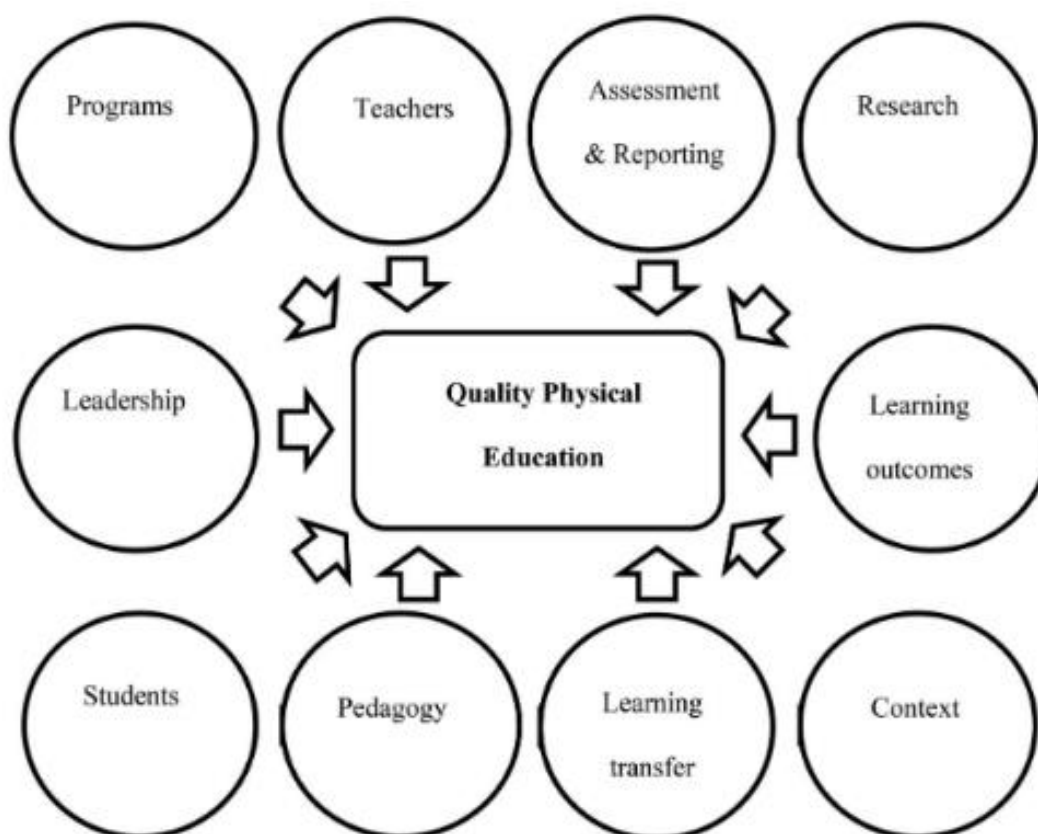


My Point of Difference

I have been an educator for 29 years, currently as a university teacher educator, but formerly as a Health and Physical Education (HPE) teacher in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and as a college senior lecturer in Scotland. Given how long I have been teaching, I have had plenty of time to ponder problems in my subject area of HPE and especially Physical Education (PE) as my particular area of interest and expertise. Central to my teaching is my emphasis on quality PE (QPE) where I mainly draw upon the work of Penney et al. (2009) who described it as the intersection of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (see Williams and Pill (2019, p. 1194) and Mainsbridge et al. (2024, pp 3-4) where I am a co-author – both papers as pdfs in this section). In Mainsbridge et al. (2024) we extend Penney and colleagues' (2009) concept of QPE using the work of Pill (2004) with this broader interpretation represented in the following diagram (Mansbridge et al. (2024, p. 4)). Nonetheless, I have come to realise it is one thing to *know*, or conceptualise QPE, and it is another for pre-



service teachers (PSTs) to embrace and operationalise QPE in their practice. Consequently, much of my recent work has been to focus on the QPE 'context' (bottom right-hand corner of the above diagram) and particularly the social context, to *understand* why a gap still exists in what I teach in teacher education and what actually happens in real world teaching.

