education teacher training: perceptions of delivering the CARE Curriculum of Physical Education in China, lessons for effective implementation

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Keywords: *CARE Curriculum, Physical Education, Transnational Education, New Era*

Abstract

China's development plans to establish a New Era for the country are driven by aspirations to modernise, enhance health and wellbeing, and establish social harmony. Physical Education (PE) plays an important role in achieving these objectives. China has sought international partners to support this culture shift and help deliver a new form of education and training in PE through the Sino-UK joint led Higher Education programmes in PE and Sport. The purpose of this study was to investigate one of these joint programmes and the CARE Curriculum ethos that underpins it, providing unique insights into its operationalisation and effectiveness. The study explored different perspectives from students, teachers and managers about the benefits and challenges of the curriculum in order to better inform its future implementation and contribution to the New Era objectives. A qualitative case study is presented including individual interviews, observations, reflective narratives and focus groups with teachers, students, and managers at University 'X' in South Central China. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed to develop 5 higher-order and 14 lower-order themes. The many benefits of the curriculum are presented as well as its perceived limitations. The CARE Curriculum was deemed an appropriate model to support pupil development and wellbeing for the New Era. Challenges are identified and framed in the context of transnational education and socialisation debates. Finally, recommendations are made about how to modify its communication, delivery, assessment, and professional training to support more effective implementation, offering insight and guidance to similar international joint programmes.

Introduction

At the ceremony marking the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), President Xi Jinping first proposed the 'Chinese path to modernization' and 'a new



model for human advancement' (Xi, 2021). His report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP offered a comprehensive explanation of a path to ensure that China's population would share the following five qualities: a common prosperity for all; coordinated material and cultural-ethical progress; improved health and wellbeing; harmony between humanity and nature; and peaceful development (Xi, 2022). China's development plans are now concentrated on establishing a New Era that is driven by aspirations to modernize the country by 2035, enhance health and wellbeing, and the desire to establish social harmony whereby all citizens have the opportunity to flourish and live meaningful lives. This focus is increasingly important as China's 14th 5 Year Plan now aspires to achieve its second centenary goal by 2049, that is, to 'build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious' (Xinhua, 2021). Indeed, President Xi himself reporting back on the State Council's progress in 2022 stated:

From this day forward, the central task of the Communist Party of China will be to lead the Chinese people of all ethnic groups in a concerted effort to realize the Second Centenary Goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects and to advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernization (Xinhua, 2022).

As part of this strategy, he asserted that the target for China is to 'become a leading country in education, science and technology, talent, culture, sports, and health' (Xinhua, 2022). Such targets are specifically outlined in the most recent 14th 5 Year Plan (2021-2025) (Xinhua, 2021) through various chapters: *Improving the Quality of the People and Promoting the All-round Development of People* (Chapter 13); *Improving People's Livelihood and Well-being, Enhancing the Level of Co-construction, Co-governance and Sharing* (Chapter 14); *Building a High-quality Education System* (Chapter 43); and to *Comprehensively Promote the Construction of a Healthy China* (Chapter 44).

Education is a key tool in achieving these objectives through the strategic aims of *China's Education Modernization 2035* and associated tasks (PRC, 2019a). There are several tasks which are directly relevant to this study:

- **Task 2:** to develop world-class education sector with Chinese characteristics;
- **Task 3:** to promote the popularization of high-level and high-quality education at all levels (improving the accessibility of quality education from pre-school to higher education stages);
- **Task 6:** to improve the cultivation process of first-class talents and their innovation capability;
- **Task 7:** to build a highly professional teaching staff with innovative aspirations;
- **Task 9:** to further open the education sector to the world; and
- **Task 10:** to promote education modernization in terms of management system and capacity.

Within this strategy, sport and PE are identified as an important components of a student's well-rounded development and a key tool in achieving the Nation's targets. The 2035 Plan specifically seeks the strengthening of sports education and students' practical abilities, following an increased focus on sport and PE. Throughout China's 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016–2020), sport continued to play a vital role in building a prosperous society. This period witnessed Chinese soccer reform the National Fitness Programme (2016–2020), Health China 2030, and other programmatic guidelines to increase Fitness-for-All coverage. The government has further issued *Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Physical Education in the New Era* and *Opinions on Deepening the Integration of Sports and Education to Promote the Healthy Development of Adolescents* in the training of sports talents to meet China's need for citizens who demonstrate comprehensive development of morality, intelligence, PE, art and labour in the New Era.

The 14th Five-Year Sports Development Plan stated that 'China should become a modern leading sports socialist country by 2035,' founded upon the State Council's sports development scheme, *Outline for Building a Leading Sports Nation* (PRC, 2019b). Under this scheme, key personnel are supported to study sport-related courses or receive training abroad, and collaboration between Chinese and foreign institutions is encouraged. This followed the release of a joint circular Plan to Promote Physical Activities for Youth (PRC, 2018), which laid out specific goals such as ensuring that students get at least one-hour of physical exercise every day at school, that sport teachers would be upskilled and receive higher-level training, and there should be greater international collaboration regarding sports.

The PE and Health National Curriculum and new era targets

In practical terms, much of China's higher-level state modernisation strategy regarding health and wellbeing, human development and education is directed through curricula delivered in schools, colleges and universities. The national curriculum for PE is termed the *Compulsory Education, Physical Education and Health Curriculum* (CEPEandH) (MoE, 2011) which promotes the core principles of Health First, personal motivation, student-centred learning, and equity and inclusion. It was actually Mao Zedong, the then leader of the People's Republic of China who decreed that school education should be 'Health First, Academic Study Second' (Liang and Huang, 2001:12). However, health in Mao's China was focussed on ensuring the physical fitness of students for purposes of national defence rather than its modern holistic objectives. Health has gained increasing significance within Chinese society as evidenced by various government policies, strategies and responses which have highlighted schools to be instrumental in addressing students' health. More recent revisions to these curricula through the Chinese National

Curriculum Standards for PE and Health (MoE, 2017; 2020) enable the State to nurture New Era citizens by implementing a range of strategies to achieve the Nation's second century goal. President Xi made this focus most clear in his report to the 19th National Congress when he stated:

We should fully implement the Party's education policy, foster virtue through education, enhance our students' well-rounded development, promote equity in education, and nurture a new generation of capable young people who have a good and all-round moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetical grounding, and are well-prepared to join the socialist cause (Xi, 2017).

