

A Historical Review of Physical Education in China (1949-2020)

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Abstract

With the drastic changes in the historical context, political and social reconstructions played a significant role in the formation of the contemporary education system in China as well as other countries around the world. Based on the chronicled outline of past revolutions in the Chinese society, this paper aims to provide a broad historical overview of the history and development of physical education (PE) in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The process of PE reform in China occurred in four distinct stages, including the Initial Establishment Stage (1949 to 1956), the Exploration Period (1956 to 1966), the Regression Era (1966 to 1976), and the Era of Renaissance and Transformation (1979 to present). This historical review describes the development of PE as a curriculum area across these four critical periods and includes an analysis of historical contexts, policies, faculty training, curriculum settings, and pedagogical content in PE. This paper focuses mainly on PE within elementary and secondary schools in China, accompanied by a brief introduction to college PE in China. Through an examination of the four distinct stages of PE reform in China, a comprehensive understanding of the overall development of PE within these historical periods is presented. Inspired by the development of the educational system in China, a touch on the physical education concepts in countries around the world will also be included. The systematic review on international PE establishments serves to provide a general idea of how future improvements can be adapted to the trend of globalization and other potential public transformations.

Keywords: China, physical education, historical review, international education, primary school, secondary school, college

1. Introduction

In the late 20th century, PE became an official subject in missionary schools and westernization schools, which were established by the government of the Qing Dynasty to teach young government official western language, culture, technologies, and conduct military training. These PE classes mainly focused on the teaching of gymnastics. After the collapse of the Qing government, the Republic of China (1912-1949) was found. During this period, the government borrowed the experience from Japan to set curriculums of PE because Japan had conducted successful educational reform to transform into the western educational system. PE during this period already exhibited some similarities to modern PE. The content of the class expanded to more than merely gymnastics, including ball games, Kungfu, as well as track and field athletics. However, education was only provided for the offspring of the rich and powerful people of China since the fee was too high for civilians to afford (Huazhuo, 2005). Thus, since the founding of the People's Republic of China seventy years ago, the Chinese government gradually promoted educational reform to benefit a larger population of school-aged children and adolescents (Keenan, 1974). Before the People's Republic of China was founded, China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. China went through two chronicle wars: The War of Resistance Against Japan (September 1931 to August 1945) where Chinese people fought against the Japanese invasion (Gordon, 2006) and the Chinese Civil War (August 1945 to September 1949) (Cheng, 2005; Pepper, 1999) where the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party; KMT) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) competed for their right to rule (Shiquan, 2000). These two wars lasted for eighteen consecutive years in total, which destroyed much of the educational infrastructure across the country and therefore hindered the development of PE. Local governments in China had to constantly change their educational policies to adapt to the situation. Thus, PE was in haphazard and hands-off management in schools in general during the war.

2. The PE Evolution in Chinese History

The Initial Establishment (1949-1956)

Deeply affected by the national political environment and the state of the economy, the development of PE in China stems from four major historical periods following the early years after the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949. After the founding of the PRC, the Central Government of China prioritized the need for infrastructure development to ensure sufficient space for PE activities to facilitate public health conditions after the war.

The Ministry of Education also needed to establish educational theoretical frameworks to guide PE reform nationwide with the help of scholars (Daming, 2003). Although most schools in China abandoned PE during the Chinese Civil War, PE classes continued in the Revolutionary Base Areas, which were regions under the control of the Communist Party before the foundation of China. Thus, the Ministry of Education inherited such experience in the policymaking and practice of PE, for instance, considering PE as an important part of both education and health care (Huazhuo, 2005). Healthcare promotion had become a prioritized agenda for the central government of China since 1949, and the motives behind improved PE standards changed considerably. From this time, PE no longer focused on conducting physical activities designed to improve the physique and health standards of Chinese youth, but instead shifted towards the goal of improving competitive labour productivity, and preparing the national defence force. Additionally, the theoretical frameworks of PE reform in China also borrowed experience from the Soviet Union to set the curriculum and teaching standards, mainly because the Soviet Union shared the same political system with China and had a relatively mature educational system. Combining the experience of conducting PE in Revolutionary Base Areas and the experience borrowed from the Soviet Union, the theoretical framework proposed by the Ministry of Education was finally established as "Health first. Actively develop the education of PE knowledge, exercise, and sports in schools to improve the physique of students for the ultimate purpose of enhancing national defence" (Peng Zeping, 2019).

