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# The importance of physical education and health to be a core subject: Arguments and postures concerning the curricular modifications in Chile

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study is focused on the declarations made by different Chilean institutions regarding the modifications affecting the subject Physical Education and Health (PEH), which were approved by the National Education Council. Purpose: The main aim was to analyse the speech generated and gather data around the curricular modifications in the 3rd and 4th course of the middle education in 2020, specifically the choice of leaving the subject PEH as an elective subject. Design: A qualitative, pragma-dialectic approach was used, focusing on the point of view and main arguments of the institutions on the topic. Results: 23 declarations were reviewed, pertaining 6 to health institutions, 12 to educational institutions, 4 to sports institutions, and finally, 1 corresponding to the political ambit. In summary, a common point of view rejecting curricular modification was found in all the institutions analysed. The main arguments to reject leaving PEH as an elective subject are related to health concerns (such as sedentarism and obesity), cognitive development and neuroplasticity, recreation, national sports performance. Due to all these factors, the institutions consulted propose PEH to be a core subject. Apart from the issues presented, the PEH teacher's role as a pedagogue should be considered. Conclusion: This study establishes a theoretical foundation to support and highlight the need for PEH to be a core subject in basic, middle, and higher education. **Keywords**: Physical education; Curricular modification; Elective subjects; Chile.

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#### INTRODUCTION

This study is focused on the declarations made by different institutions regarding the curricular modification affecting the subject of Physical Education and Health (PEH). This curricular modification, approved in 2019 and implemented in 2020, affects the 3rd and 4th course of the Chilean Middle Education and among other contents, leaves PEH as an elective subject (Icaza, 2019). This curricular modification provoked a series of reactions from different institutions related to physical education, sport, and health. All the institutions reacted rejecting the measure proposed by the authorities in the curricular modification. The arguments employed to reject the curricular modification were based on health, sport, and educational concerns (Chilean Senate, 2019).

Once the first Chilean educational reform took place around 1990, the main aim of the changes was to improve education following equity, inclusion, and collective learning principles (Arellano, 2001). However, in recent years a rushing development provoked by the necessity of responding to the international standards, took Chilean education from the public to the private, segregating the education by the purchasing power of the families (Ruiz, 2018).

PEH during school has always been a core subject in Chile. This subject has been modified and adjusted following social, cultural, and political transformations of the country lives, just as the rest of the subjects in the curriculum. In this way, on the 17th of May 2019, the National Education Council ruled a modification consisting of Physical Education and Health to become an elective subject in years three and four of the Middle Education after the year 2020 (Ministry for Education, 2019). These curricular modifications are aimed at: "rearranging school schedule and increase subject eligibility to fit students' interests and vocation and prepare them for the Higher Education" (Ministry for Education, 2019). With this rationale, PEH and other subjects such as History were converted into elective subjects. This curricular modification was not without response, several institutions reacted disagreeing with different arguments. Bearing in mind all the aforementioned factors, it is necessary to analyse the discourses rejecting the curricular changes introduced in 2020.

Education as a concept must be viewed not as a unidirectional act, but as the transmission of knowledge through a pedagogic practice (Restrepo, 2009). This is reflected in the National Curriculum (2009), although the main knowledge acquisition is regarded as the core subject (National Council for Education, 2020). This "total control" is quite opposite of other educational models, such as the Norwegian and Finnish, and constrains the holistic educational development accomplished by creativity (Monarca et al., 2019).

Bearing in mind all the aforementioned, it comes to mind that the State should be promoting models and structures to the pedagogic improvement (CPEIO, 2017). To this end, it is necessary to rescue multidisciplinary values and skills, such as the "soft" skills (Santos, 2017). And therefore, the question arises as to why subjects such as PEH, which promote transversal values and skills, is left as an elective subject. This fact can displace the curriculum to a more cognitive dimension instead of a human dimension.

The main aim of this study was to analyse the speech generated and gather data around the curricular modifications in the 3rd and 4th course of the middle education in 2020, specifically the choice of leaving the subject PEH as an elective subject.

#### METHODS

A qualitative approach with a non-probabilistic study selection was employed. For the analysis of the discourses, a modified argumentative pragma-dialectic perspective will be adopted. Pragma-dialectics consider active two-sided argumentation to obtain a settlement or at least to reflect on the matter of study (Vicuña & Marinkovich, 2008). In this regard, a pure pragma-dialectic approach focuses its analyses on giving scientific strength to each of both sides of the dispute through their points of view and arguments (Gutiérrez, 2003; Ramos, 2019). To our aim, this study will only focus on the points of view and arguments against the curricular modifications.