Reflecting the call of the New Era, the most recent reform to the PE and Health Curricula strives to:

Reflect advanced educational thought and concepts, pay attention to education reform in the informationised environment, and students' individualised and diversified learning and development needs, promote the transformation of talent training modes, focus on developing students' core competencies, update in a timely way the content and discourse system of instruction' (MoE, 2017, pp. vii-viii).

The rationale for PE is clearly described as:

A subject based on life, being life oriented, and aiming to improve the quality of life, the PE and Health curriculum has... irreplaceable importance for improving students' physical and mental health, helping them build strong physique, promoting the construction of 'Healthy China' enhancing the vitality of the Chinese nation, facilitating the progress of social civilization' (MoE, 2017:1).

The rationale for the curriculum in its current format results from the following MoE objectives:

1. Implementing the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and the guiding philosophy of 'health first' to promote students' healthy and all round development;
2. Respecting students' learning needs and cultivating their love for sports;
3. Reforming curriculum content and teaching methods to improve students' comprehensive ability and character;
4. Focusing on cultivating students' sports expertise and laying the foundation for their lifelong participation in sports; and
5. Establishing a diverse learning assessment system to encourage students to learn and develop better.

At early stages of development; kindergarten, elementary, PE/Health provision reiterates the health, sport and fitness goals but pays additional attention to making physical activity fun and enjoyable. Latterly, this has been enshrined within the experimental curriculum reform programme *Keep Daily Life*. This is an ethos but also a teaching and learning plan that provides schools, teachers, pupils and parents with resources to support children's lifelong physical activity (KDL, 2023).

As pupils progress through the school system, the goals of the subject re-emphasise the child's future role in society with PE and Health lessons, with Middle and High Schools now targeting the goal to:

Help students hold the correct values, form essential characters and develop key abilities which are related to PE and Health and are required in their future development. In this way, students can develop a positive life attitude featuring optimism, enterprising spirit, and vitality, maintain physical and mental health, build a stronger physique, and thus get ready for a healthy and civilised life in the New Era (KDL, 2023:10).

The PE and Health curriculum standards offer many recommendations for implementation, including teaching suggestions and learning assessment that are based on innovative design, cooperation, problem solving and individual choice. Such reforms in approach and their associated pedagogy provide challenges to existing Chinese PE teachers and their sports performance-orientated culture (Meng *et al.*, 2021). Despite traditional Eastern philosophy being based on holistic human development (see Ames 2016 for a comprehensive description of Confucius teaching and Di, 2016's exploration of Xueji), the high-stakes and one-chance 'Goakao examination', coupled with Chinese National Fitness Programme targets and the PE Physical Examination has led many teachers in China to prioritise very different methods of teaching delivery such as block-repetition and individual practice (Jin, 2013; Xiaofei *et al.* 2021). It is a situation well-recognised by the State and it is here that the Ministry of Education has sought to 'open up' to learn how other countries deal with such challenges in order to enhance its future provision and improve its pupils' experience of PE and Health in the New Era.

The case of investigation

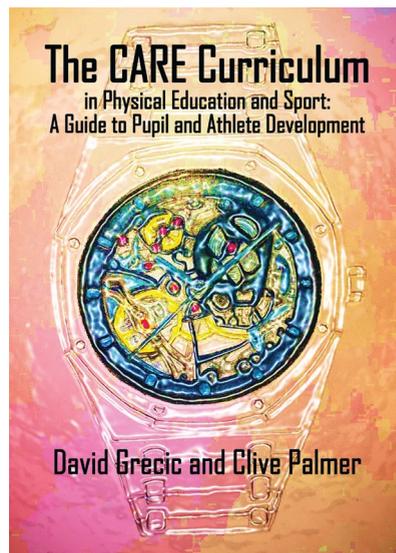
The study site for exploring the New Era for PE training is in mainland China, at a highly ranked provincial level teaching university that has delivered its Sino-UK Cooperative Run Education Project (SUKCREP) since 2018. Specifically, the project is jointly delivered by its staff and supported by those from their UK partner, to provide an Honours Degree programme in Sport and Physical Education. The partnership is supported by the British Council and the Chinese Ministry of Education and aligns with China's New Era of Modernisation aims, with successful SUKCREP; an important measure of China's 'opening up' of Higher Education to the outside world, as well as promoting Chinese culture and values more widely. Sino-foreign cooperative education is also seen as an important way to broaden the approach of individuals' learning and has a major role in the introduction of high-quality education and teaching resources, improving subject knowledge and understanding, and optimizing methods of personal development. With the Chinese government imposing a range of national strategic plans regarding sport and education, Chinese universities have been encouraged to cooperate in the training of talents via PE, with joint cooperatively run programmes therefore being established

in Physical Education. As noted previously, the Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards for Kindergarten and Elementary Schools (MoE, 2020), Senior Middle and High Schools (MoE, 2017) propose contemporary holistic, personalised, creative and cooperative aims and teaching strategies to achieve its objectives. This is a major deviation to the traditional ethos of PE and pedagogy in China, which has driven the Ministry of Education to seek knowledge exchange in many formats. The SUKCREP explored in this study was one area in which a new, holistic and humanistic PE philosophy could be introduced to trainee PE teachers, providing the foundation of future teaching practice and support the subject's contemporary objectives.

