



Applying Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model to Decision-Making in PE Curriculum Optimization at Vocational Colleges

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ABSTRACT

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With educational reform advancing and emphasis on students' holistic development growing, optimizing PE curricula in vocational colleges has become a complex challenge. This study examines it by integrating Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model, adopting a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews. The findings show it's a multifaceted process with conflicting interests, ambiguous objectives, limited resources, and dynamic policies. Integrating the two theories, a comprehensive decision-making framework is proposed, suggesting that successful reform depends on inclusive participation, flexible strategies, and adaptive governance.

KEYWORDS:

Stakeholder Theory; Garbage Can Model; Physical Education Curriculum; Vocational Education; Decision-Making

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Research Context

Over the past two decades, global educational systems have experienced substantial transformation in response to rapid technological advancement, economic restructuring, and evolving labor market demands. In many countries, vocational education has been increasingly recognized as a critical pathway for cultivating a skilled workforce capable of supporting industrial development and economic competitiveness (Jansson et al., 2022). Within this context, the role of Physical Education (PE) has gradually shifted from a

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marginal or auxiliary subject to an essential component of students' holistic development (Nyberg et al., 2024).

Traditionally, PE in vocational colleges has been primarily concerned with improving students' physical fitness through standardized sports activities and routine exercise programs (Iannucci et al., 2023). While such approaches contribute to basic health outcomes, they often fail to address the broader developmental needs of vocational students, particularly in relation to professional competence, psychological resilience, teamwork, and stress management. As vocational education increasingly emphasizes employability, adaptability, and lifelong learning, PE curricula are expected to align more closely with these objectives by fostering transferable skills and health-conscious behaviors that extend beyond the classroom (Mokmin & Rassy, 2024).

In China and many other developing economies, educational reforms have explicitly highlighted the importance of integrating physical education with vocational training (Gong

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et al., 2024). Policy documents emphasize that PE should support students' long-term well-being and enhance their capacity to adapt to physically and psychologically demanding work environments (Ding & Hu, 2024). Despite these policy aspirations, however, the practical implementation of PE curriculum reform in vocational colleges remains uneven and challenging. Many institutions continue to rely on traditional curriculum models that lack relevance to students' vocational pathways and fail to engage learners effectively (Chen et al., 2023).

1.2 Problem Statement

Optimizing PE curricula in vocational colleges is not merely a technical or pedagogical task but a complex organizational endeavor involving multiple stakeholders and institutional constraints (Zou et al., 2024). Decisions related to curriculum objectives, content selection, teaching methods, assessment mechanisms, and resource allocation are shaped by diverse and often competing interests. Students may demand flexible, engaging, and career-relevant PE courses; teachers may seek professional autonomy, pedagogical support, and opportunities for innovation; administrators must balance reform initiatives with policy compliance, budget limitations, and institutional performance indicators (Ege et al., 2022a).

These competing priorities often result in fragmented and reactive decision-making processes. In many cases, PE curriculum reforms are implemented in response to short-term policy directives, leadership changes, or resource availability rather than through systematic planning based on stakeholder consultation and empirical evidence (Zhong et al., 2024). Consequently, curriculum reforms may lack coherence, sustainability, and alignment with students' actual needs.

Furthermore, educational organizations such as vocational colleges frequently operate under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. Reform goals may be vaguely defined, solutions may be proposed before problems are clearly articulated, and decision-making authority may be distributed unevenly across organizational levels (Zheng et al., 2023). Traditional rational decision-making models, which assume clear objectives and linear problem-solving processes, struggle to explain such phenomena. This highlights the need for alternative theoretical frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of curriculum-related decision-making in educational settings (Liu, 2024).

1.3 Research Objectives and Contributions

This study seeks to address these challenges by examining the

decision-making process involved in PE curriculum optimization through the integration of Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model. The specific objectives of this research are to:

- Explore the perceptions of students, teachers and administrators on the existing PE curricula at vocational colleges
- Understand their expectations and priorities on curriculum optimization
- Explore their experiences with decision-making processes related to PE curriculum reform.

This study uses the Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model as an integrated framework to help provide a comprehensive explanation of curriculum-related decision-making under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. Ultimately, it hopes to propose practical implications for improving PE curriculum optimization through inclusive, flexible, and adaptive decision-making strategies.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on educational decision-making by integrating two complementary frameworks that address both stakeholder engagement and organizational ambiguity. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers, administrators, and educators seeking to design and implement PE curricula that are responsive to stakeholder needs and resilient to institutional constraints.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Stakeholder Theory in Educational Decision-Making

Stakeholder Theory was originally proposed by Freeman (1984) (Beck et al., 2023) to challenge shareholder-centered models of organizational governance. The theory argues that organizations should consider the interests, expectations, and influences of all parties affected by organizational decisions. Rather than prioritizing a single dominant group (Ramoglou et al., 2023), Stakeholder Theory emphasizes ethical responsibility, inclusiveness, and long-term value creation through balanced decision-making (Moy & Rossi, 2024).

In educational contexts, Stakeholder Theory has been widely applied to analyze institutional governance, policy implementation, and curriculum reform. Educational institutions are inherently multi-stakeholder organizations, involving students, teachers, administrators, policymakers,

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parents, and, in the case of vocational education, employers and industry partners (Glebova & Mihail'ova, 2023.). Each stakeholder group holds distinct interests and varying degrees of influence, which collectively shape educational outcomes. Previous studies suggest that curriculum reform initiatives are more likely to succeed when stakeholder participation is actively encouraged (Burgueño et al., 2022). Inclusive decision-making processes can enhance legitimacy, reduce resistance, and improve implementation effectiveness. Conversely, reforms that marginalize key stakeholders—particularly students and teachers—often encounter implementation challenges and fail to achieve intended outcomes.

In vocational education, students are primary stakeholders whose learning experiences, physical health, and employability are directly affected by PE curricula. Teachers serve as both designers and implementers of curricula, and their professional expertise and motivation significantly influence reform outcomes. Administrators, meanwhile, play a decisive role in allocating resources, interpreting policy directives, and setting institutional priorities. Government agencies and educational authorities further shape curriculum reform through regulatory frameworks and evaluation systems.

Despite its analytical value, Stakeholder Theory has limitations when applied in isolation. While it effectively identifies stakeholder groups and their interests, it often assumes that decision-making processes are relatively structured and rational. In practice, however, educational decision-making is frequently characterized by ambiguity, competing priorities, and unpredictable outcomes. This limitation underscores the need to complement Stakeholder Theory with alternative models that can better capture organizational complexity.

2.2 The Garbage Can Model and Organizational Decision-Making

The Garbage Can Model, developed by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) (Ege et al., 2022), offers a fundamentally different perspective on decision-making in organizations described as “organized anarchies.” Such organizations are characterized by three key features: problematic preferences, unclear technologies, and fluid participation (Ege et al., 2022). Educational institutions, including vocational colleges, often exhibit these characteristics, making the Garbage Can Model particularly relevant.

According to the Garbage Can Model, decision-making does

not follow a linear sequence of problem identification, solution generation, and implementation. Instead, decisions emerge from the interaction of four relatively independent streams: problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities (Ganz, 2021). Solutions may exist before problems are clearly defined, participants may enter or exit decision-making arenas unpredictably, and decisions may occur when these streams happen to coincide.

In the context of PE curriculum optimization, this model helps explain why reforms are often fragmented or opportunistic. For example, a new PE course may be introduced not because it systematically addresses identified student needs, but because funding becomes available, a new administrator takes office, or policy pressure intensifies. Similarly, innovative teaching methods may be proposed without clear alignment to institutional goals, only to be adopted when a suitable opportunity arises.

The Garbage Can Model highlights the role of timing, chance, and organizational politics in decision-making. It challenges the assumption that curriculum reform is always the result of deliberate planning and rational analysis (Burke et al., 2023). Instead, it suggests that decisions may be shaped by temporary alignments of interests and circumstances, which can lead to inconsistent or suboptimal outcomes.

2.3 Integrating Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model

While Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model originate from different theoretical traditions, they are highly complementary when applied to educational decision-making. Stakeholder Theory provides a normative and analytical framework for identifying who should be involved in decision-making and whose interests should be considered. The Garbage Can Model, by contrast, offers a descriptive explanation of how decisions actually unfold in complex organizational environments.

By integrating these two perspectives, this study adopts a more comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing PE curriculum optimization. Stakeholder Theory clarifies the constellation of interests and power relations among different actors, while the Garbage Can Model explains why decision-making processes may deviate from rational expectations. Together, they enable a nuanced understanding of both the structure and dynamics of curriculum-related decisions.

This integrated framework acknowledges that while inclusive

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stakeholder engagement is desirable, decision-making in vocational colleges is inevitably shaped by ambiguity, limited resources, and shifting institutional priorities. Recognizing this reality allows for the development of more flexible and adaptive strategies for PE curriculum reform.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the decision-making processes involved in PE curriculum optimization in vocational colleges. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining complex organizational phenomena, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and interactions.

The study is guided by an interpretivist research paradigm, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of reality and seeks to understand how individuals make sense of organizational processes. By focusing on stakeholders' perspectives, this research aims to uncover the underlying dynamics that shape curriculum-related decisions.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of key stakeholder groups involved in PE curriculum optimization. The sample included students, PE teachers, and institutional administrators from vocational colleges. These groups were chosen because they play central roles in both the formulation and implementation of PE curricula.

Students were selected from different academic programs and year levels to capture diverse learning experiences and expectations. PE teachers included both junior and senior faculty members with varying years of teaching experience. Administrators included department heads and curriculum coordinators responsible for academic planning and policy implementation.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility to explore participants' perspectives while maintaining consistency across interviews. Interview questions focused on three main areas: (1) perceptions of existing PE curricula, (2) expectations and priorities regarding curriculum optimization, and (3) experiences with decision-making processes related to PE curriculum reform.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach. Initial coding was conducted to identify recurring patterns and key concepts related to stakeholder interests, organizational constraints, and decision-making dynamics. Codes were then grouped into broader themes, which were interpreted through the lenses of Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing perspectives across different stakeholder groups. Reflexive memos were also maintained throughout the analysis process to document analytical decisions and emerging interpretations.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Stakeholder Perceptions of Existing PE Curricula Students' Views

The analysis of interview data highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with the current PE curricula, particularly among students. Many students described the existing PE courses as "monotonous," "overly standardized," and "disconnected" from their vocational training. One student explained, "The physical education course feels like a generic program that doesn't help us in our field of work. We need something that aligns better with what we're actually learning." This sentiment was echoed by several others, who expressed a desire for more diversified and flexible curricula that could engage them in a way that directly contributed to their personal and professional development. Many students emphasized the importance of incorporating activities that are relevant to the demands of modern work environments. For instance, one student noted, "It would be better if we had classes that include teamwork-building exercises, stress management techniques, and focus on occupational health."

Teachers' Views

Teachers expressed frustration with the outdated nature of the PE curriculum, particularly in terms of content and the lack of institutional support for innovation. One teacher remarked, "The curriculum hasn't changed in years, and it doesn't reflect the evolving needs of the students. We're expected to teach the same material, year after year, without room for flexibility."

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Another teacher added, “There’s a real lack of professional development opportunities. We want to implement new teaching methods, but the rigid curriculum guidelines make it difficult to do so.” The challenge faced by educators was the insufficient support for professional development, making it hard to innovate in the classroom. Teachers indicated that the lack of institutional backing and resources for curriculum adaptation hindered their ability to engage students meaningfully.

Administrators’ Views

Administrators acknowledged the issues raised by students and teachers but pointed to institutional constraints that limit their ability to address these concerns. One administrator explained, “Curriculum reform is difficult because of budget constraints and compliance with existing policy frameworks. We understand the need for change, but the resources to implement such changes are not always available.” Another administrator stated, “While we are encouraged by policy at the national level to reform the PE curriculum, the actual implementation is often stifled by competing priorities within the institution.” Administrators noted that resource allocation, compliance with national educational policies, and the pressure to meet institutional evaluation criteria often overshadow the need for curriculum innovation. They also acknowledged that, while curriculum reform was often promoted at the policy level, practical implementation was hindered by these financial and bureaucratic limitations.

4.2 Stakeholder Interests and Decision-Making Dynamics

From a Stakeholder Theory perspective, the findings indicate that optimizing the PE curriculum involves a range of conflicting interests from various stakeholders, each of whom has distinct priorities and concerns. Students, teachers, and administrators each play pivotal roles in this process, but their goals often diverge, leading to complex decision-making dynamics.

Students’ Interests

For students, the central concern is the relevance and engagement of the PE curriculum. They prioritize courses that are not only enjoyable but also applicable to their future careers. One student stated, “I want PE classes to teach us more about teamwork and stress management – things that will actually help me in my job.” This sentiment was shared by many, as students expressed a clear desire for curricula that integrate

vocationally relevant activities, such as teamwork exercises and health management, which would complement their professional training. They view PE not as a standalone subject, but as a tool for improving both physical and mental well-being, essential for thriving in demanding work environments. Thus, students advocate for a curriculum that is dynamic, flexible, and tailored to the vocational context, fostering both personal and professional growth.

Teachers’ Interests

Teachers, on the other hand, seek greater professional autonomy and support for their work. One teacher shared, “We need more freedom in how we design and deliver PE classes. The current curriculum doesn’t allow for much innovation.” Teachers expressed frustration over the rigid curriculum guidelines, which often hinder their ability to adapt lessons to the needs of individual students or incorporate new teaching methods. Many educators also highlighted the need for institutional support in terms of professional development and resources. As one teacher put it, “There’s no incentive for us to innovate because there’s no backing from the institution, and we don’t have the resources to implement new teaching strategies effectively.” Teachers are eager for more opportunities to expand their pedagogical skills, collaborate with peers, and integrate new teaching practices that could make PE more engaging and relevant to the students' vocational goals.

Administrators’ Interests

Administrators, responsible for aligning the curriculum with institutional priorities and policy directives, focus primarily on efficiency, compliance, and institutional performance. Their main concern is ensuring that curriculum reforms adhere to national educational standards and align with broader institutional goals, such as improving student outcomes and maintaining institutional credibility. One administrator pointed out, “We have to balance curriculum reforms with resource constraints and policy requirements. It’s not just about what’s best for students or teachers, but also about meeting the larger institutional goals.” Administrators emphasized that while there is recognition of the need for PE curriculum reform, the actual implementation is constrained by competing priorities, such as budget limitations, compliance with national education policies, and pressure to achieve institutional targets. Furthermore, administrators often view curriculum reform as a top-down process, in which decisions are made at the policy

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level and then passed down through the institutional hierarchy.

Conflicting Interests and Decision-Making Processes

The differences in priorities among stakeholders often lead to tension and conflict in the decision-making process. Students prioritize a more engaging, relevant curriculum that directly connects with their vocational training. Teachers, while agreeing on the need for a more engaging curriculum, also stress the importance of professional autonomy and institutional support for innovation. Administrators, however, focus on compliance and resource efficiency, which can sometimes limit the extent to which the voices of students and teachers are considered in the decision-making process.

The decision-making processes regarding PE curriculum reforms are typically described as top-down, with administrators holding the most influence. One administrator noted, “Decisions about curriculum changes often come from the top, and by the time they reach us, there’s little room for input from teachers or students.” This hierarchical approach to decision-making limits the potential for collaboration and active participation from students and teachers. While students and teachers may be consulted, their input is often seen as advisory rather than integral to the final decisions. As one teacher explained, “We’re asked for our opinions, but those opinions don’t always make it into the final curriculum decisions.”

This top-down decision-making dynamic significantly reduces the opportunities for collaborative decision-making, which could potentially lead to more effective and widely accepted reforms. A more inclusive process, where students and teachers have a more active role in shaping the curriculum, could foster a stronger sense of ownership and investment in the changes, making the reforms more likely to succeed. However, as the findings suggest, such participatory approaches are often undermined by the centralized nature of decision-making, where administrators prioritize efficiency and policy compliance over the practical and pedagogical needs expressed by students and teachers.

4.3 Decision-Making under Organizational Ambiguity

Aligned with the Garbage Can Model, the study found that decision-making regarding PE curriculum optimization in vocational colleges is often marked by ambiguity, unpredictability, and opportunistic responses to external pressures. The model's assertion that decisions in “organized

anarchies” emerge from the intersection of four independent streams—problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities—was clearly evident in the data, where decisions regarding PE curriculum were made in reaction to external influences rather than through long-term, systematic planning.

Opportunistic Decision-Making

In several cases, decisions about the PE curriculum were influenced by the availability of external resources or opportunities that arose unexpectedly. One administrator explained, “When funding becomes available, or when there is a change in leadership, we sometimes push through curriculum changes, even if they are not fully aligned with what students or teachers need.” This response highlights the opportunistic nature of decision-making, where reforms were driven by external circumstances, such as a new policy directive or an infusion of funds, rather than a proactive evaluation of student needs or curriculum effectiveness.

For instance, several administrators mentioned that significant reforms often took place “when windows of opportunity” emerged, such as during changes in government policy or leadership transitions. As one administrator put it, “Curriculum reforms tend to happen when there’s a shift in leadership or when new policies come down the line, but there’s not much of a consistent, long-term strategy.” This type of decision-making leads to fragmented reform efforts, where solutions are implemented quickly and without sufficient alignment to the original educational objectives or stakeholders' needs. This approach often results in reforms that are reactive rather than proactive and are more likely to lack sustainability or long-term impact.

Fragmentation of Reforms

The findings further highlighted the fragmented nature of PE curriculum reforms, as decisions were made in a piecemeal fashion rather than as part of a cohesive and well-coordinated strategy. The lack of clear, structured planning often led to a patchwork of solutions, which may address immediate concerns but fail to achieve broader educational goals. One teacher observed, “It feels like curriculum changes happen in isolation. There’s no overarching strategy, just bits and pieces being introduced here and there.” This fragmentation is consistent with the Garbage Can Model’s premise that decision-making in organizations like vocational colleges is influenced by multiple, often conflicting, forces that result in disjointed and inconsistent outcomes.

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Lack of Clear Goals and Problem Definition

The study also found that one of the primary characteristics of decision-making under ambiguity was the lack of clearly defined goals and problems. Several participants noted that curriculum decisions were frequently made without a clear understanding of the specific challenges or needs they were meant to address. As one administrator explained, “Sometimes, the problems we’re trying to solve with curriculum reform are not even clearly defined. We just know that something needs to change, but what that something is remains vague.” This ambiguity led to decisions being made in a reactive and ad hoc manner, with reforms implemented based on the urgency of external pressures, rather than the strategic goals of the institution or the needs of students.

The absence of a clear problem definition meant that solutions were often adopted without a deep understanding of their long-term effectiveness. Administrators and teachers alike mentioned that, when opportunities arose for curriculum reform, solutions were quickly adopted in response to policy mandates or inspection requirements, sometimes without sufficient evaluation of their potential impact on students’ learning outcomes. One teacher noted, “We get a new curriculum mandate, but we don’t always know if it’s the right fit for our students or if it addresses the real issues in the classroom.”

Participants and Fluid Roles

The Garbage Can Model also emphasizes the fluidity of participants in decision-making processes. In this case, the roles of key stakeholders were often not fixed, and participants in curriculum reform could change depending on the timing of decisions. One administrator noted, “It’s often not clear who should be at the table when decisions are made. Sometimes the people involved change depending on what the issue is, and who’s available at the time.” This fluidity of participation further compounded the ambiguity of the decision-making process, as the voices of students and teachers were not consistently involved in discussions about curriculum reforms. Instead, decision-making was often influenced by the availability of certain individuals or the pressing need to meet policy deadlines or compliance requirements, rather than being part of a structured, ongoing consultative process.

Impact on Curriculum Implementation

The opportunistic and fragmented nature of decision-making had a direct impact on the implementation of the PE curriculum.

The lack of coherent long-term planning meant that curriculum reforms were often implemented without thorough evaluation of how they would align with students’ needs, institutional goals, or teaching capacity. Teachers often reported feeling ill-prepared to implement changes that were introduced abruptly. As one teacher shared, “When changes happen quickly, we don’t have time to adapt our teaching methods or materials accordingly. It creates confusion and inconsistency in the classroom.”