#### Inclusion-exclusion criteria

In this study, the construction and argumentative focus of the discourses in the public declarations are analysed and compared. Different discourses from well-known Chilean public institutions related to pedagogy, health, and sport with similar converging points of view against the curricular modification, and more specifically against leaving PEH as an elective subject in 3rd and 4th course of the middle education, were gathered.

## Data processing

A total of 23 declarations (pertaining 6 to the health area [Medical College and medical associations], 12 to education [University, teachers councils and federations], 4 to the sport [associations, federations, sport schools] and, finally, 1 to the political ambit) were analysed.

To the study analysis, first, the declarations were quantified by institution and area, moreover, the arguments employed to reject the curricular modification classified in ambits. Finally, the discourses were analysed through argumentative structures (Van Eemeren, 2019). The institutions included in the analyses are presented in Table 1.

## Table 1. List of the institutions included in the analyses.

Escuela de Pedagogía en Educación Física, Deportes y Recreación. Universidad Austral de Chile

Colegio de Nutricionistas Universitarios de Chile

Escuela de Educación Física. Universidad Católica del Maule

Federación Internacional de Educación Física – FIEP – Chile

Grupo de investigación Epidemyology of Lifestyle, Health, and Outcomes in Chile – ELHOC

Departamento de Educación y Humanidades. Universidad de Magallanes

Comité olímpico de Chile – COCH

Federación de Colegios Profesionales Universitarios de Chile

Asociaciones Gremiales del Instituto Nacional del Deporte – IND de Chile

Sociedad Chilena de Pediatría – SOCHIPE

Carrera de Pedagogía en educación Física. Universidad de Antofagasta.

Universidad de los Lagos

Facultad de Educación, Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades. Universidad de la Frontera

Parlamentarios del Gobierno de Chile

Fundación Rugby de Chile

Comisión Nacional de Deportistas de Alto Rendimiento – DAR Chile

Escuela de Pedagogía en Educación Física, Deportes y Recreación. Universidad Austral de Chile

#### RESULTS

Although a common point of view rejecting the curricular modification that leaves PEH as an elective subject was found, the institutions consulted presented different arguments. First, it is worth highlighting that the most represented area of study in the declarations was educational; the percentage of articles in each ambit is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Ambit to which the institutions consulted pertain.

Ambit	Percentage
Health	26%
Education and pedagogy	52%
Sport	18%
Politics	4%

As previously mentioned, the arguments employed by the institutions to reject the curricular modification were also classified in areas. In this sense, six categories were formed as can be seen in Table 3. Although the most represented area of the Institutions was educational, the highest number of arguments were focused on the health area.

Table 3. Ambit to which the arguments employed to reject the curricular modification pertains.

Ambit	Percentage
Health	41%
Education and pedagogy	26%
Sport	2%
Legal	18%
Social	8%
Scientific	5%

## Discursive analysis

This section will be divided into the ambits to which the arguments pertain. The points of view and arguments of some selected institutions are presented to observe their argumentative structure.

Arguments pertaining to the health ambit

The first argument to analyse in this section will be that presented by the Sport Psychology and Coaching Chilean Association (Figure 1).

- Point of view: We believe that leaving this subject as an elective subject makes it difficult for the country, as a society, to obtain the benefits of physical activity.
- Argument 1: Following data from OCDE, we are the second country pertaining to this organisation with the highest obesity index in subjects older than 15 years old, with 34%.
- Argument 2: Following the WHO and its document "World recommendations on physical activity for health", it is necessary for children between 5 and 17 years old to accumulate a minimum of 60 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.
- Argument 3: This development stage is crucial when it comes to acquiring healthy habits for the future life that will be difficult to change later. These habits favour a healthier adult society with a higher quality of life.

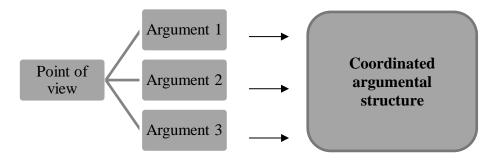


Figure 1. Argumentative structure of the Sport Psychology and Coaching Chilean Association, pertaining to the health ambit.

Arguments pertaining to the scientific ambit

The following argument to be analysed pertains to the official communication issued also by the Sport Psychology and Coaching Chilean Association (Figure 2).