Under the instructions of PE reform proposed by the Ministry of Education, each level of the local governments implemented the policies and started the recruitment and training of PE staff and physicians in schools (Dongchang, 1998). In 1951, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai announced the Resolution on Improving Health Conditions of Students from All Grades, which ensured well-organized schedules for PE classes in elementary and secondary schools, and increased time spent on sports activities. The mandatory PE hours in elementary and secondary school were regulated to be 1-2 hours per week. Outside these schedules, schools were encouraged to organize multiple sports meetings (Huazhuo, 2005). Furthermore, detailed regulations on the number of hours per week to be spent on PE activities were also introduced. As shown below in Chart 1 (Xiangbo, 2010), there was a distinction between elementary school and secondary schools regarding the required number of class hours to be devoted to PE. The percentage of hours dedicated to PE in elementary schools increased over time, whilst that of secondary schools remained mostly steady (Chart 2) (Huazhuo, 2005). Hours spent in PE activities also varied by age in elementary schools. Generally, PE classes accounted for 6.63% on average of the total timetable curriculum hours during the initial years of the Republic, with a slight increase or decrease in percentage according to the total class hours every year (normally $\pm 0.3\%$).

Chart 1. The regulation of PE Hours in elementary schools from 1952-1955 (Xiangbo, 2010)

Publish Year	Quantity of Courses	Total Class Hours	PE Hours (Weekly)	PE Total Hours	Percentage	Rank
1953	8	4978	2 (Grade 1-3) 1(Grade 4-5)	304	6.1	3
1953	8	5928	1 (Grade 1-2) 2 (Grade 3-6)	380	6.4	3
1954	8	5928	1 (Grade 1-2) 2 (Grade 3-6)	380	6.4	3
1955	9	5032	2	408	8.1	3

Chart 2. The regulation of PE hours in secondary schools from 1950-1956 (Huazhuo, 2005)

Publish Year	Quantity of Courses	Total Class Hours	PE Hours (Weekly)	PE Total Hours	Percentage	Rank
1950	12	3600	2	240	6.7	5
1952	13	3420	2	216	6.3	7
1953	13	3352	2	214	6.4	7
1954	13	3173	2	214	6.7	6
1955	12	3101	2	214	6.9	6
1956	15	3230	2	204	6.3	6

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, introducing central and unified leadership on school PE confirmed the need for an emerging new state. And history has shown that this more concentrated regulation on PE has contributed to the transformation of PE and the substantial improvement of overall population health (Dongchang, 1998).

The Exploration Period (1956-1966)

In 1957, influenced by the Great Leap Forward movement (a political movement that pursued unrealistic goals of agricultural and industrial development) and associated radical policies, all schools replaced PE with manual labour activities (such as farming), which was called the Si-Hong movement in 1958. Given that sport delivered in PE classes was removed, there was an upsurge of mass sports activities participated by school students during the extra-curriculum time. The focus during this second period of PE reform was to lift the physical strength and athletic ability of all middle school students (apart from the sick and disabled), to reach the same physical standard of athletes, in line with the evaluation system of labour and defence used by the Soviet Union (Dongchang, 1998). Following this, the Shuang-Hong movement claimed to raise the physical ability of all primary school students to the same level as average juvenile athletes in the Soviet Union (Dongchang, 1998). These movements pursued unrealistically high standards with no respect for the basic laws of the physical development of children and adolescents. Moreover, schools did not allow any forms of sports training or exercise except manual labour activities, which made it impossible for students to further strengthen their physique. Thus, the goals were not achieved. Furthermore, due to natural calamities in 1959, the massive reduction of grain yield caused the death of around 10 million people and the declined health status of school students in China. Manual labor activities in schools were temporarily abolished.

During the period from 1960 to 1966, under the guidance of Provisional Administrative Regulations by the Ministry of Education (Rao Linfeng, 2015), PE was re-introduced into Chinese schools. In 1960, the State Council required every level of administration, including those in schools, to care for students' health, ensuring they complied with recommendations on sleeping patterns and food intake as well as their prescribed PE class schedule (Huazhuo, 2005). The new "two-class, two-exercise, two-activity" policy was put into practice, which set the standardized procedure of PE teaching and extracurricular athletics. Students undertook morning exercise and also took a daily class-break exercise, along with two PE classes and two extracurricular activities per week.