The joint programme in Sport and Physical Education is a 4-year Bachelor of Arts Honours degree, arranged in modular format and covering topics around sports performance, sports participation, PE pedagogy, research methods, and health and wellbeing. The degree is underpinned by the CARE philosophy, developed by Grecic and Palmer (2021), as a complete education system for human development. The CARE concept comprises a four-dimensional model focusing on the individual's physical, mental, social, and emotional aspects and how to develop them. These are defined as the:

- **Cognitive,**
- **Active,**
- **Relational,** and
- **Emotional** domains of learning.

Grecic, D. and Palmer, C. (Eds.) (2021) *The CARE Curriculum in Physical Education and Sport: A Guide to Pupil and Athlete Development*. Sport and Wellbeing Press, Preston, UK. ISBN: 978-0-9955744-6-5



The CARE Curriculum offers a compendium of ideas, concepts and theories that challenge and develop every area of personal learning. It focuses on providing the support necessary for all people, whether children or adults, to become versatile, outstanding individuals with transferable life skills that can be applied to any subsequent sports, education or employment field. It is this philosophy and its application to practice on which the teacher training praxis of the joint programme is built.

Following extensive change to State policy in response to China's Second century aim of modernisation, little is known about how effectively this is occurring in different sectors of society. Despite the 'opening up' of Chinese education, few studies that have examined the situation at Sino-UK cooperatively run programmes (e.g. Hu, 2020) and even fewer have attended to those delivering sport and PE programmes (e.g. Xi *et al.*, 2022). Given the importance afforded by the State to this area and following the recent reforms to the PE national curricula, it would seem prudent to draw on the viewpoints of key stakeholders to investigate how effective Transnational Education (TNE) provision is in sharing new knowledge to prepare its teacher trainee students to deliver the nation's human development objectives. It is therefore the perceptions of those managing, delivering, and experiencing the CARE Curriculum at University X that we sought in order to learn more about their lived experiences. In this way we sought information about the challenges and necessary actions to ensure such holistic and humanistic philosophy and practices as those enshrined in the CARE Curriculum are successfully facilitated and received by trainee teachers in China, in order to underpin future PE and Health delivery and create China's citizens of the New Era.

Method

Our aim was to provide unique insights into how the CARE Curriculum delivery was perceived and experienced by key actors, and thus the study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy. Both pragmatism and critical realism did, however, bear influence on our methods. From a pragmatic perspective, as practitioners with a vested interest in the case study we hoped our research would make a difference and enable our Joint Programme to improve and grow. Our results and discussion demonstrate this by providing key recommendations for change (see figure 2). The critical realist position also influenced our data collection and analysis, that is, we sought to dig deeper into meaning and discourse to better understand the hidden influences and influencers that shape our participants' experiences and world views. The study's design followed a multi-method qualitative case study approach to collect a wide range of data via reflective narratives, individual interviews and semi-structured focus groups from a range of stakeholders. The qualitative data were supported by observations, journal and meeting notes, informal discussions and student input that informed our construction of meaning and results.

Participants and procedures

University ethical approval was granted for the study. Purposeful sampling was applied to identify stakeholders with a range of roles and inputs into the Joint Programme. Participants therefore included students, teachers, as well as programme and partnership managers from both institutions. All participants granted their informed consent.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with managers (n=6) using a schedule designed around the aims, philosophy and operation of the course. For example, What is the overarching aim of the Joint Programme? What ideas and concepts is the programme based upon? How does the programme delivery achieve the desired outcomes? What are the key challenges for successful implementation? What changes would you like to make to the programme and why? Following these interviews, a series of focus groups (n=8) were facilitated by the research team. These groups consisted of the programme's Chinese teachers (n=3, total 15 teachers) UK teachers (n=1, total 7 teachers) and programme student representatives across each year of delivery (n=4, total 17 students). The focus groups followed a consistent format guided by the Epistemological Chain framework for PE and Sport (Grecic, 2022) Topics within the chain, such as philosophy, relationships, environment, methods and so on were discussed in turn with prompts, ensuring the participants considered the strengths and limitations of the current programme, potential improvements and the associated enablers or barriers to change. All interviews were conducted in English language with translation of complex terms performed using a range of applications including Google Translate, Accurate Translate, NetEase, King of Words and Spoken English 8000, depending on the participants' individual preferences and accessibility. Data were recorded via Microsoft Teams software (with a Dictaphone back up) and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analysed via Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This approach was deemed most suitable due to the research team's wealth of experience working in China, teaching PE, and tutoring trainee teachers. It was this insight coupled with numerous classroom and practical teaching and observations, journal notes and research team discussions that informed the theme construction. This process itself followed Braun and Clarke's six stages of RTA adopting a deductive – inductive approach initially based upon the Transnational Cooperative Education model (Grecic, 2022) and the *Sport For Development Framework* (Keane *et al.*, 2021). This abductive process of reflecting back and forth against existing concepts, new ideas and personal experiences finally resulted in the creation of the five major themes depicting the perceptions of the CARE Curriculum in practice. Reflecting the pragmatic stance, this process also enabled the grouping of recommendations received from all stakeholders into these 5 newly developed themes (see figure 2).

Trustworthiness

To improve trustworthiness within the current study, researcher reflexivity was crucial to ensure the interviewees were aware of their own potential biases at both the data collection and analysis stages with various measures taken to recognise,

accept and reflect (Jones *et al.*, 2012). These measures included feedback from others in the research team as critical friends, pilot interviews and each author’s own self-reflection. In practical terms, the research team discussions resulted in amendments to the interview guide questions as well as reflections on how to explain and explore alternative interpretations of the data. Member reflection was also considered but discounted due to the time constraints placed on teachers, managers and students, and the high turnover of the Chinese staff involved (three managers and eight lecturers had moved universities/positions shortly after data collection). It was also felt that the cultural expectations of those involved would also most likely see participants agreeing with findings and not wishing to develop data from others in deference to social ‘status’, ‘respect’ and ‘face saving’ in Chinese [meaning] Ren, Li, and Mianzi, (Grecic, 2021; Zhao, 2019).