- Point of view: We believe that leaving this subject as an elective makes it difficult for the country, as a society, to obtain the benefits of physical activity.
- Argument 1: Both physical exercise and sport have a crucial role in the cognitive development of human beings.
- Argument 2: As demonstrated by neuroscience, physical exercise is correlated with problem task solving, memory, and decision making, being cornerstones for learning and cognitive development.

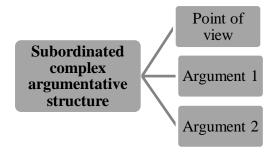


Figure 2. Argumentative structure of the Sport Psychology and Coaching Chilean Association, pertaining to the scientific ambit.

Arguments pertaining to the educational ambit

This argument, which can be seen in Figure 3, was issued by the Physical Education School from the Catholic University of El Maule (El Heraldo, 2019).

- Point of view: We do not understand the decision of the National Council for Education of depriving adolescents between 16 and 18 years old (3rd and 4th course of the middle education) of the unnegotiable benefits generated in the PEH classroom.
- Argument 1: PEH has the aim of establishing physical activity habits that will stay the whole life.
  - Argument 1.1: PEH pretends, not only to favour conditions for the students to improve their physical conditioning but also to create long-lasting habits related to enjoyment, satisfaction and diminishment of risk factors related to sedentary life.
- Argument 2: PEH intervenes in the core of the educational process. The principles of this subject can positively interfere in the adolescent's life and, therefore, should be an educational cornerstone and be present in all the rest of the subjects.

- Argument 3: Physical exercise has been demonstrated to be related to cognitive function, brain plasticity, improvement of learning and mental performance in adolescents, which suggest that increasing physical activity time in education spaces will have uncountable benefits.

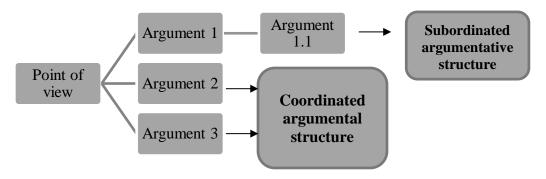


Figure 3. Argumentative structure of the Physical Education School from the Catholic University of El Maule (El Heraldo, 2019), pertaining to the educational ambit.

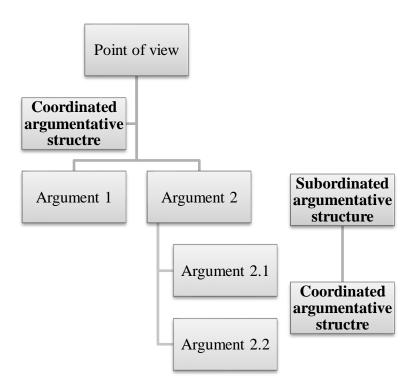


Figure 4. Argumentative structure of the Department of Physical Education, Sport, and Recreation of the University of Atacama (Academic Council of the Department of Physical Education, Sport, and Recreation, 2019), pertaining to the legal ambit.

## Arguments pertaining to the legal ambit

The following argumentative structure to be analysed (Figure 4), was extracted from the communication issued by the Department of Physical Education, Sport, and Recreation of the University of Atacama (Academic Council of the Department of Physical Education, Sport, and Recreation, 2019).

- Point of view: PEH cannot be an elective subject, it should be a core subject for all the students in our country.
- Argument 1: The State, with this curricular modification, has contradicted article number 10 of the Constitution on the Education Right, which is written that "the education has the aim the holistic development of the subject among the different stages of growth".
- Argument 2: With this curricular modification, the State, has contradicted the World Physical Education Manifest, which in its first article indicates that "Physical Education and sport are fundamental rights of all human beings" (UNESCO, 2015).
  - Argument 2.1: This right provides the means to develop physical and sportive aptitudes in subjects of the educational system.
  - Argument 2.2: Should be offered through particular conditions adapted to the specific need of the adolescents.

# Arguments pertaining to the sports ambit

The following argument to be analysed (Figure 5) pertains to the Chilean Olympic Committee (2019).

- Point of view: We would like to add that this curricular modification will be detrimental to the future of the sport.
- Argument 1: In this age range starts the transition between young and high-performance athletes. Therefore, the foundation of this pyramid could be seriously damaged to detriment of the national sports reserve.