More specifically, the Regulations on Full-time Elementary Schools and Regulation on Full-time Secondary Schools were published in 1963 (Xu, 2013). The standardized PE hours for elementary school students were 442 hours over a total of six years, accounting for 6.8% of the total course hours of all subjects; that of the secondary school students was 6.1%. The regulations also insisted that students participate in morning exercise and class-break exercise on top of mandatory PE time (Xiangbo, 2010). These policies effectively facilitated the development of students' physical ability and general robustness (Xiangbo, 2010).

The Regression Era (1966-1976)

Schools became the worst-hit area of the whole havoc after the Cultural Revolution (May 1966 to October 1976) began, which were in confusion since the students of the whole country, spurred on by the press, boycotted classes and engaged in the revolution (Tsai & Zhou, 2017). In 1967, there was even a period when PE was not taught at all (Peng Zeping, 2019). The foundations of PE in school were destroyed, from theoretical and leadership structures right down to curriculum design, faculty resources, and teaching materials - removing the entire academic environment for PE. Training programs and competitions, as well as mass sports activities, were also abolished (Huazhuo, 2005).

In 1967, although a series of classes were resumed, the physical education course was replaced by military sports, where students merely learnt the simple actions of the liberation army, for instance, how to form a queue, drop a bomb

and use bayonets, etc (Hong, 1999). The previous teaching content was banned on account of involving “Bourgeois education”, and even numerous schools carried out labour education in place of military sports teaching. Students mainly participated in “militia training” and “military learning activities” in spare time, and there was almost no extracurricular activity because the sports playgrounds were occupied and sports equipment was damaged (Huazhuo, 2005).

At the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, peasants' sports was not impacted significantly due to the special rural social environment, but it had been greatly shrunk both in terms of scale and content compared with those before the revolution (Zheng, Chen, Tan, & Lau, 2018). It was worth mentioning that on account of the large-scale “Educated youth in the cultural revolution and going to the mountains to go to the countryside” activity carried out in 1968 (Zhang, Liu, & Yung, 2007), students from the city promoted the popularization of rural sports to a certain extent (Zhouxiang, 2016). In the late 1970s, schools gradually went back on track with basic teaching processes, and universities began to enrol new students again (Tsai & Zhou, 2017).

The political situation in China ushered in a promising upturn in September 1970, school physical education and mass sports were recovered and developed to a certain extent (Hong, 1999). Ball events were introduced in military sports of students, and various amateur sports schools had also sprung up. In 1973, the 1st National Games for Middle School Students was convoked, and in the next year, Chinese students participated in the 1st World Games for Middle School Students and obtained 14 gold medals in athletics and gymnastics. Besides, mass sports began to come back to the public eye, and a variety of long-distance running, swimming and basketball competitions sprung up across the country after 1971. According to the statistics, more than 20,000 workers in Tangshan, Hebei Province took part in basketball matches; and over 800,000 people in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province joined the swimming team in summer per year in 1972 and 1973. In addition, more than 120 basketball and football games were held in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region in 1973, aiming for celebrating the 21st anniversary of the publication of Chairman Mao's inscription on “developing sports and building up people's health”.

The Era of Renaissance and Transformation (1979-to present)

Since 1979, The Chinese government has begun to revise and amend the National Standard for Physical Exercises, for purpose of arousing the enthusiasm of teenagers for continuous exercise, correct and improve the defects in standards enacted during the “Cultural Revolution” (Huazhuo, 2005). China's Central Government also focused on educational reform in the same year 1979 with a series of conferences, organized once the “Gang of Four” leaders – responsible for starting the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution – were legally executed (Pan Lingyun, 2019).

The first national survey about the health conditions of Chinese youth (i.e. The Survey on the Body Constitution and Health Condition of Chinese Youth) was conducted in 1979, 1985, 1990, and 1995. The purpose of the survey was to collect data regarding the health conditions of China's youth, along with statistics showing levels of PE and sports activities undertaken in and out of school hours. The collective findings of the four surveys contributed significantly to the long-term decision-making processes of PE in school (Qin., 2020). In primary and secondary schools there was a general increase in hours spent on PE, accounting for 11.1% of total class hours in elementary school in 1988 (Xiangbo, 2010). The government also established a considerable number of experimental units in elementary and secondary schools to test the effectiveness of selected teaching methods before expanding them nationwide. Moreover, PE content was diversified, involving education on sports knowledge and application, field and track events, fundamental gymnastics, mechanical gymnastics, ball games, and martial arts training (Huazhuo, 2005). With economic recovery, a wide range of sporting meetings within and between schools, as well as the construction of stadiums and modern sporting facilities there was a considerable improvement in the quality of PE during this period. The Reform and Opening-up Policy introduced in 1978 resulted in international participation and communication in exchanging academic and practical experience in PE implementation, which also facilitated constant development. In 1992, a trial scheme that included sports examination grades as a part of high school entrance qualification was implemented in nine provinces and was promoted nationwide by the Ministry of Education of the PRC.

Since then, the Chinese government consistently valued and supported the all-around development of youth through PE, including the implementation of teaching modules on morality, intelligence, physique, and aesthetics. Teaching materials in elementary and secondary schools comprised two elements, sports knowledge, and sports application. At this time, dance and rhythmic gymnastics were included in the sports application element (Huazhuo, 2005). To lift prosperity, raising ideological and ethical standards, scientific and educational levels, the physical constitution of the whole nation was considered paramount in China. The Central Committee of the Communist Party and State Council of China issued the Resolution of Deepening the Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education in 1999, which emphasizes the significance of PE (Liang, Liu, & Fulmer, 2017). This resolution views physical health as a fundamental premise for youth to better serve the country and its people, as well as a symbol of the vitality of the Chinese nation

(Wang & Mao, 1996). Among all the necessary elements to achieve this, curriculum reform has been identified as the most essential and crucial aspect of overall educational reform (Xiangbo, 2010). The reform of PE has undergone a lengthy journey, which mainly focuses on two different agendas: compulsory education - at both elementary and secondary school level - and regular senior high school education. In 1999, the State Council of China also published their resolution to set basic principles in school education, which involved deepening education reforms in elementary schools and promoting quality education both in the 9-year compulsory education curriculum and the regular senior high school system, emphasizing a balanced development of students' intelligence and physical growth (Zonghu, 1998). This aimed to build a foundation to guide reforms in an ideal direction. During 2000 and 2003, the State Council also set limits on the numbers of authorized faculty members. According to the Ministry of Education, these authorized faculty members could enjoy a more stable income and benefits than those who did not acquire an authorized certificate, along with extra state subsidies (Zonghu, 1998). This suggests that the government of China emphasized the importance of treating qualified teachers well in order to promote higher quality of education. For PE teachers, the standardised faculty allocation was one PE teacher covering the courses for five to six classes in the first and second grade, one PE teacher for six to seven classes from the third to the ninth grade, and one PE teacher for eight to nine classes in high schools (Morgan & Hansen, 2007).

After the resolution was published by the State Council of China in 1999, the reform processes of compulsory education and high schools began to show differences, with reform in high schools following that of the compulsory education system based on the timeline shown in Figure 1 (Pan Lingyun, 2019). In 2001, the experimental draft of curriculum standards for elementary and secondary schools was published, followed by experimental practice in assigned areas. To verify its performance and determine whether it was a feasible plan, the government conducted a large-scale survey to collect data from these areas in 2003. A revised version of the curriculum standards was then put into practice during 2004. Again in 2007, the Ministry of Education researched to test the feasibility of the second version of the Curriculum Standards. After examining its effect of the new curriculum standard on the implementation of PE, the revised version issued in 2004 was announced with the official enactment being made in 2011.

Following a test run in 2004 and nationwide implementation in 2005, an experimental draft of high school curriculum standards was initially announced in 2013. This comprehensive amendment of curriculum standards was organized during 2014-2017, and its official enactment took place in 2018. With curriculum reforms in compulsory education being slightly earlier than that of their high school equivalents, the government aimed to focus on one part of the whole educational system first to set a benchmark on other national curriculums. This enabled them to accelerate the process of reform, applying lessons learned from changes made to one part of the educational system to subsequent areas, aiming to improve the methods.