Results

Data were analysed with over 700 meaning units identified that were subsequently built up into 14 sub-themes, 5 major themes and finally storybook themes were developed presented in figure 1 - described below:

| Story Book Theme | Major Theme | Sub-Themes |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| (i) Challenges to effective implementation | Cultural norms and practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role and status of physical education • Expectations of staff and students based on working practices |
| | Communication for learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for CARE context to be sold • Line of command challenges • Parental influence as the key decision makers? • Challenge of language and its workarounds |
| | Coherence of philosophy and practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misaligned of aims and management structures • Philosophical and political influences – are we willing partners? • Structural building blocks– modules, assignments, assessment. • Practical pedagogy and needs analysis |
| (ii) Required revisions to practice | Capacity to deliver | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources - planning protocols • Training and development |
| | Clarity of purpose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits to pupils, staff and wider community • Rationale for change |

Figure 1: Stakeholder perceptions of the Joint Programme of Sport and Physical Education

(i) Challenges to effective implementation This storybook theme encapsulated how culture, communication differences and the lack of coherence created serious challenges to the Joint Programmes' current and future operation.

The **Culture - role and status of Physical Education** major theme provided a range of interesting responses. Unsurprisingly cultural differences were at the centre of many comments which reflect He and Lui's (2017) study findings that managing these differences is crucial to the success of East-West partnerships. Many of the Chinese experienced teachers and managers expressed a very performance orientated view of the subject with [Chinese Teacher] CT2 explaining, 'It is about improving performance, improving pupils' talents, making them better at (the sport)'. It was clear, however, that the younger Chinese staff had a more developmental view of PE and their role. CT5 described his and his colleagues' aim as, 'We want to develop good people, help them learn, communicate better and help others. Be better at life!'

At a management level, [Chinese Manager] CM1 noted how the aim of her courses were evolving. She stated,

PE is changing – we have many problems now. Health is the focus now. Physical and mental health due to all the pressure of study. We (our Government) have made changes and we must focus on this important area now.

The UK staff interviewed recognised the different drivers of their provision, describing their work on the programme as being 'twin track... it is about giving the students the skills to improve (both) a child's health and performance' [UKTeacher] (UKT5). UKT1 described what this entailed:

We have three strands. We help students understand performance, health and participation, and PE and sports role in society. This will help them become more knowledgeable and informed teachers in order to have a positive impact in their future schools (UKT1).

The UK teachers' responses clearly describe a model of PE desired by the Ministry of Education and underpinned by the State's objectives for health, education and society. Most of their Chinese colleagues embraced this new national focus for PE, yet there still exist a number of staff who adopt a more traditional conceptualisation of the subject. Such findings are supported by studies of Chinese PE practice that demonstrate teacher preferences for skill based repetition, didactic transmission of sport activity knowledge, and basic approaches to contemporary health and student-centred teaching (Xiaofei et al., 2021; Lui and Lui, 2015; Huang *et al.*, 2018). Interestingly, Meng and colleagues (Meng *et al.*, 2021) explored teachers' state of readiness to incorporate PE policy reforms and embrace a holistic approach to health education through PE and identified that many felt unprepared and incapable of effecting real change. Research also highlights that the intended

pedagogical changes associated with ‘Health First’ have not materialised (Jin, 2013). In schools, PE teachers are criticised by the government for failing to implement the new curriculum, while PE teachers report that they have not had sufficient support and training to implement the CEPEandH curriculum (Huang *et al.*, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2019; Meng *et al.*, 2021).

Expectations of staff and students based on working practices. Here, CM3 attributed the change of direction for PE to the partnership. He explained, ‘We want to be better. We want to learn everything about how a UK university runs a degree. How do you manage, deliver, train, support and quality assure the course’. The Chinese teachers themselves seemed to value the developmental experience, not only for the profession, the subject and the university, but for their own personal advancement too. For example, CT11 stated, ‘I have been told I will teach on this programme. I will learn lots of new ideas, lots of new theories, this is the new focus of the Chinese curriculum. This will help my career and help get another job’.

Although this sentiment is laudable and reflective of how the programme had been presented to and by the Chinese partner, in practice there remained a mismatch in the practice observed on the ground. For example, UKM2 noted:

Many of our team say the right things, nod and agree but out on the pitch or in the gym they resort back to what they know. When challenged (why they are not adopting the new ethos or pedagogy aligned to this) they explain that the students don’t like it, they don’t understand it, so they deliver games and activities that they feel more confident with.

Such sentiments have been noted in other studies (Gunder and Raghuram 2017, Li *et al.*, 2019, Lui and Lui, 2015). When these students were interviewed however, they explained that despite their concerns about the lack of content knowledge transmission, the teaching had increased their motivation, enjoyment and increased their cultural awareness (Gunter and Raghuram, 2017; Jin *et al.*, 2020). The reluctance for Chinese staff to fully embrace the CARE Curriculum ethos may lie at a much deeper level. In order to meet learning outcomes and support students’ learning, teachers are expected to be creative and adopt student-centred teaching approaches that align with the course philosophy. For these teachers, the implementation of the CARE Curriculum has increased the expectations of their role, led to a loss of connection with familiar (old) practices and resulted in additional work to enact these changes, all of which mirror findings from classroom PE teachers when they explain why the CEPEandH curriculum has not been welcomed by all involved (Huang *et al.*, 2018). In the Huang study, PE teachers suggested that the change from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogy challenged their authority in the class and even had negative implications for the subject. These concerns were seemingly shared by the team when challenging each other’s practical delivery.

Communication. This theme mainly concerned responses relating to how staff communicated with students, parents, managers and each other. Both Chinese and UK staff recognised the **Challenge of language and its workarounds**. Previous [Trans-National Education] TNE research has identified the language barrier in terms of partner-to-partner communications as a key challenge in appreciating the many nuances of programme delivery (He and Lui, 2017). The topic of language relates to the cognitive load and increased work demands that are placed on all non-native English speakers. UKT6 explained his colleagues' challenges in this regard, 'Thinking in Chinese, translating to English, listening and translating back to Chinese to respond in English is very difficult, takes a lot of energy and is very slow'. CT12 agreed, providing the following details in respect to assessment, 'I translate the student's work in my mind to think about the content and assess it. I think of my feedback then translate this back into English to deliver it'. Discussing the impact upon students, UKT7 explained the difficulties they face in lessons:

In school, students read, write and listen to English but very rarely speak or really communicate in the language. Now [at university] we are asking them to stand up and present, engage in discussion, lead a practice or team, and reflect on the experience. This is scary for many of them so they hide and let the better students take over. We offer extra classes and tutoring but using English is a real barrier the students face.

Interestingly all participant groups noted the **Parental influence as the key decision makers** in the education process and the value of clearly communicating the benefits of the CARE Curriculum to ensure it is widely known for recruiters to promote. CM3 explained why this would be so important:

Parents decide where their children go and choose here because this is a high ranked university with high status. They want their children to pass with a high grade, with lots of awards. We need them to know more about our course and we need to promote this highly at every recruitment fayre.

The key role played by parents is supported by research around the world (Craig *et al.*, 2018; Keller and Whiston, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2004). In China the familial relationship is reinforced further by Confucian teachings about values and virtues with respect and hierarchy described in the practice of the father teaching the son (Fairbank and Goldman, 1998). Linked to this, the UK team expressed a desire to learn more about how the students were involved in their study decisions with their parents and how this impacted upon how the teachers could connect and communicate with them. For example, UKT1 explained:

We need to learn more about why the students are here, how and why have they chosen this course, what experiences have they had in school. Then we can tailor our lessons to better fit their needs.

Finally, **Line of command challenges** were noted predominantly by UK teachers and managers. Responses noted issues around not knowing who to

communicate with on specific issues, what was the chain of command when things needed action. For example, UKT7 recounted how this had caused difficulties when he needed to change the teaching schedule to add additional support sessions. He explained, 'it is the lack of decisions, or person available to make a decision that slows us down and is frustrating'. This frustration was equally apparent on the Chinese side of the partnership, as CM3 remarks:

Here we wait for the University to direct planning and changes to staffing resources, facility usage and teaching plans. You want to change and react quickly which is good but often it is the Module Leader, Course Leader, Programme Leader that request change rather than your Senior Leaders through the required channels.

Such line of command communication delays are recognised in TNE partnerships across China (Dai, 2019), where the bureaucratic hierarchy and a high-power-distance culture can lead to reduced and restricted communication. Indeed Dai's (2019: 336) study of a Sino-US TNE partnership mirrored our findings, stating that the 'rigid and strict reporting lines characterized by hierarchical relations' which created 'long communication channels, restricted and impersonal communication and slowness in information flow'.

Coherence - the alignment, or lack thereof, between the partners' aspirations, structures, processes and practices gained considerable attention from each participant group. From a student perspective, they explained that 'Students just want a degree. Not many want to teach PE. They just want an English degree and then to move on. Many will try to learn a Masters or go overseas' [student focus group] (SFG1). From a teaching perspective, both UK and Chinese groups highlighted many granular level issues regarding misalignment of teaching and assessment practices. For example, CT12 explained, 'We mark out of 100 and students need the best grades to get the awards. It (the UK system) is too low for them. They don't understand and the parents are angry'. CT3 described how the course structure was also confusing for Chinese students. She noted, 'here for their exit and final degree award every year counts for our students not just the final year. They can't change their efforts just at the end in China (in order to get a final score higher than their average score over 4 years)'.

UK teachers focussed many of their comments on different pedagogical expectations and the challenges that this led to. UKT5 discussed the struggle to get input and response from his students and how difficult group activities were to facilitate. He described a situation where, 'students feel confused and angry by this teaching method. They think their team won't try and it will impact badly on them. They don't like it when I decide on the groups. They get upset and complain'. These findings are again reflected in research at the school level, where teachers viewed student-centred pedagogy not as something to be embraced as a means to enhance

opportunities and provide experiences, but rather as a threat to student achievement (Meng *et al.*, 2021). School PE teachers' concerns about student-centred pedagogy also reflect a conceptual, deep-rooted and longstanding tradition in China emphasising respect for authority and, as such, the teachers are reluctant to relinquish control of learning in lessons (Yin and Buck, 2015). Many PE teachers appreciate that a generational change is happening as thus their relationship with pupils is changing too. It has been noted, however, that teachers in China are increasingly frustrated and disenchanted by their perceived loss of discipline and their inability to adopt new pedagogies (Jin, 2013).

Finally, the Chinese managers also recognised the conflicting needs and expectations of the curriculum and its delivery. In particular, they worried that essential components of the Chinese school system may be lost and that every effort needed to be made to prepare the students for their future jobs. CM4 described what is needed, 'We've not covered all the CARE areas before but we need to make sure the students know how to teach in a Chinese school, take a register, get pupils in lines quickly, do the tests'. The managers here seemed aware of the cognitive dissonance that existed between their own traditional teaching philosophy and the practices required to action the CARE Curriculum (Festinger, 1957). The challenge of meeting various and potentially conflicting needs is noted in Chinese school-based research, by both students and teachers (Jin *et al.*, 2020), yet research promotes the importance of philosophical alignment with practice in many sporting contexts (Grecic, 2022; Crowther *et al.*, 2022; Collins *et al.*, 2017). This has been identified as a major challenge to participants on the case study programme and will require attention if both staff and students are to flourish. More of these proposed amendments are presented in the next storybook theme, set out below.