The reliance on external opportunities rather than internal, needs-based planning also meant that changes were frequently out of sync with the broader vision for student development. This misalignment contributed to a sense of frustration among educators and students alike, as they struggled to make sense of changes that were not grounded in a coherent, strategic framework.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined the decision-making process involved in Physical Education (PE) curriculum optimization in vocational colleges through the integrated lenses of Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model. The findings highlight that PE curriculum reform is not merely a pedagogical or technical undertaking, but rather a complex organizational process shaped by competing stakeholder interests, ambiguous goals, and dynamic institutional conditions. This section discusses the implications of the findings at three levels: theoretical, practical, and policy-related.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on educational decision-making by demonstrating the value of integrating Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model. Previous research has often applied these frameworks independently, with Stakeholder Theory emphasizing normative considerations of participation and equity, and the Garbage Can Model focusing on descriptive explanations of organizational behavior. By combining these perspectives, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum decision-making in vocational education.

The findings confirm that Stakeholder Theory is effective in identifying key actors involved in PE curriculum optimization and clarifying their interests and expectations. Students, teachers, and administrators were found to prioritize different aspects of curriculum reform, reflecting their distinct roles and

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responsibilities within the institution. However, the study also reveals that identifying stakeholder interests alone is insufficient to explain how curriculum decisions are actually made. Despite recognition of diverse stakeholder needs, decision-making processes often remained centralized and top-down.

The Garbage Can Model complements this insight by explaining why decision-making outcomes frequently diverge from rational planning ideals. The presence of ambiguous objectives, fluid participation, and limited resources means that curriculum decisions often emerge opportunistically, shaped by timing, leadership changes, or external policy pressures rather than systematic analysis. By integrating these two frameworks, this study advances theoretical understanding of how educational decisions are both structured by stakeholder relationships and constrained by organizational realities.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several important practical implications for vocational colleges seeking to optimize PE curricula. First, the results highlight the importance of genuine stakeholder engagement. While consultation mechanisms may exist in many institutions, they often function symbolically rather than substantively. To enhance curriculum relevance and effectiveness, institutions should establish formal channels that enable meaningful participation by students and teachers throughout the decision-making process.

Second, the study underscores the need for flexibility in curriculum design and implementation. Given the inherent uncertainty and complexity of organizational environments, rigid curriculum frameworks may limit institutions' ability to respond to emerging needs. Adopting modular, adaptable PE curricula can allow institutions to adjust course content and teaching methods in response to changing student demands, resource availability, and policy contexts.

Third, professional development for PE teachers is essential to support curriculum innovation. Teachers play a critical role in translating curriculum reforms into practice, yet many participants reported insufficient institutional support. Providing opportunities for training, collaboration, and pedagogical experimentation can enhance teachers' capacity to deliver diverse and engaging PE programs aligned with vocational objectives.

5.3 Policy Implications

At the policy level, the findings suggest that educational

authorities should move beyond prescriptive reform mandates and encourage context-sensitive implementation. While policy frameworks play an important role in guiding curriculum reform, overly rigid requirements may exacerbate organizational ambiguity and constrain institutional autonomy. Policymakers should allow vocational colleges greater flexibility to adapt PE curricula to local needs and conditions. In addition, evaluation mechanisms should account for the complexity of curriculum reform processes. Rather than focusing solely on standardized performance indicators, evaluation frameworks should consider qualitative outcomes such as student engagement, well-being, and skill development. Such an approach aligns more closely with the holistic educational objectives of PE and supports sustainable reform.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored the decision-making process underlying PE curriculum optimization in vocational colleges by integrating Stakeholder Theory and the Garbage Can Model. The findings demonstrate that PE curriculum reform is a multifaceted organizational endeavor shaped by diverse stakeholder interests, ambiguous goals, and dynamic institutional environments. While Stakeholder Theory provides a valuable framework for identifying and balancing stakeholder expectations, the Garbage Can Model offers critical insights into the non-linear and opportunistic nature of decision-making in educational organizations.

By combining these perspectives, this study proposes an integrated framework that captures both the normative and descriptive dimensions of curriculum decision-making. The findings highlight the importance of inclusive participation, flexible strategies, and adaptive governance mechanisms in promoting effective and sustainable PE curriculum reform.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The qualitative design and focus on vocational colleges may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to examine curriculum decision-making processes across different educational contexts. Nevertheless, this study provides a robust theoretical and practical foundation for understanding and improving PE curriculum optimization in vocational education.

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