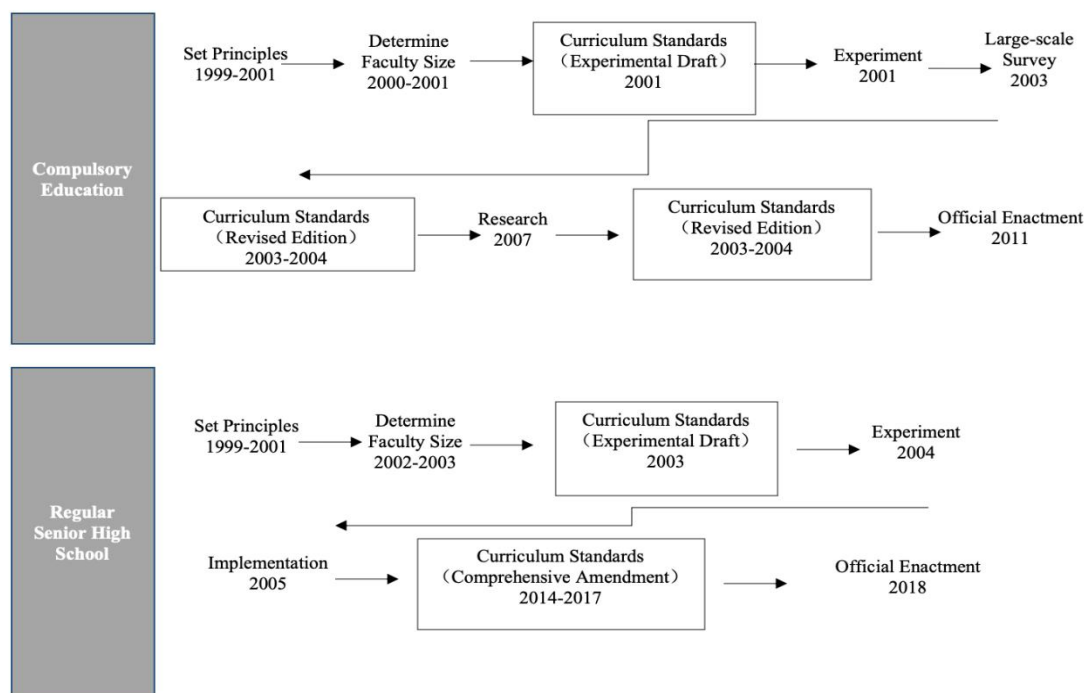


Figure 1. Evolution of physical education and health curriculum standards (Pan Lingyun, 2019)

In the current Chinese school system, PE is compulsory. Within the nine-year compulsory education curriculum, first-year and second-year students must take four PE classes per week, whilst students from the third to ninth grade should have three PE classes every week. High school and university students take part in two PE classes weekly. In 2019, the Ministry of Education and the General Administration of Sport jointly published the Student Physical Health Standard, which further optimized the evaluation of the system (Chart 3) (He & Hao, 2014; Peng Zeping, 2019). The quality of faculty members has also improved remarkably since they are evaluated by the local Ministry of Education every five years. In the 1990s, the percentages of qualified faculty members in primary, secondary, and high schools were 95.9%, 85.5%, and 65.85% respectively (Ministry of Education of the P.R.C., 1999), whereas the percentages after 2000 increased to 98.81%, 88.72% and 70.71% (Pan Lingyun, 2019).

Chart 3. The Required PE Hours of Different Stages in Schools (He & Hao, 2014; Peng Zeping, 2019)

Stages	Required PE Classes Per Week	PE Hours (Weekly)
Grade 1-2	4	2.67
Grade 3-9	3	2.67
High School	2	1.33
University	2	1.33

In elementary schools, the focus of PE is on basic knowledge and application and cultivating interests in various physical activities. PE in secondary schools concentrates on helping youth to develop comprehensive abilities through more challenging scenarios such as regional and national sports competitions (e.g. National Sports Competition for Junior and High School Students). High schools also now look at PE scores as part of the enrolment process. Notably, some of the secondary schools have increased their PE hours in the ninth grade due to the pressure of senior high school entrance examination since 2001, whereas in other grades, PE classes are easily cancelled and replaced with academic subjects such as literature or mathematics (Hardman, 2008; Yao & Jin, 2005). Although PE is mandatory according to the curriculum standard and the school rules, a gap still exists between the regulation and the implementation due to schools' and parents' low interest in PE and high interest in academics so that PE can be replaced or cancelled by schools (Hardman, 2008; Yao & Jin, 2005). With deepening educational reforms and the all-around implementation of higher quality education, starting with the development of teaching methods and programs, the approach to PE has been transformed in a variety of ways including curriculum objectives, structure, content, organizational forms, and evaluation systems.