(ii) Required Revisions to Practice. This second storybook theme presents additional contested areas of thinking. Here, however, the themes convey areas that offer tangible headings upon which future actions can be based to effect meaningful change to the joint programme.

Capacity - Resources - Planning protocols. In regard to resources, although participants recognised that the programme is well supported financially and politically, many expressed concerns with how the course structure placed demands on the timetabling of facilities, staff time and teaching activities. CT3 noted her feelings that the course had 'too much to fit in with all the other topics and preparation for assessments, too many students to get through and not enough space for them to practice'. UK teachers also experienced frustration in this respect with UK5 explaining, 'We plan a session, turn up and there is another group in there. We end up using a small space at the side or back'. Although an individual's perception, it nevertheless implies a larger issue around those involved fully understanding what

is needed in ensuring the course philosophy underpinning New Era delivery, can be delivered in practice.

Training and Development - The course leader also described the importance of ensuring he had adequate resources for his programme. In particular, he noted the importance of sharing how the programme fits together with colleagues. Unfortunately, however, even this was difficult with him explaining:

Getting everyone we need together to go through the plans and support delivery is nearly impossible. Everyone is in demand on other programmes and with other modules' (UKT1).

This aspect was clearly recognised by both partner's management teams, with UKM2 explaining:

We offer workshops when we visit, staff development sessions online and bi-weekly meetings. The engagement is very poor though as everyone is so busy with their teaching commitments, research, and other roles'.

CM1 appreciated her teachers' situation and explained her intentions:

We would like to send teachers to you (the UK) for training. They need to learn your methods and understand the course. We don't have time here. We will send them in summer.

Although clearly such an action would be a positive step forward, taking Chinese staff and training them out of country, in a different environment with students who have been socialised into a very different view of PE brings into question the value and transferability of such an approach. These comments are, however, supported by findings from PE teachers attempting to implement the Health First PE curriculum in Chinese Middle and High Schools. Tasked with delivering this PE educational reform, these teachers were not fully prepared via their PE Teacher Education nor ongoing professional development to incorporate reformed policies in the subject and embrace a holistic approach to health education through PE (Jin, 2013; Meng *et al.*, 2021).

Clarity - Benefits to pupils, staff and wider community. From a management perspective, it was clear as to why both universities had been keen to join the partnership. CM2 detailed how:

We will learn how you teach PE. Our partner schools will notice the difference. Everyone will improve, our staff, students and schools'.

At the same time, however, CM2 fell back into a performance pedagogy stance, possibly forged from his own experiences as an international level athlete:

Students and staff need to know where else CARE is used, who uses it, that it is successful, that win's things.

As a person tasked with leading change in his institution, this perceived need - to justify and validate the new approach through objective success and sporting victories, seemed strange and at odds with the altruistic ethos of the CARE Curriculum and the new Chinese PE and H reforms. Indeed, from the UK perspective, whilst the holistic philosophy of the subject and course was recognised it was the corporate benefits highlighted from Healy's research that were expressed the most (Healy, 2020), with UKM1 stating:

It enables us to promote our work. It gives us profile and reach into new areas. It is a great opportunity to make a difference and share our ideas and experiences'.

UKM2 had an even more transactional view of the partnership, explaining that:

It brings in good money for us. It shows our reach and impact and the value of our work.

Rationale for change. In addition to the high-level State policy, participants believed that more clarity was needed about the nature and changes in course content and delivery methods. Chinese teachers noted their desire for, 'more staff development, lectures, training, presentations. We need to know what is CARE and how does it translate in China' (CT5). Equally, from a UK perspective, teachers described how having access to the newly translated Chinese Curriculum Standards would be a 'game-changer'. UKT3 explained:

This is what we need to show the students why we are doing this. Finally, we will be able to link our lessons and content to the exact page in their curriculum and show them how important these new ideas are. They will be able to refer to the translation and see this is something they have to do if they are to be a teacher in China too.

Studies identify the cultural differences in teaching practices and the difficulty to bring about change to traditional teaching practices, which are often associated with Confucian approaches to education wherein the teacher feels a responsibility for 'transmitting' content to students (Jin, Parr and Dooley, 2020). The Health First reforms for the New Era seek to encourage student-centred learning, critical and creative thinking, curiosity in exploring world knowledge and cultures, and more diverse communicative skills, all of which should help validate and justify the joint programme's ethos and its embedding of the CARE philosophy.

Need for CARE curriculum to be sold. Overlapping with the theme above, the construction of this theme and its specific target was focussed on staff interactions. The UK team especially had recognised this topic of potential confusion with the course leader proposing, 'We need to explain our position more, our course philosophy, why are we pushing it? Why should the staff buy-in to it with us?' (UKT1). It was felt that, if teachers were clear on the changes to their traditional practice, they would more effectively pass this information on to the students. UKT6 stated that 'if the teachers could understand the learning journey better, they can

better explain what is happening to the students'. Despite the picture being painted here, CT1, a lecturer who had been with the programme since its start, described her very positive experience and perspective:

When I started, I didn't know anything about CARE. As I have learnt about it and how to use it, I see its benefits. We need to get all teachers in (the Province) aware and using it. We need our students to embed it in their practice so children enjoy lessons, move more and develop life skills.

In similar studies of TNE in China, the data also revealed substantial differences in educational concepts and teaching and learning strategies between the specific educational systems because of the contrasts in social, political, and cultural contexts (He and Lui, 2018; Hefferman *et al.*, 2010). Initial tensions were appeased following extensive staff development and promotion with some university staff eventually reaching a position where they highly valued the intercultural practice (Jin *et al.*, 2020). It would appear that TNE staff development programmes providing all parties with quantitative and qualitative evidence, as suggested by Jin (2013), would have great value here.

