

The historical evolution, existing problems and development prospect of physical education curriculum in primary and secondary schools in China

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Abstract: Since the founding of New China, the physical education curriculum in primary and secondary schools has gone through four historical stages: the initial construction and exploration period (1949-1966), the stagnation period during the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976), the recovery and development period following the reform and opening up (1977-1999), and the rapid development period in the new century (2000 to present). The curriculum goals have shifted from the political orientation of 'national defense labor' to the quality-oriented education principle of 'health first.' The content has evolved from imitating the Soviet model to localized innovation. The evaluation system has transitioned from a single skill test to a multi-dimensional assessment of core competencies. Currently, two major issues remain: the evaluation system for physical education in the high school entrance examination is one-sided, neglecting mental health and process evaluation; the implementation of curriculum standards at the grassroots level is inadequate, and teachers' independent innovation capabilities are weak. Future development should focus on four key areas: leveraging the role of physical education in promoting mental health, exploring models for physical education homework, promoting interdisciplinary thematic learning, balancing localization with an international perspective, and building a Chinese-characteristic physical education curriculum system.

keyword: Elementary school physical education process; evaluation system; mental health

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1 Summary of the historical evolution of physical education curriculum

Sports fall under the category of education, and the development of education is closely linked to sports. Moreover, the advancement of education is a crucial component of a country's overall development. Therefore, using China's comprehensive development stage as a guide, we cluster the evolution of physical education courses. In this article, physical education courses refer to the comprehensive set of goals, content, and evaluations for physical education at all levels and types of schools, aimed at achieving the school's physical education objectives. Based on these aspects, the following sections will briefly describe the evolution of physical education courses at various stages.

1.1 The period of construction and exploration in the early stage of socialism (1949-1966)

led to standardization. The physical education curriculum was characterized by: 1) under the influence of the Soviet model, the goals of physical education were primarily focused on national defense and labor, with slower localization efforts. 2) The central role of students was not emphasized during this stage, and there was a lack of a close connection between the content and goals of physical education courses, making it difficult for students to understand and apply the knowledge they learned. 3) Physical education teaching was overly uniform and standardized, resulting in a rigid and monotonous approach (Wang Huazhuo, 2005).

Table 1 Comparison of physical education curriculum documents in the early stage of socialist construction

filename	The objectives of physical education	The content of physical education
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Provisional Standards for Physical Education Curriculum in Primary Schools (Draft), 1950	We should cultivate a healthy physique, lay a solid physical foundation for fighting for the people and the country's construction, and strengthen education in patriotism and collectivism.	The whole team and the pace, gymnastics, dance, games, skills, ball games, track and field events, etc
Physical Education in Primary Schools, 1956 Outline and Secondary School Physical Education Learning Syllabus	To cultivate students to become all-round socialist builders and defenders.	Take the labor and defense system as the main body

During this period, the development was also marked by twists and turns. In the context of the 'Great Leap Forward in Education,' the blind pursuit of the 'Four Red' and 'Double Red' campaigns severely disrupted the order of school physical education courses. The slogan 'Labor instead of physical education' caused significant damage to the development of physical education (Ma Beibei, 2015). In 1961, under the guidance of the 'Eight-Character Policy,' the Ministry of Education issued the Provisional Regulations for School Work, which brought physical education back on track. The regulations also set requirements for school physical health work, promoting the standardization of physical education courses.

1.2 The period of stagnation of the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976)

Between 1966 and 1976, China's education system suffered unprecedented severe damage and loss. During this period, the abolition of the Ministry of Education led to significant chaos in the reform of physical education curricula, with the disconnection between central and local authorities. Local authorities blindly followed the curriculum reforms in major cities (Ma Beibei, 2015). The physical education curriculum was characterized by: 1) militarization and 'revolutionary' goals; 2) the politicization of teaching methods, which became overly formalistic.

1.3 Recovery and Development Period after Reform and Opening up (1977-1999)

As the rectification work proceeded smoothly, physical education courses gradually recovered from their chaotic state. According to the regulations of China's Ministry of Education, the physical education courses were restored to those before the Cultural Revolution, and new reforms were implemented. During this period, a series of documents related to physical education courses were released (see Table 2), and the development of physical education courses was vigorous. In particular, the goals and content of physical education courses gradually aligned with modern standards (see Table 3). The physical education courses mainly exhibited the following characteristics: 1) More specific and detailed goals, emphasizing the enhancement of physical fitness, quality education, and the corresponding requirements in moral, intellectual, and physical aspects. 2) The content of physical education courses was gradually optimized and improved, with the localization process accelerating. 3) For the first time, the requirements for physical education course assessments were specified. 4) Greater attention was paid to student development, with a more student-centered approach becoming increasingly evident.

Table 2 Relevant documents of physical education curriculum for primary and secondary schools promulgated from 1977 to 1985

Date of promulgation	document
In 1978	Provisional Regulations on the Work of Full-time Secondary Schools (Trial Draft)
In 1978	Provisional Working Regulations for Full-time Primary Schools (Trial Draft)
In 1978	Trial Draft of Teaching Plan for Full-time 10-year Primary and Secondary Schools
In 1981	Full-time Five-year Primary School Teaching Plan (Revised Draft)
In 1981	Trial Draft of Teaching Plan for Full-time Six-year Key Middle Schools
In 1981	Revised Opinions on the Draft of the Five-year Full-time Teaching Plan
In 1984	Full-time Six-year Urban Primary School Teaching Plan (Draft)
In 1984	Full-time Six-year Rural Primary School Teaching Plan (Draft)

Table 3 Comparison of physical education curriculum documents during the period of recovery and

development of reform and opening up

filename	The goal of physical education	The content of physical education
1978 Ten-year Physical Education Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Schools	The goal of improving physical fitness was first proposed.	It breaks the arrangement system centered on competitive sports, expands the content system of physical education, and for the first time specifies the assessment items and standards of physical education courses in detail.
Regulations on Physical Education in Primary and Secondary Schools, 1990	To enhance students' physical and mental health, enhance students' physical fitness; to enable students to master the basic knowledge of sports, cultivate students' sports ability and habits; to improve students' technical level of sports, to train reserve talents for the country	No specific requirements
1992 Nine-year Compulsory Education Daily Physical Education Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Schools	The "one purpose and three basic tasks" have been defined, with the aim of enhancing students' physical fitness, comprehensive physical exercise; mastering basic knowledge, basic techniques and skills in physical education; and conducting ideological and moral education.	Sports and health knowledge and sports practice content.
Physical Education Curriculum for Full-time Senior Secondary Schools, 1996	It directly puts forward three aspects of physical education teaching and emphasizes "putting people first"	It is divided into subject courses and activity courses

1.4 Rapid development period since the beginning of the new century (2000-present)

As we entered the new century, society flourished, and the strategy of revitalizing the country through science and education gained increasing national attention. Educational reforms deepened further. Meanwhile, the issue of students' physical and mental health became increasingly serious, making the reform of physical education courses urgent, leading to a wave of reforms (see Table 4). Drawing on international experiences and past domestic reforms, the physical education curriculum was renamed 'Physical Education and Health Curriculum'. 'The reform consistently emphasized the principle of health first, 'promoting the idea that enhancing students' physical fitness is essential for their all-round development. In recent years (see Table 5), there has been a greater focus on cultivating core competencies in primary and secondary school students, including sports skills, healthy behaviors, and sports ethics. The fundamental task of moral education has been emphasized, with a strong emphasis on the educational role of physical education (Pan Shaowei, 2019).

The main features of physical education courses include: 1) the broad diversity and hierarchical nature of the course objectives. 2) the course content is guided by these objectives and is categorized according to different levels. 3) the emphasis on nurturing students through the curriculum, with the student's central role being increasingly highlighted. 4) the evaluation system is gradually improving, encompassing multiple dimensions, diverse methods, and a variety of evaluators.

Table 4 Documents on physical education programs for primary and secondary schools issued since 2000

a particular year	document
In 2000	Teaching Outline of Physical Education and Health in Full-time Primary Schools for Nine-year Compulsory Education (Trial Revised Edition)
	Teaching Outline of Physical Education and Health in Full-time Middle Schools for Nine-year Compulsory Education (Trial Revised Edition)
In 2001	Curriculum Standards for Physical Education (Grades 1-6) and Physical Education and Health (Grades 7-12) in Full-time Compulsory Education Senior High School (Experimental Draft)
In 2011	Compulsory Education Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards (2011 edition)
In 2017	Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 edition)
In 2022	Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 edition)

Table 5 Comparison of documents on physical education curriculum for primary and secondary schools issued since 2000

filename	The objective of the physical education curriculum	The content of physical education
Physical Education and Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards for Full-time Compulsory Education in Senior High Schools (Experimental Draft) 2001	It is mainly divided into course objectives, learning domain objectives and level objectives	It is divided into several learning areas: sports participation, sports skills, physical health and mental health
Compulsory Education Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards (2011 edition)	It is mainly divided into the overall goal of the course, the learning goal and the level goal	It is divided into four aspects of learning: sports participation, sports skills, physical health and mental health
Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 edition)	It is mainly divided into overall course objectives and level objectives	Basic motor skills, physical fitness, health education and interdisciplinary subject learning of special motor skills

Over the past 70 years since the founding of New China, the evolution of physical education courses has progressed through several stages: initially, to 'defend and build socialism,' then to 'adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics and lay the foundation for improving national quality'; next, to 'expand the scope of coverage and deepen learning'; followed by 'reconstructing the curriculum system to enhance the flexibility of physical education courses'; and finally, to 'the new era imposes new requirements on physical education courses, with core physical literacy taking the lead' (Cui Yaomin, 2019).

2 Existing problems

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, physical education courses have overcome one problem after another in the process of development and become increasingly deepened with the development of the country and the deepening of educational reform. However, physical education courses are also facing a series of challenges and problems, which affect the all-round development of students and the quality of physical education.

2.1 The diversified evaluation methods are not reflected in the promotion

The physical education examination in the high school entrance examination is intended to promote talent selection, with a focus on advancing students' academic progress, fostering their all-round development, and cultivating a habit of regular physical exercise. However, in practice, physical education is often studied for exams and practiced for scores. The physical education examination overemphasizes the evaluation of skills and physical fitness, while neglecting the assessment of students' psychological qualities. Moreover, the evaluation of students' sports activities is a summative assessment, which fails to effectively promote student development through evaluation (Hu Huifang, 2023). Establishing a more comprehensive and robust evaluation system for the physical education examination is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed.

2.2 The physical education and health curriculum standards have not been implemented at the grass-roots level

At the grassroots level, physical education teachers show little interest in the laws, regulations, and policy documents issued by relevant national departments (Song Nami et al., 2018). The curriculum reform has granted teachers significant authority in physical education, allowing them to select and design course content based on local conditions. However, some teachers simply follow the national physical education curriculum plan.

3 Development and Prospect

With the continuous evolution of society, physical education courses must adapt to the needs of the new era in order to better meet the needs of students' all-round development. Future physical education courses will face more opportunities and challenges, and the following are some developments and prospects of physical education courses.

3.1 Play the role of physical education courses to promote students' mental health

The pressure on students in the current examination environment is increasing, and the issue of students' physical health has not been effectively addressed. The problem of students' mental health is becoming more severe. Students who are under prolonged high-pressure conditions are prone to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and disinterest in learning. Physical education positively impacts students' mental health by helping to reduce stress, boost self-esteem, enhance social interaction, improve emotional regulation, and increase happiness. Therefore, developing physical education courses to promote mental health is particularly crucial.

3.2 Physical education homework

Currently, there is limited research on physical education homework. Physical education homework can effectively bridge the gap between in-class practice and after-school review, helping students better understand and apply sports knowledge, and enhancing their sports skills (Wang Dengfeng, 2020). Regular and quantified completion of homework is crucial for fostering students' exercise habits. How should homework be assigned? What forms should it take? These questions regarding physical education homework still require further exploration and resolution.

3.3 Interdisciplinary learning

The 'New Curriculum Standards' emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary learning. Physical education courses stand out from other subjects due to their practical nature. By linking knowledge acquisition with students' experiences, real-life situations, and social practices, these courses focus on creating authentic scenarios to enhance students' ability to understand the real world and solve real-world problems (Yu Sumei et al., 2022). Interdisciplinary learning can boost the influence of physical education and health, address the lack of moral education in the curriculum, and improve the monotony and lack of innovation in teaching content. Physical education has significant potential for interdisciplinary learning.

3.4 Localization development

President Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of promoting the construction of a strong education nation by deeply rooted in China's excellent educational traditions. As an essential part of national education, physical education cannot be overlooked in its localization efforts. Therefore, when it comes to the reform and development of physical education courses, we should maintain a balance between two aspects. On one hand, we should ground ourselves in local culture to nurture well-rounded builders and inheritors of the socialist cause. This involves tapping into the value of traditional Chinese sports culture in student development and encouraging schools and teachers to innovate in their curricula and teaching methods. On the other hand, we need to adopt an international perspective, absorb international experiences, and develop a physical education curriculum with Chinese characteristics. Additionally, through international exchanges, we can promote cultural understanding and enhance respect for diverse cultures and values (Liu Xin, 2019).

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