College PE, on the other hand, serves as a compulsory course for first-year and second-year college students for three hours per week and 144 PE hours required in total. College students must participate in all required PE classes to collect full credit for graduation. The first-year PE classes account for half of the total PE hours, which requires students to take part in basic fitness training, which is a fixed content of college. Although PE is also compulsory during the second year in college, the content of the PE curriculum is more diversified. It is encouraged that students choose optional course contents to attend to specialized physical interests, including basketball, tennis, swimming, etc. The second-year PE courses also take up half of the total PE hours (Huazhuo, 2005). Aside from the compulsory PE courses, various sports events and competitions help enrich the extra-curriculum exercise in colleges. For example, a program named "Common Student Sports Level Standard" is currently under implementation in nearly 40 universities, including Peking University and Hebei University, which aims to increase sports activities, events, and competitions in universities (He & Hao, 2014). A clear structure has now emerged from both a systematic and practical perspective, with reforms ensuring constant development of physical and sporting abilities from primary right through to college-level education.

3. PE Evolution in the International Context

Interestingly, the historical aspect of society could heavily influence its physical education curriculum, even in geographically distant lands. Despite the contrasting ideas of PE in different countries, the progress of change seems to follow similar patterns.

In the 19th century, most European countries along with the US were impacted by the German gymnastic structure, focusing their physical education on gymnastic-like practices with large equipment (Vlček, 2011). Some of the assistive tools, such as the parallel bars, can still be seen in today's Western PE training field. Evolving along with the chronicle of Western history, the European physical education then transformed to militarization-inspired exercises, while the US started bringing the modern Olympic activities into its curriculum, as an impact brought by the English Sport and Games movement, which was introduced into the country around that period (Vlček, 2011). Afterwards, the Western countries started incorporating the concept of philosophy into their exercise teaching in the late 20th century. These

novel amendments included humanistic, adventure education, play education, as well as experiential education (Vlček, 2011), which played a significant role in the development of contemporary Western physical education. However, in more recent years, statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows a remarkable amount of teenagers who are insufficiently engaged in daily physical exercises, causing a drastically growing obesity rate in Western countries. The convenience brought by modern technology innovation seems to be the culprit of a new health-related epidemic. The importance of physical education has thus drawn a greater concern to the US and other Western officials.

On a whole other continent across the Pacific Ocean, Singapore has gone through a similar process of PE revolutions according to its historical context as that of other countries previously discussed. After the country's independence from the former colonisation, young people were compelled by the government to participate in demanded physical education programs, to help the country in becoming strong and self-efficient as a whole (Sufri & Chung, 2019). PE lessons were then introduced to the school curriculum by this governmental demand. Later on, the induction of diplomacy in Physical Education had drawn more and more teachers and educators into this movement, having helped the country's PE development to a great extent. Singapore is now working on building a holistic education system for students to benefit from motor and growth skills, after the short yet successful revolution of physical education in the country.

The comparison among different PE evolutions around the world has demonstrated the commonality shared by the countries discussed above, showing a close connection between the education involvement with the social context it was in.

4. Conclusion

According to the discussion in this paper on how each country has developed its physical education system for young people, the process is evidently to have a close association with the historical context and political revolution of the country. Based on the detailed chronicle of Chinese history, this paper has provided an overview of the country's historical impact on its educational establishment, followed by succinct examinations on countries from all over the world with the justification of social and historical influences on their educational systems. With the substantial urbanization and globalization worldwide, the physical education programs in all countries have been accordingly enriched and innovated based on the countries' own needs. In the abstract, the physical education programme, in general, has evolved from basic skill development to a comprehensive improvement on young people's growth from multiple perspectives. However, due to such rigorous changes in the social context, prevalent issues among the youth all over the world, such as child obesity and mental health problems, have become the main focus in today's society. Future researchers are then in need of discovering each country's reaction to the contemporary health situations with a critical interpretation of relative statistics, to refine the educational system correspondingly.

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