Discussion

Unsurprisingly the challenges described above seem reflective of many ongoing debates within schools, teacher training institutions and TNE in general. Regarding our case study and context, it appears we have mirrored the traditional West-to-East delivery of educational products, in particular that of UK universities who have provided their educational products to partners across the world. However, given the shift from West-to-East in global industrial power and influence, many have questioned the continued rationale, efficacy and legitimacy of traditional TNE partnership templates (Hefferman, *et al.*, 2010; Huang, 2003; Stein, 2016). Within our investigation, we recognise many of the tensions such provision creates at the point of delivery. We echo the calls for the reconceptualization of the *donor – receiver* relationship (Hu and Willis, 2017), in this instance with the CARE Curriculum seen as a framework to support rather than usurp or positively disrupt existing working practices. Reflecting on the data, we note that, despite the two institutions forging an alliance intended to attract students, establish international branches and sell knowledge-based products together, the uncovered challenges must be managed in such a way to enable both partners to flourish and feel empowered to deliver the curricula to best prepare students to flourish for the New Era of PE.

Some of the management and leaders' responses seem to align with Healey's view of such partnerships being based on the financial rewards on offer (Healey, 2018). However, they also infer the neoliberal benefits relating to academic and reputational gains as well as raised international profile (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019).

Strangely, what was not mentioned directly but was evident in the data were the inherent challenges of TNE partnerships, such as the post-colonial implications, institutional conflicting interests, the risk of poor-quality teaching, as well as concerns over the potential role that higher education plays in projecting soft power (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019; De Wit and Altbach, 2021; Healy, 2018). Thankfully, despite historical donor / host relationships being the starting point of the case study partnership, new attitudes are emerging that are aligned to more social and cultural contexts and the needs of the local populations they serve (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019; Jones *et al.*, 2021). Hopefully, this will help the programme develop into a more valued and impactful educational opportunity for the current students and thus the pupils they will eventually affect through their own teaching.

In terms of the case's specific PE subject focus, recent post-Covid changes in China have served to increase the role and purpose of PE, as the government is seeking a vast number of new, highly trained PE teachers who can deliver against both the Health 2030 and Sporting Nation goals. The challenge here is not just to deliver more PE but High-Quality PE (UNESCO, 2015). High quality PE for the New Era should bring about a closer coming together of teaching philosophy with the perceived value of subject. It is also prudent to view the results above from a socio-cultural perspective, specifically recognising the impact of socialisation. Socialisation can be described as the social processes by which individuals learn to conform to the norms, expectations and values espoused in a given culture or context (Cashmore, 2005). In many cases, individuals *passively* internalise these norms, expectations and values, but more contemporary approaches to socialisation appreciate the *active* role that individuals take in shaping their identities through dialogical means – that is, when viewed as a two-way process of being *socialised* and being the *socialising agent*. Socialisation then involves social processes of accepting and rejecting certain norms, expectations and values.

Due to the powerful socialising effects of Chinese culture and the country's deep-rooted traditional PE practices, a pedagogical culture shift may prove challenging. Our study relating to the teaching profession must also frame many of the participants' responses by understanding and appreciating the processes by which they become teachers. Extremely important during their training and most relevant for our Chinese PE trainee teacher students, is the subjective warrant they bring with them into the profession, which is described as 'an individual's perceptions of the requirements of a given profession along with a self-evaluation of their abilities to meet these requirements' (Richards *et al.*, 2014:116). This warrant links directly to philosophy-based responses about the way things should be in PE. Such views are typically grounded in their habituses (the various values and associated predispositions that pervade their lives) as well as the contexts that they

operate (Bourdieu, in Hunter, 2004). This was most evident when listening to students' reflections of their own PE experiences as pupils and what PE now needs for the New Era. Here, students described their own lessons as boring, standing around, being talked at, doing nothing, with disinterested or absent teachers. This had had a profound effect as they described their aspirations to make PE interesting, active, fun, meaningful and valued by all.

Linked to the PE profession, Lawson (1986:107) described and defined the concept of occupational socialisation, this being:

All kinds of socialisation that initially influence persons to enter the field of Physical Education and later are responsible for their perceptions and actions as teacher educators and teachers.

In addition, he observed that three distinct types of socialisation; acculturation, professional socialisation, and organisational socialisation, are each likely to mould PE teachers' perspectives about their subject and the pedagogical practices they employed (Curtner-Smith, 2001:81).

Returning back to our data, now framed by our socialisation reflections, the move to New Era student-centred pedagogy may prove challenging. Reflecting traditional Chinese culture, the teacher has been seen as a person of wisdom and honour, to be respected and trusted with students expected to be obedient (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). Yang, Zheng and Li (2006) reiterate the profound influence that traditional Chinese culture, dominated by Confucianism, has on the teaching and learning philosophy and practice (Yang, Zheng, and Li 2006). In the PE class, discipline and obedience are considered as key to class organisation, so if teachers perceive a loss of authoritative control and decision-making in lessons, this could present a significant risk their professional reputation and identity. Furthermore, forms of student-centred pedagogy are predicated upon more democratic approaches to teaching, which clash with deeply entrenched cultural scripts in China (Grecic 2022). For example, the honour, dignity and self-worth people feel in social situations, known as 'Mianzi' (translated as 'saving face'), can be compromised when interactions during lessons could publicly expose teachers' misconceptions and misunderstandings.

A move away from collectivist values and practices to individual choice and development could also present problems. Xiaofei *et al.* (2021) note that, in China, the predominance of collective action in all types of work confers the teacher respect and high social status, preserving a cultural relationship between teachers and students that is unequal in nature (Zhao, 2019). Thus, the challenge of implementing an individual approach as in the case study, is that it promotes educational values that are almost the opposite to those many students and teachers will have observed

and experienced during their training and within their previous teaching roles. Chan and Rao (2009) made the valuable point that, while ‘the West’ remains an important resource for influencing educational reform, local values in China are not abandoned when adopting new Western values. This sentiment is at the heart of our suggested reforms (see figure 2) and our desire and commitment to establish a truly integrated programme that is culturally aware, professionally valued, and brings the best elements of both partners’ educational systems, in order to meet the needs of the New Era students, teachers and society.