My point of difference, is my standing as the preeminent figurational sociologist in PE globally, which I use to teach my students the social context of PE teaching, believing this is critical for their future success. Specifically, I use figurational sociology to help my students *understand* this context, and to explain the limited *actual* learning that has traditionally occurred in PE and why Indigenous perspectives have until recent times been largely 'silent'. Importantly, I also use my research about PE using a figurational sociology lens to mobilise QPE in my teacher education. Significantly, I have published more than anyone else worldwide, about PE using figurational sociology and mostly in Q1 and Q2 (Education) peer-reviewed journals (please see pages 29 to 37 of the pdf manuscript under the banner 'A systematic review of figurational sociology within Physical Education Research' in this section. Out of the 43 papers we identified where

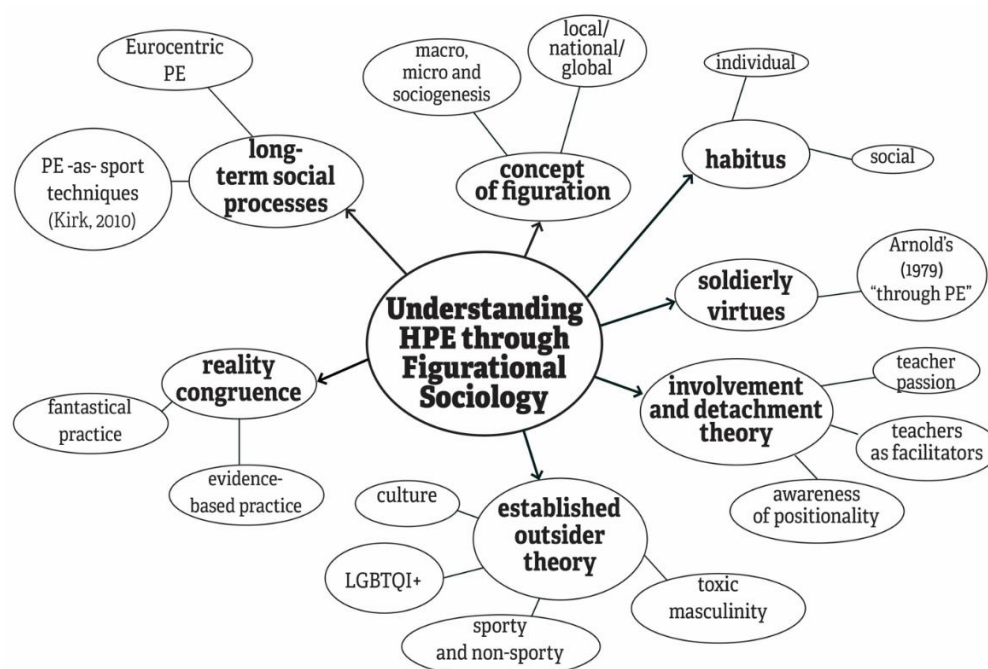
figurational sociology was used as a theoretical framework in PE studies, I was lead author in 12 papers and a co-author in three. Further, five of these 15 papers use figurational sociology to explore Indigenous perspectives in PE or school sport with all the reported research carried out in the ACT. I have deliberately conducted much of my research in ACT schools since more than 90% of our graduate teachers gain employment locally. Our manuscript is currently in the second stage of review for publication in *Sport, Education and Society* (Q1 Education)). Finally, evidence of the claims I have made in this section are provided in several testimonies from different colleagues (see for example Professor Shane Pill's reference letter and the Evidence Summary in 3.4.7).

