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Understanding the Actual Role of Physical Education in the School Curriculum: A Theoretical and Critical Analysis of Educational Purpose, Practice, and Policy

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Understanding the Actual Role of Physical Education in the School Curriculum: A Theoretical and Critical Analysis of Educational Purpose, Practice, and Policy

Parveen Kumar[1]

Abstract

Physical Education is widely recognised as an important component of holistic education; however, its actual position within school curricula often raises questions about its educational purpose, institutional status, and contribution to student development. Although Physical Education is expected to promote physical literacy, motor competence, health-related fitness, psychological well-being, social development, and lifelong participation in physical activity, its implementation may be restricted by inadequate instructional time, limited infrastructure, examination-oriented priorities, insufficiently trained teachers, and an excessive emphasis on competitive sports. This theoretical paper critically examines the intended and actual roles of Physical Education within the school curriculum. Drawing on curriculum theory, holistic education, physical literacy, educational policy, and pedagogical perspectives, the paper analyses six interconnected dimensions: educational purpose, curriculum status, teaching and learning practices, assessment and accountability, institutional support, and student development. It further distinguishes between the formal curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and the experienced curriculum to explain why the educational intentions of Physical Education may not always translate into meaningful learning experiences. The paper proposes a conceptual framework for evaluating the actual curricular role of Physical Education by examining curriculum allocation, instructional quality, inclusiveness, learning outcomes, assessment practices, and opportunities for lifelong physical activity. It argues that Physical Education should be understood as an educational discipline in its own right rather than merely as recreation, a competitive sporting activity, or a supplementary subject. The paper concludes that strengthening Physical Education requires alignment between educational policy, institutional priorities, teacher preparation, pedagogical practice, and assessment systems.
Keywords: Physical Education, school curriculum, curriculum implementation, physical literacy, holistic education, educational policy, curriculum evaluation.

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1 Introduction

Education is a multidimensional process that aims to develop individuals intellectually, physically, emotionally, socially, and morally. Traditionally, school education has placed considerable emphasis on academic achievement, literacy, numeracy, and examination performance. However, a comprehensive understanding of education requires recognition that human development extends beyond cognitive learning. Physical competence, health awareness, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to participate meaningfully in society

are equally important dimensions of a well-rounded education. Physical Education occupies a distinctive position in this broader educational vision because it engages learners through movement, bodily experiences, structured physical activity, cooperation, and reflection.

Despite its recognised educational value, the position of Physical Education within the school curriculum remains an important issue for critical examination. In curriculum documents, Physical Education may be presented as a subject contributing to holistic development, health promotion, physical literacy, and social learning. In everyday school practice, however, its role may be interpreted more narrowly. In some educational settings, it is associated primarily with sports competitions, morning assemblies, recreational activities, annual sports days, or preparation for inter-school tournaments. These activities can be valuable, but they do not represent the complete educational purpose of Physical Education.

UNESCO's Quality Physical Education: Guidelines for Policy-Makers emphasises inclusive participation, appropriate teacher preparation, adequate resources, curriculum flexibility, and the development of physical literacy. It also identifies the need to strengthen the position of Physical Education within educational systems. This perspective suggests that the effectiveness of Physical Education cannot be determined simply by confirming whether it appears in a syllabus. Its actual contribution depends on what students are expected to learn, what teachers teach, how learning is assessed, and what opportunities students receive to apply their learning beyond the classroom. The National Education Policy 2020 in India similarly supports holistic development and recognises Physical Education among the subjects that should receive an appropriate place within the curriculum. It also advocates reducing rigid distinctions between curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular learning. These policy intentions create an important basis for examining whether Physical Education is treated as an integral educational discipline or remains subordinate to subjects traditionally regarded as more academically important. The central concern of this paper is therefore not merely whether Physical Education is beneficial, but whether its intended educational purpose is adequately understood and translated into curriculum design, institutional priorities, teaching practices, and assessment systems. This distinction is important because a subject may be formally included in a curriculum without being implemented in ways that fulfil its educational potential. A theoretical examination of the actual role of Physical Education can contribute to curriculum development by identifying the difference between its stated objectives and its practical functions. It can also provide a conceptual basis for evaluating whether Physical Education develops knowledgeable, physically competent, confident, socially responsible, and physically active individuals.

2 Statement of the problem

Physical Education is commonly justified through its contribution to physical fitness, sports performance, health, discipline, and recreation. Although these contributions are important, such explanations may not adequately represent the full educational scope of the subject. An overly narrow interpretation can reduce Physical Education to physical activity participation or competitive sport while neglecting its intellectual, social, emotional, ethical, and lifelong learning dimensions.

The problem is further complicated by the possible difference between the intended curriculum and the curriculum actually experienced by students. A syllabus may specify learning outcomes relating to movement competence, health knowledge, cooperation, inclusion, and self-management, while institutional practices may prioritise sports selection, competition, or informal play. Similarly, a school may allocate time to Physical Education without providing structured lessons, qualified teachers, appropriate facilities, or meaningful assessment.