Conclusion

Meng *et al.* (2021) note that China, like other countries, has borrowed ‘best practices’ from other ‘reference societies’, and educational policy from ‘the West’ has shaped curriculum reforms, in our case the sport, physical culture and Physical Education ideologies (Li *et al.*, 2019; Lui and Lui, 2015). However, ‘policy borrowing is by no means a straightforward, predictable and uncontested process’ Meng *et al.*, 2021:602). On the contrary, reform initiatives are (re)interpreted, challenged and modified in such a way that the final form they take in a locality may be very different from that in the original setting (Burdett and O’Donnell, 2016; Herold, 2020) as seems to be the case with the Chinese CHPE curriculum.

Our study, which is the first to dig deeply using qualitative methods into a Sino-UK joint programme in the specific area of PE, found many challenges reflective of more general TNE partnerships. However, we found the cultural shift demanded by China’s New Era modernization played the major role within the data exploration and analysis. It was evident that with China’s comprehensive education plans there had already been a coming together of East and Western philosophy despite socialisation’s limiting factor for many of the participants.

To conclude, the CARE curriculum was deemed an appropriate model to support pupil development and wellbeing in this context. A number of challenges were identified when applying it fully in China. Suggestions were made to modify its communication, delivery, assessment, and professional training support to truly establish a TNCE partnership that can more effectively operate in a Chinese cultural context so that learning and all its associated benefits could be shared amongst all involved (figure 2). A closer coming together will be achieved by adapting, ‘owning’ and researching the CARE Curriculum in this TNE context (figure 1) with this study intended to provide a template for others embarking or reviewing their own TNE partnerships.

| Focus | Future Actions |
|----------------------|--|
| Culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural awareness training compulsory for all involved in programme. History of sport and PE units. Teaching standards and working practices. Relationship management techniques. Communication protocols. • Improve progression and work market understanding – visits to home and international schools and sports companies, • Create learning based rather than performance-based awards. • Celebrate success engaging with the change process, applying teaching innovations. • Establish professional development research projects around culture and philosophy of programme |
| Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand wants and needs of students and staff – honest appraisals, individual student feedback as well as from student representatives • In house – wider University promotion - to all staff so they know who and what is on their campus – benefits to them. • Link to PR strategy – communicate content and rationale but also focus on innovation, value, co-creation and future impact • Involve parents – invite to induction, yearly presentations, targeted SM feeds, create business network, involve in programme governance • Accept value of learning consolidation in native language. Offer bilingual feedback that could be tapered off in later years. • Explore challenges of meaning |
| Coherence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint joint management position/s to connect to both systems • Involve future teaching teams in initial scoping discussions and planning meetings • Better understand assessment priorities and embed key metrics • Appreciate diverse pedagogy and embrace difference. Use this as a strength of the programme and an explicit example of integration |
| Capacity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Joint Training Centre – identify future workforce early - create staff pipeline and mentor system – attract in-country applications to wider CPD to promote opportunities. • Source schools for placements, demonstration teaching, wider CPD to promote course, better understand facility confines for lesson programming |
| Clarity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a Public Relations strategy - identify key stakeholders in order to promote rationale and benefits – understand value judgements • Define roles better – what students and staff will do, how, and why. Individual Action Plans with regular reviews. • Reporting mechanisms – remove ‘twin track’ approach – need single source – go to person to get things done in a timely manner |

Figure 2: Future Actions for Joint Programme in Sport and Physical Education Evolution

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Reviewer Comments

This paper affords a valuable, practical, and grounded insight into a Trans-National Education initiative in China, particularly focused on fostering mutual understanding between Chinese and British educational systems. It highlights collaborative efforts, such as British universities establishing campuses in China, setting up joint degree programs, and partnerships with Chinese institutions, all

aimed at enhancing the understanding of British pedagogical methods, critical thinking approaches, and curriculum design within a Chinese context. Furthermore, the paper offers a robust methodology to probe and report on the experiences of staff and students in this educational venture, where data collection is well explained and highly appropriate to this international context. The clarity in outlining the research design strengthens the reliability of the findings, while the careful selection of participants ensures a representative sample. Additionally, the paper competently contextualises the data within the broader framework of Trans-National Education, offering insights into the practical challenges and successes encountered by both staff and students as they navigate the British approach to education in a Chinese setting.

The CARE Curriculum provides a new, comprehensive foundation to bring about change in a culture that, on the ground, often resists change. However, without the underlying structure of the CARE Curriculum, the educational intervention in China might easily be swayed off course, with Chinese PE reverting to its norms, as the authors point out in their discussion. The authors also emphasise that while the CARE Curriculum introduces British pedagogical practices and promotes critical thinking, these ideals must continually be reinforced to prevent a reversion to more traditional, (often authoritarian) range teaching methods. The paper acknowledges the difficulty of balancing innovation with cultural sensitivity, stressing the need for ongoing support and adaptation to ensure the sustainability of these trans-national educational efforts.

The work of these authors and PE researchers in this challenging educational setting has the potential to transform lives by widening access to good quality PE and healthy activities for sectors of the population in China that will ultimately benefit. Their focus on embedding a sustainable and progressive curriculum in China's PE landscape not only enhances physical well-being but also promotes the development of social and mental resilience. The true impact of this research is yet to be fully realised, socially, physically, mentally, and culturally. However, by laying the groundwork for long-term change, this study opens the door for future educational research and reforms that may ultimately reshape Chinese Physical Education in schools, bringing it closer to a more inclusive and holistic model of teaching and learning in PE, while respecting local traditions.