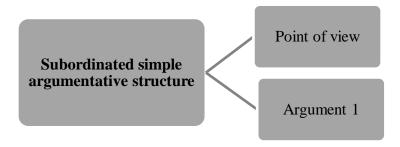


Figure 5. Argumentative structure of the Chilean Olympic Committee (2019), pertaining to the legal ambit.

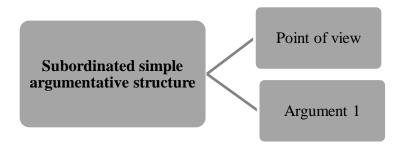


Figure 6. Argumentative structure of the Chilean Paediatric Society (2019), pertaining to the legal ambit.

## Arguments pertaining to the social ambit

The argument presented in this section and Figure 6 was extracted from the public declaration issued by the Chilean Paediatric Society (2019).

- Point of view: We consider that this curricular modification constitutes a measure which is completely contra posed to what our Scientific Society has postulated in recent years.
- Argument 1: We are convinced that the changes proposed contribute to the inequity of the students in public education compared to those in the private, in which further human and structural resources and facilities ease the practice of physical activity and sport.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

First, it is worth highlighting that all the declarations analysed present well-structured, clear, discursive arguments coinciding in the same point of view. The arguments employed pertain to different areas of knowledge, which strengthens the position. One could affirm that the arguments employed in each of the presentations are not counterarguments but add one to each other. This fact makes sense bearing in mind that the Institutions analysed to have a large experience in their field of study and rely their arguments on strong robust science.

Following the data analysis, exist a predominance of arguments related to health. From this, it could be said that adolescents' health is a great concern for most of the institutions consulted, most of them are not directly related to health as their study area. This demonstrates that the efficacy of the arguments related to health lies not on specific knowledge but the interdisciplinary collaboration (Van Eemeren, 2012). It is also worth highlighting that most health arguments are related to mortality risk factors, such as sedentarism (Bernate et al., 2020) and obesity (Castro et al., 2018), concerns that are growing in Chile (Martínez et al., 2018).

Regarding the arguments related to the sport, it could be seen that it is the weakest argumentation font employed. Although four sports institutions were included, only one of them used sportive arguments as the main reason to reject the curricular modification (Chilean Olympic Committee, 2019). It should be added as a sportive argument, that sport is important as a cultural fountain of values and principles for all the age and social groups (Salguero, 2010).

In other lines, the arguments lying in the legal ambit are centred on demanding that the old laws are respected when modifying the current laws. Respect and tolerance for the norms is one of the contents of Civic Education, another subject that is required to a harmonic society (Rey, 2014), and which is out of the core subjects.

Bearing in mind the importance of employing a transdisciplinary strategic approach for a scientific debate (Méndez, 2015). It is worth saying that most of the declarations do not use more than one argumentative area, being two the maximum of argumentative areas employed in the declarations. None of the declarations approaches the matter of study using all the six areas analysed in this study, which as Méndez (2015) reported, would be the most effective way of presenting a discourse in a debate with a scientific background.

Bearing in mind all the discourses analysed, we could state that the curricular modification that leaves PEH as an elective subject in the 3rd and 4yh course of the middle education, increases the existing educational gap and promotes pedagogic inequity. This curricular modification generates a regressive curricular and political proposal, which diminishes the holistic education of adolescents, no matter the pedagogic contexts in which it could be applied (Pueyo et al., 2012). As a result of the subject electivity in the educational programs of the 3rd and 4th course of the middle education, a fragmented education will replace the hegemonic system existing to the date. This could be considered not only as a political problem, but also a

multidisciplinary issue (Tapia, 2021). As per Milicic et al. (2020), relevance to all the areas and dimensions of the curriculum could not be given until there are hegemonic characteristics in the current study plans.

Finally, it is relevant to highlight that although many arguments and approaches are used to defend the posture against leaving PEH as an elective subject, the role of the PEH teacher as pedagogue has not been considered as a relevant argument. Educational institutions should mention the emotional and work instability which could be caused by the curricular modification to the PEH teachers (Hernández-Silva et al., 2017). Therefore, the question arises whether the educational institutions are only defending the unquestionable role of PEH in the harmonic development of adolescents and forgetting about the relevant role of the teachers in this sense.

This study establishes a theoretical foundation to support and highlight the need for PEH to be a core subject in basic, middle, and higher education. We could conclude that, according to all the information gathered on the declarations analysed, politics should review this curricular modification to ensure an adequate development for Chilean adolescents.

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