Accordingly, the problem addressed in this paper is the need for a theoretically grounded

understanding of the actual curricular role of Physical Education and a framework through which its educational position, implementation, and contribution to student development can be critically examined.

3 Aim and objectives of the paper

The main aim of this paper is to develop a theoretical understanding of the actual role of Physical Education within the school curriculum.
The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the educational purposes traditionally and contemporarily associated with Physical Education.
2. To distinguish the intended, implemented, and experienced roles of Physical Education within the curriculum.
3. To analyse the contribution of Physical Education to physical, cognitive, psychological, social, and ethical development.
4. To critically examine the influence of curriculum status, teaching practices, assessment systems, teacher preparation, and institutional support on its actual role.
5. To develop a conceptual framework for evaluating the curricular position and educational effectiveness of Physical Education.
6. To propose recommendations for strengthening Physical Education as an essential component of holistic education.

4 Methodological approach

4.1 Research design

The paper adopts a theoretical and conceptual research design based on critical analysis and synthesis of established ideas in curriculum theory, educational philosophy, Physical Education pedagogy, physical literacy, and educational policy. It does not involve primary data collection, experimental intervention, surveys, interviews, or statistical analysis. The purpose of this approach is to develop an explanatory framework for understanding the relationship between the intended purpose of Physical Education and its practical expression within school education.

4.2 7.2 Sources of theoretical analysis

The discussion draws on four broad categories of literature:

- Educational policy and curriculum frameworks: Documents addressing holistic education, curricular integration, and the position of Physical Education in schools.
- Conceptual and theoretical literature: Work concerning physical literacy, experiential learning, holistic development, and the educational significance of movement.
- Physical Education policy guidance: Particularly UNESCO's quality Physical Education framework, which emphasises inclusion, curriculum provision, teacher education, facilities, and quality assurance.

- Public health guidance: WHO recommendations concerning physical activity and sedentary behaviour, used to distinguish the health-related contribution of physical activity from the broader educational role of Physical Education.

4.3 Analytical dimensions

The theoretical analysis is organised around six dimensions: educational purpose, curriculum status, pedagogical practice, assessment, institutional support, and student development. These dimensions are used to identify how the formal expectations of Physical Education may differ from the experiences provided to learners.

4.4 Scope and limitations

The paper offers a conceptual interpretation rather than an empirical measurement of school practices. It does not establish how frequently particular problems occur, nor does it claim that all schools undervalue Physical Education. The issues discussed are analytical possibilities and propositions that require contextual investigation. The proposed framework can subsequently be used to guide empirical research involving teachers, students, school administrators, curriculum documents, and classroom observations.

5 Theoretical Foundations of Physical Education

5.1 Physical Education as an Educational Discipline

Physical Education should be understood as a planned learning experience through which students develop movement competence, physical understanding, health knowledge, social capabilities, and the confidence to participate in physical activity. It is distinct from unstructured physical activity because it involves educational intentions, organised learning experiences, progressive development, and assessment.

A central characteristic of an educational discipline is that it provides knowledge, skills, values, and competencies that learners are expected to acquire. Physical Education fulfils this function when students learn not only how to perform movements but also how to understand movement, make informed decisions about physical activity, cooperate with others, evaluate their performance, and manage their own physical development.

Kirk (2010) critically examined the organisation and historical development of school Physical Education, drawing attention to the limitations of traditional curricular approaches. His work provides a useful basis for questioning whether conventional lesson structures and sports-centred programmes adequately fulfil the educational potential of the subject.

From this perspective, the educational value of Physical Education should not be judged solely by the number of students participating in sports or the performance of school teams. Its value also depends on the quality of learning experienced by every student.

5.2 Holistic Education and Whole-Person Development

Holistic education considers learners as integrated individuals whose physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions influence one another. Physical Education provides a distinctive setting for this development because movement activities involve bodily performance, decision-making, emotional responses, interpersonal communication, and social interaction.

For example, a team game may require students to understand rules, interpret changing situations, coordinate movements, communicate with teammates, manage frustration, and accept responsibility for collective outcomes. A fitness activity may require students to establish personal goals, monitor progress, understand physiological responses, and reflect on

their behaviour.
These experiences demonstrate that physical activity can become a medium for broader learning when activities are intentionally planned and appropriately taught. However, such outcomes should not be assumed to occur automatically. They depend on the quality of instruction, the nature of the activity, the classroom environment, and opportunities for reflection.
Physical Education therefore contributes to holistic education not merely by making students physically active but by using movement as an educational context for developing the whole person.

