

**“I Didn’t Even Know That There  
Was Such a Thing as Aboriginal Games”:  
A Figural 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? Figural sociology incorporating racialization theory, was used as the theoretical framework for this study due to its usefulness in interpreting social problems processually. In figural 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 figural sociology and is used to represent relationships of individuals, systems and processes.

An accompanying methodology sympathetic to figural 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.

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## List of Abbreviations

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

SBCD            School Based Curriculum Development

SSSA            Secondary School Sports Association

UCHERC        University of Canberra Human Ethics in Research Committee

## Key Terms

Black Americans	People of the United States of America who have African ancestry.
Charisma	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.
Core Subject/Unit	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.
Corroboree	Used in here as an Aboriginal term for an informal gathering.
Curricula	Used as a plural of curriculum.
Early Adolescence	Refers to a band of development for Year 7 and 8 students in the <i>Every Chance to Learn</i> (ACT DET, 2007) curriculum.
Elective Unit	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.
Essential Learning Achievement	The learning that students are expected to have completed within set stages of the <i>Every Chance to Learn</i> (ACT DET, 2007) curriculum.
Executive Teacher	A teacher who has leadership and management responsibilities typically at a faculty level.
Experiences	Describes how Indigenous students encounter physical education and school sport.
First Australians	Refers to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples that

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

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:

- *Buroinjin: An intercultural success story*. Paper presented at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association Conference, Wednesday 25 to Friday 27 September 2013, Darwin, Australia.

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