Figurational sociology

Figurational sociology was pioneered by Norbert Elias, regarded by many as one of the greatest twentieth century sociologists (Mennell, 1992). Instead of an 'alternative' approach, Elias viewed his work more as a starting point towards a 'central theory' to establish sociology as a more freestanding human science discipline. One that emphasises the primary importance of long-term processes and temporal and spatial webs of interdependence, as part of the flow of continually changing human relationships (Quilley & Loyal, 2004). My long-term use of figurational sociology has been inspired by the 'as yet largely undiscovered – significance of figurational sociology in general, and the work of Eric Dunning in particular, for our understanding of physical education and sport in schools' (Green, 2006, p. 650). Please see [UC Uncover Figurational Sociology Article](#) (discussed more in section 3.4.7 of this website) where I provide an overview of my use of figurational sociology in PE. This article was written for a broad audience and especially those unfamiliar with this branch of sociology. Also please see 3.4.7 where my current final year students talk about figurational sociology and how they value this branch of sociology in their journey to become teachers.

Figurational sociology theories

The diagram below illustrates how I currently use figurational sociology to teach my PSTs QPE and QHPE, as my research informs my teaching and my teaching my research (note I have also published about health literacy/health education using a figurational sociology interpretive framework). Referencing this diagram and beginning with the 'concept of figuration' moving clockwise, I now



introduce seven main Eliasian theories (in **bold** in the diagram).

Concept of figuration

Elias (2012 [1978], p. 525) described his concept of figuration as ‘a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people’. According to this idea, humans can only be adequately understood through considering the interdependent relationships or invisible ‘ties’ they form and share with each other (van Krieken, 1998). In the HPE context, the concept of figuration can be used to describe social structures to include small-scale, national and international representations. An example of a small-scale figuration is a faculty of high school HPE teachers and all the children those teachers collectively teach in a school. An example of a national figuration is the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) as the national professional association for Australian HPE teachers, where I am currently a director on the national Board. This figuration includes everyone who is an ACHPER member across all states and territories. An example of an international figuration is teachers and students who were taught PE in the former British Empire. This figuration included people who were mutually aligned through the common use of the *British Syllabus of Physical Training for Schools* (Board of Education, 1933) in nations that formerly made up the British Empire.

Elias maintained that all figurations should be considered as being in a continuous state of flux and as dynamic representations shaping and re-shaping over time. Elias (2009, p. 2) observed ‘human societies have no absolute beginning: they have no substance other than as human beings’. An example of the fluidity of figurations would be the HPE faculty mentioned in the previous paragraph. Such a figuration changes over time with teachers and children coming and going. This notion of the dynamic properties of a hypothetical HPE faculty informed a drama exercise I designed and use with my PSTs in the unit 9916 (provided in section 3.2.1 tab: ‘Task Figurational Sociology Drama Scene’).

Habitus

Concerning habitus, Elias meant a person’s ‘personality structure’ or what is ‘second nature’ to them (Elias, 2012 [1978]). He described the term as developing through ‘the web of social relations in which the individual lives during his most impressionable phase, during childhood and youth, which imprints itself upon his unfolding personality’ (Elias, 1998, p. 62). Habitus tends to be unconscious most of the time and can also be understood as someone’s ‘second nature’ (Elias 2010 [1991], p. 163). In addition to individual habitus, Elias also used social habitus, meaning shared or common habitus amongst groups of individuals. I use both forms to explain teacher behaviour. For example, where PE is viewed incorrectly by some teachers and PSTs as being synonymous with sport and where traditional ways of teaching PE, which are often out of date, are upheld. In Williams and Pill (2019, pp. 1199-1204) (again in this section of my website) we used habitus to explain ways ACT teachers perceived QPE. We found that their interpretations of PE tended to have questionable educative purpose, a lack of focus on meaningful learning, and limited reality congruence to how the subject should be taught contemporarily (please also see below section on reality congruence).

Soldierly virtues

Elias (1972, p. xii) wrote:

“physical education”, for instance, may find its overt justification in the contribution it can make to people’s health and, less overtly, in its contribution to people’s soldierly virtues and capacities. Perhaps, if public money is to be spent on “physical education”, this type of justification is both useful and convincing enough.

Elias’s ideas about ‘soldierly virtues’ which can be interpreted contemporarily as citizenship skills, translate to the broader purpose of PE according to the *Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education* (AC: HPE) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2023) used in all ACT schools. The PE component of the AC: HPE (ACARA, 2023) is informed by Arnold’s

(1979) ideas of 'in' 'through' and 'about' movement, with 'soldierly virtues' specifically relating to 'through' movement. In other words, 'through' movement children and young people learn teamwork, leadership and social emotional aspects of PE, such as empathy, respect and caring for others. These 'soldierly virtues' can be effectively taught using Hellison's (2011) *Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility* (TPSR) evidence-based pedagogy. Teaching PE in the broad ways Arnold (1979) suggested, is a significant shift from traditional 'skills and drills' PE, or 'PE-as-sport-techniques' (Kirk, 2010) that has remained prominent and persistent in PE teaching in ACT schools (Williams, 2016). Accepting I conducted this research eight years ago, anecdotally I still hear from my students that 'skills and drills' PE, or 'PE-as-sport-techniques' is still common in ACT schools. I have also observed the same during many school visits.

Involvement and detachment theory

Within all social situations, individuals are emotionally involved or detached to varying degrees. Specifically, 'Elias challenges the distinction between emotional involvement and scientific distance' (Frydendal & Thing, 2020, p. 165). Regarding PE teaching, Elias and Dunning (1986 [1986]) contended PE professionals can often be 'too close to their work' being, at times, overly passionate about what they *do*, without being removed enough to view their work with higher degrees of emotional detachment. While many of my PSTs see me as a passionate educator (see section 3.1.4), I am nonetheless cognisant of Elias and Dunning's (1986 [1986]) observations and purposefully aim to remain as distanced as possible from my teaching. I also use this Eliasian theory to encourage my PSTs to be aware of their own levels of involvement, especially in PE, which are closely linked to their habitus, pre-dispositions and biases. In other words, their own positionality may or may not be aligned to what they *should* teach according to the AC: HPE (ACARA, 2023), specifically broad notions of PE beyond 'skills and drills' or 'PE-as-sport-techniques' (Kirk, 2010).

Established outsider theory

Essentially, this theory (Elias & Scotson, 2008, 1994; [1965]) is an account of power ratios and status differences between two groups of working-class people who lived in the same Leicestershire (England) neighbourhood. One group considered themselves 'superior' due to their longevity in the community and because of their 'superior' standard of behaviour and perceived the other group as 'foreigners' lacking their sophistication and social conduct. The established group exercised their greater power chances to successfully stigmatise the newcomers, to the extent members of the 'outsider' group began to internalise their supposed inferiority. Elias and Scotson (2008, 1994; [1965]) argued their findings were largely transferable to other social contexts where established-outsider relationships exist.

In my own research I have applied this theory in several studies. For example, I used established outsider theory to examine a figuration of my PSTs and I, in the unit 9916 and in the context of an Asian games focused workshop (Williams & Pill, 2022) (also included as a pdf in this section). In this paper I problematise Chinese Wall, a game that I had, until researching its origins, been using as a legitimate Asian game in student workshops. I use our findings to encourage my PSTs to question what they read in PE textbooks, with Chinese Wall being wrongly described in a recent Australian PE textbook as an authentic Chinese game. In addition, I have used established outsider theory to explain the relationship between HPE teachers as an established group, and their Indigenous students as 'outsiders' (Williams, 2016; Williams & Bamblett, 2017).

In both papers I showed how ACT HPE teachers as an established group exercised their power chances to resist inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in PE. Finally, in Williams (2018) I examined social power relationships to understand how Indigenous students are often portrayed by their HPE teachers according to deficit racialised discourses. My current research extends Elias and Scotson's (2008, 1994; [1965]) theory to understand LGBTQI+ perspectives in PE and school sport, and to examine toxic masculinity. This theory can also be applied to PE, through conceptualising

‘sporty kids’ as an established group and ‘non-sporty kids’ as an ‘outsider’ group within any typical PE lesson.

Reality congruence

Elias (2007, [1987], p. 135) described this idea as ‘what we now call ‘scientific’ or ‘rational’’. Further, that reality congruent knowledge ought to be understood in the context of other forms of knowledge, and in terms of degrees of reality congruence. Elias considered knowledge with high degrees of fantasy or ‘magical thinking,’ as the primary manner of human thinking typically experienced by young children and ‘primitive’ cultures (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998). Nevertheless, adults in modern societies also engage in the development of knowledge with high fantasy content. For example, in the HPE context, I often hear teachers and PSTs say that professional experience placements are where learning to be a teacher *really* happens instead of at university, or words to that effect. This idea is reported in Williams and Pill (2019) where a local HPE teacher commented:

having ‘prac’ students, university students, being a mentor to them and seeing they either come with nothing and then what you do to help them actually get somewhere and feel positive about teaching (Williams & Pill, 2019, p. 1201).

Another finding from Williams and Pill (2019) about reality congruent PE teaching, was the absence of evidence-based approaches by our HPE teacher participants. Instead, they used what can be described as their *everyday practices*, often relying on colleagues in deciding what teaching, learning and assessment approaches to use. Typically, these *everyday practices* were subjective ideas about what constituted PE and that privileged sport. A related central idea I teach my PSTs, is that much of what we do in PE lacks reality congruence to QPE. I use Elias’s (2007, [1987]) reality congruence to encourage them to be more critical of *everyday practices* that are more or less fantastical to contemporary notions of QPE. **In short, these often outdated and traditional practices lack educative purpose, provide limited actual learning and do not belong in our subject.** Such practices that can be humiliating and embarrassing for many students, include, but are not limited to: Dodgeball, the Beep Test, captains picking teams, students running round an oval as a warm-up, elimination games and multi-activity wet weather lessons where physical activity is misconstrued as PE. In these ‘lessons’ students wait their turn before demonstrating their skills or lack of, in front of two classes. A further teacher centred practice that persists, is that all students in a ball game must touch the ball before a point is scored. This ‘inclusive’ approach, that I see my PSTs use time and time again, is anything but equitable, as it puts pressure on less skilled players through causing concerns about ‘dropping the ball,’ and letting the team down. In addition, more skilled players typically do not want to pass the ball to their poorly skilled teammates. Finally, this rule tends to make games artificial, through normal ‘flow’ being compromised.

Social processes

All figurations are social processes and Elias drew particular attention to long-term ongoing transformations spanning at least three generations (Elias, 2009). In understanding their dynamic nature, Elias was highly critical of the ‘urge to reduce processes to static concepts’ (Elias, 2012 [1978], p. xix). The significance of social processes and the fluidity of human relationships in Elias’s work, is summed up by Dunning and Hughes (2013, p. 50) who observed figurational sociology is ‘radically processual and radically relational in character; that is, it is processual and relational at its roots or core’. Examples of long-term-processes relating to education generally, include schooling, teaching, learning, knowledge, assessment, socialisation of teachers and students, colonisation, racialisation, segregation and Eurocentrism.

Social processes, especially long-term social processes are very much intertwined with what we do in the *name* of HPE. Such processes account for how specific figurations have ‘come to be’, or what Elias (2012 [1978]) termed their ‘sociogenesis’. The specific development of these social

processes has contributed to traditional approaches to teaching PE, like the ones I have mentioned, continuing and a resistance among HPE practitioners for change. Significantly, teaching PE as 'skills and drills' or 'PE-as-sport-techniques' (Kirk, 2010) is a long-term process that rewards a small number of students and is typically taught through a performance discourse (Tinning et al. 2001). Such teaching means that most school aged students learn very little in PE. Such a narrow and limited teaching focus also lacks reality congruence with the broad aims and rationale of the AC: HPE. A further long-term social process that again leads to limited learning in PE, is teachers providing a range of activities but without explicit teaching, in the hope rather than expectation that learning will occur. A final example of a long-term social process, is the historical lack of Indigenous perspectives in PE, accepting there has been some positive change in recent times. This relative 'silence' means that PE has less relevance than it should for Indigenous children and young people in our schools.

In the remainder of my website, I expand on why my point of difference is worthy of an Australian Awards for University Teaching Award for Teaching Excellence.

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