5.3 Physical Literacy as a Central Educational Outcome

Physical literacy offers a useful conceptual foundation for understanding the long-term purpose of Physical Education. Whitehead (2010) describes physical literacy as a holistic concept involving motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding that support meaningful participation in physical activity throughout life.
This conception extends beyond the acquisition of isolated motor skills. A physically literate learner should be able to participate confidently in a range of physical activities, understand the significance of movement, recognise personal capabilities, and make informed choices about continued participation.
For curriculum purposes, physical literacy connects several educational outcomes:

- Development of fundamental movement skills and coordination.
- Confidence and motivation to participate in physical activity.
- Understanding of health, movement, and physical performance.
- Ability to adapt movements to different environments and tasks.
- Recognition of the value of physical activity across the lifespan.

Physical literacy thus provides a broader criterion for evaluating Physical Education than athletic performance alone. A student who does not become a competitive athlete may nevertheless achieve important educational outcomes by developing movement competence, confidence, knowledge, and an enduring willingness to participate in physical activity.

5.4 Experiential Learning and Learning Through Movement

Dewey (1938) emphasised the importance of experience in education and the relationship between learning activities and meaningful educational growth. Although experiential learning is relevant across subjects, Physical Education provides particularly direct opportunities for students to learn through action, feedback, experimentation, and reflection.
In Physical Education, learners experience movement outcomes rather than merely reading about them. They can observe how changes in posture affect balance, how different movement strategies influence performance, or how exercise intensity influences their perceived exertion. However, experience alone does not guarantee learning. A meaningful educational experience requires appropriate sequencing, guidance, feedback, and opportunities to interpret what has occurred. A lesson consisting entirely of repetitive drills without explanation or reflection may offer limited conceptual learning even when students remain physically active.
The educational role of Physical Education is therefore strengthened when practical participation is combined with understanding, problem-solving, feedback, and reflection.

5.5 Social and Moral Learning Through Physical Activity

Physical Education can create opportunities to learn cooperation, fairness, respect, responsibility, inclusion, and the constructive management of competition. Games and group activities often involve rules, shared objectives, disagreements, success, and failure.
Nevertheless, participation in sport does not automatically produce positive character development. Competitive environments may also reproduce exclusion, discrimination, excessive performance pressure, or unsporting behaviour if they are not managed appropriately.
The teacher's role is consequently important in transforming physical activities into meaningful educational experiences. Explicit discussion of fairness, respectful conduct, inclusive participation, and responsible decision-making can help connect physical experiences with broader educational values.

6 Conclusion

Physical Education occupies a distinctive and essential position within the educational process because it contributes to the physical, cognitive, psychological, social, and emotional development of learners. However, its actual educational role cannot be determined merely by its inclusion in the formal curriculum or by the provision of opportunities for sports and recreational activities. A comprehensive understanding requires critical examination of the relationship between educational objectives, curriculum implementation, pedagogical practices, assessment procedures, institutional support, and student learning outcomes.
The present theoretical analysis highlights the distinction between the intended, implemented, and experienced curriculum of Physical Education. Although curriculum policies may emphasise holistic development, physical literacy, health awareness, social responsibility, and lifelong participation in physical activity, the realisation of these objectives depends on the quality of educational experiences provided to students. When Physical Education is primarily associated with competitive sports, recreational activities, or isolated fitness assessments, its broader educational potential may remain insufficiently recognised. Therefore, the subject should be understood not simply as a means of improving physical fitness or developing athletic performance, but as an educational discipline that integrates movement, knowledge, values, and lifelong learning.
The proposed conceptual framework identifies six dimensions for understanding the actual role of Physical Education: educational purpose, curriculum status, teaching and learning practices, assessment and learning outcomes, institutional support and inclusion, and student development and experience. These dimensions provide a systematic basis for examining whether the educational intentions of Physical Education are translated into meaningful learning opportunities. They also highlight the importance of qualified teachers, adequate instructional time, appropriate facilities, inclusive pedagogical approaches, and multidimensional assessment systems in strengthening its curricular position.
The analysis further suggests that the effectiveness of Physical Education should be evaluated through a broader range of educational outcomes rather than through competitive achievements or physical fitness measures alone. Movement competence, health literacy, confidence, cooperation, decision-making, responsible participation, and readiness for lifelong physical activity should be recognised as important indicators of educational contribution. Such an approach would encourage curriculum designers, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers to evaluate Physical Education in terms of the quality and relevance of the learning it provides to all students.
Nevertheless, the framework presented in this paper is theoretical and requires empirical examination before it can be used as a validated evaluation instrument. Future research should investigate the extent to which curriculum objectives correspond with actual teaching prac-

tices and student experiences across different educational settings. Mixed-methods studies, curriculum analyses, classroom observations, and the development of appropriate assessment instruments could help establish the practical relevance of the proposed dimensions.

In conclusion, the actual role of Physical Education should be understood through the educational value it creates rather than merely through its formal presence in the curriculum. Its meaningful integration into school education requires alignment between policy intentions, institutional priorities, teaching practices, assessment systems, and student needs. Recognising Physical Education as an essential educational discipline can contribute to a more balanced conception of schooling in which physical development, intellectual growth, social responsibility, and lifelong well-being are treated as interconnected educational objectives.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

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