“I Didn’t Even Know That There Was Such a Thing as Aboriginal Games”:
A Figurational Analysis of How Indigenous Students Experience Physical Education and School Sport

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to find out how Indigenous students from Year 7 to 10, at three government funded schools in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), experience physical education (PE) and school sport. The study also sought to gain insights into how this meaning came to be, and the key processes and events over time that were most influential. The research was undertaken in the context of a national curriculum for Health and Physical Education (HPE) being recently introduced into the ACT. Justification for the research is that no study of this kind has ever been undertaken in ACT schools. Therefore, there is no empirical data about how Indigenous students experience PE and school sport. It is argued that this gap in the research facilitates fantasies, assumptions and stereotypes about Indigenous students.

There were three research questions in this study which were: How do Indigenous students experience PE and school sport at the three high schools selected for the research? How did these Indigenous students’ experiences of PE and school sport come to be? What events and long-term processes have influenced Indigenous students’ experiences of PE and school sport at the three high schools? Figurational sociology incorporating racialization theory, was used as the theoretical framework for this study due to its usefulness in interpreting social problems processually. In figurational sociology the notion of process is central and is the study of long-term practices and occurrences for understanding social phenomena. Along with process, the idea of the figuration or configuration is also fundamental to figurational sociology and is used to represent relationships of individuals, systems and processes.

An accompanying methodology sympathetic to figurational sociology was adopted that involved reconstructing three inter-related levels of the figurations studied: the macro, micro and sociogenesis levels. The macro level depicts the contemporary social structure or
‘rules’ of the figurations; the micro level the individuals that exist within those social structures, and the sociogenesis being how the respective figurations came to be. Websites, photos, a school plan and current documents were used as data sources at the macro level as they were deemed as being most suitable for answering the first research question. Interviews and archive documents were used for the micro and sociogenesis levels respectively.

This research found that a single figuration for PE and school sport existed that interconnected the PE and school sport figurations at each of the three schools. Within this single figuration, Eurocentric PE and school sport was almost exclusively programmed. Indigenous students were found to experience PE and school sport within what was almost entirely a European frame of reference that lacked acknowledgment of their own culture. Another main finding, consistent with the literature about adult Indigenous sport, was that the students were stacked towards football codes of rugby, and Australian Rules. Stacking in the context of this study means that Indigenous students were encouraged by HPE teachers and non-Indigenous students to play only certain sports based upon racialized perceptions. The main long-term processes found to have influenced the single figuration were ‘invented tradition’, HPE teacher and student predispositions towards certain values and beliefs, a form of civilizing process and racialization.
Acknowledgements

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# List of Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT DET</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT ETD</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory Education and Training Directorate (the name changed in 2010 from ACT DET to ACT ETD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT SSSA</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory Secondary School Sports Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEC</td>
<td>Australian Educational Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEO</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFL</td>
<td>Australian Football League</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>Australian Sports Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSRGWA</td>
<td>Department of Sport and Recreation Government of Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>Essential Learning Achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>FMS</td>
<td>Fundamental Movement Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HPE</td>
<td>Health and Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>International Baccalaureate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBMYP</td>
<td>International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEO</td>
<td>Indigenous Education Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICF</td>
<td>Indigenous Critical Friend</td>
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<tr>
<td>KLA</td>
<td>Key Learning Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCEETYA</td>
<td>Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYP</td>
<td>Middle Years Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAIDOC</td>
<td>National Aborigines and Islander Day Observance Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE</td>
<td>Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PETA</td>
<td>Physical Education Teachers Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PETE</td>
<td>Physical Education Teacher Education</td>
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SBCD  School Based Curriculum Development
SSSA  Secondary School Sports Association
UCHERC  University of Canberra Human Ethics in Research Committee
### Key Terms

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Black Americans</td>
<td>People of the United States of America who have African ancestry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charisma</td>
<td>Used in a group context to describe the shared virtuous beliefs that members hold about themselves that distinguish them from groups that they consider to be inferior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Subject/Unit</td>
<td>A compulsory subject/unit of work that students undertake according to their year of study. PE was a core subject in Years 7 and 8 at each school in this research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corroboree</td>
<td>Used in here as an Aboriginal term for an informal gathering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricula</td>
<td>Used as a plural of curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Adolescence</td>
<td>Refers to a band of development for Year 7 and 8 students in the <em>Every Chance to Learn</em> (ACT DET, 2007) curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elective Unit</td>
<td>A unit of study that students can choose. In years 9 and 10, students at the three schools in this research could elect sport and fitness related units instead of PE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential Learning</td>
<td>The learning that students are expected to have completed within set stages of the <em>Every Chance to Learn</em> (ACT DET, 2007) curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Teacher</td>
<td>A teacher who has leadership and management responsibilities typically at a faculty level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td>Describes how Indigenous students encounter physical education and school sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Australians</td>
<td>Refers to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples that</td>
</tr>
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inhabited Australia prior to British colonization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-service Teacher</td>
<td>A teacher who is qualified and working in that capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>The term used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Australians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Traditional Games</td>
<td>Games that were played in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities prior to British colonization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later Adolescence</td>
<td>The term given to describe a band of development for Year 9 and 10 students in the <em>Every Chance to Learn</em> (ACT DET, 2007) curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 Teacher</td>
<td>The name given to classroom teachers including HPE teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Sports</td>
<td>Refers to the most popular sports played in a given nation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>The practice of compulsory teacher transfer in ACT government schools. Usually teachers are allocated five year placements with continuation at the discretion of the relevant school principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-activity Curriculum</td>
<td>A PE curriculum comprised of sports or physical activities taught as units of work typically lasting two or three weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node</td>
<td>The term used in NVIVO computer software for a data code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service Teacher</td>
<td>Someone who is training to be a teacher by attending a university education degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Curriculum</td>
<td>A curriculum that is fixed by policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Sport</td>
<td>Competitive sport in which ACT government secondary schools participate, on a term by term basis organized by the ACT SSSA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Level</td>
<td>Where documents, processes or practices are in widespread use</td>
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across a number of schools.

**Zone** The term given for regional competition for school sport within the ACT.
Conferences and Journal Articles During Candidature

During his candidature the researcher presented at the following peer reviewed conference:


The researcher also published the following peer reviewed journal article: