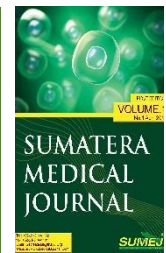




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Research Article

Evolution and Implications of the Secondary School Physical Education Curriculum in Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Investigation

Thanuja Prabashani Liyanage¹, Walter Senevirathne², Godwin Kodithuwakku³, Tharindi Wijerathne⁴

¹Department of Sports Sciences and Physical Education, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Belihuloya, 70140, Sri Lanka

²Department of Education, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, 20400, Sri Lanka

³Department of Education, Aldersgate College, Solano, Nueva Vizcaya, 3709, Philippines

⁴Department of Indigenous Health Sciences, Faculty of Indigenous Health Sciences and Technology, Gampaha Wickramarachchi University of Indigenous Medicine, Yakkala, 11870, Sri Lanka

*Corresponding Author: Thanuja@appsc.sab.ac.lk

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ABSTRACT

Background: Physical Education (PE) in Sri Lankan secondary schools has undergone significant changes over the decades, affecting its structure, content, delivery, and priority. These changes have contributed to reduced recognition and declining student interest. **Objective:** This qualitative, inductive study explores the evolution of the PE curriculum since independence, identifies key issues, and proposes recommendations for future development. **Methods:** Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 25 experienced professionals in sports education. **Results:** Findings reveal that shifts in political and social contexts have reshaped the purpose and nature of PE. **Conclusion:** The study recommends making PE compulsory for O/Ls, revising assessment methods, enhancing teacher training, updating teaching practices, and forming a national advisory committee to lead long-term curriculum reform.

Keywords: curriculum implementation, curriculum reform, education history, health and physical education (HPE), historical analysis, physical education, policy development, secondary schools, student participation, teacher training

1. Introduction

This study critically examines the evolution of the secondary school Physical Education (PE) curriculum in post-independence Sri Lanka, employing a historical method of curriculum analysis. The research investigates how social, cultural, economic, and educational forces have shaped national education policy and, specifically, the development of physical education. By contextualizing the PE curriculum within broader historical and societal shifts, the study aims to uncover the key challenges and transformations that have influenced its implementation and reception over time [1].

The study's background traces the origins of Sri Lanka's school curriculum to the British colonial period, highlighting the introduction of public-school models that emphasized sports and physical training. These public schools demonstrated notably higher sports performance than other institutions, setting a precedent for physical education that continues to influence contemporary practice [2]. Against this backdrop, the main

objective of this study is to investigate the impact of the evolving PE curriculum on the development of sports and physical education in secondary schools across Sri Lanka. Two specific research objectives and corresponding research questions have been established to guide the investigation [3,4]. These aim to explore curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, and policy decisions and their collective influence on student participation and national sports development [5,6].

2. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design through a historical approach to examine the evolution of the secondary school physical education curriculum in post-independence Sri Lanka. The research was informed by both primary and secondary data sources [7]. Primary sources included Acts of Parliament, government circulars, and official documents related to education reforms, whereas secondary sources comprised books and academic literature on curriculum development.

For data collection, two main methods were used: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Written document samples relevant to physical education were purposively selected to trace historical developments [8]. To address the remaining objectives, twenty-six ($n=26$) key informants were purposively selected using non-random sampling, based on their expertise and experience in the field. Participants included school PE teachers, university lecturers, officials from the Ministry of Sports, the National Institute of Education, and the Ministry of Education [9].

All interviews were audio recorded with participant consent, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities, and standard ethical protocols were followed throughout the study. Thematic analysis enabled categorization and interpretation of findings to draw conclusions aligned with the research objectives. The study utilized purposive sampling to select a total of twenty-six ($n = 26$) key informants from various levels of the physical education sector in Sri Lanka [10,11]. This non-random sampling method was chosen to ensure the participation of participants with extensive experience and expertise in the topic, which is consistent with the inductive and qualitative nature of the study. Participants comprised a diverse mix of currently active and retired professionals, including university lecturers, school principals, government PE teachers, private school instructors, directors of national institutions, curriculum planners, ministry officials, national coaches, and military sports officers [12,13]. Their selection was based on professional qualifications, years of service, and significant contributions to the development and implementation of physical education at various levels.

Among the 19 currently employed participants were professors, deans, curriculum planners, project officers, and experienced school-level physical education teachers. Most held advanced academic qualifications (e.g., PhDs, Master's degrees, Diplomas in Physical Education) and had over two decades of relevant experience. Seven other participants were retired professionals, including former heads of departments, teachers and senior officials from national educational and sports institutions [14]. These individuals brought historical and institutional perspectives to the development of the physical education curriculum, and many of them had made direct contributions to policy and practice during their tenure.

This study used both primary and secondary data collection methods to explore the historical development, implications, challenges, and future directions of the physical education curriculum in secondary schools in Sri Lanka [15]. PE curriculum, with many having directly contributed to policy and practice during their tenure. This study employed both primary and secondary data collection methods to investigate the historical development, implications, issues, and future directions of the secondary school Physical Education curriculum in Sri Lanka. Primary data were collected through open-ended interviews, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires addressed to stakeholders such as teachers, principals, project managers, lecturers, and retired workers in the physical education and sports sector. Open-ended interviews allowed flexibility for respondents to share detailed personal insights.

- Semi-structured interviews used an interview guide to cover predetermined themes while allowing room for emergent issues.
- Questionnaires gathered broader data from professionals engaged in the education system.

Secondary data were gathered through an extensive review of documents, including Hansard reports, archival agreements, circulars, administrative reports, policy documents, syllabi, education history books, journals, newspapers, and artefacts. These sources offered historical and contextual perspectives and were instrumental in triangulating and validating primary data [16].

Key historical literature used included works by Sumathipala (1968), Jayasuriya (1977), Perkin (1992), Ranaweera (2003), and Senawirathne (2004). Administration of Data Collection Tools. The researcher personally administered all interviews and questionnaires. Interviews were pre-scheduled, recorded with

consent, and held in familiar environments to ensure comfort and open communication. Data collection occurred in two phases:

- Phase 1: Gathering of secondary data from written and published documents.
- Phase 2: Collection of primary data through interviews and questionnaires.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and organized into categories derived from the research questions. This approach ensured an accurate representation of participants' responses. Consent forms and interview schedules were shared with participants in advance. Interviews typically lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted in environments selected by the informant.

2.1 Data Analysis Process and Validity

To achieve the first research objective, historical trends in the development of Physical Education in Sri Lanka were examined using historical research methods. For the remaining objectives, qualitative data were gathered through interviews with purposefully selected participants. All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed, and analyzed through iterative reading, coding, and thematic categorization.

In qualitative research, data analysis begins early and evolves throughout the research process. As Hamersley and Atkinson (2007) note, historical data analysis is not a separate stage but is integrated with research design, reflection, and writing. To ensure validity, the researcher developed relevant subject knowledge through formal training and expert consultations. A rich and diverse sample—including academic staff, education officials, sports professionals, and military officers—was selected using purposive sampling to ensure credibility and representativeness. Triangulation was achieved through the use of both primary (interviews and questionnaires) and secondary data. Respondent validation was carried out by cross-checking the results with 25% of the sample.

Further, rigorous analytical steps were applied, including critical reflection, logical coherence checks, comparison with literature, and examination of multiple perspectives. Together, these strategies helped to increase the reliability and validity of the results.

3. Results

The findings of this study highlight the urgent and multifaceted role that Physical Education and Health (PEH) must play in the Sri Lankan school curriculum. PEH is not just a credit-earning subject; it is a powerful tool for developing a physically fit, emotionally strong, socially responsible and deeply patriotic generation. A key finding is that Physical and Social Education (PEE) can serve as a transformative component of education, shaping not only the physical well-being of students but also their character and social awareness. Furthermore, the research findings reveal the potential of physical education to instill lifelong healthy habits in students. By participating in age-appropriate physical activities, following a healthy diet, and developing exercise and wellness routines, students can help reduce future pressures on public health.

4. Discussion

The study highlights the growing social need to go beyond the traditional goal of producing subject matter experts. There is an urgent need to produce a disciplined generation that respects diversity, lives together peacefully, and is motivated to contribute to national progress. This is in line with the broader vision of education as a means of promoting social harmony and national development. The study highlights the growing social need to go beyond the traditional goal of producing subject matter experts. There is an urgent need to produce a generation that maintains discipline, respects diversity, lives together peacefully and is motivated to contribute to national progress. This is in line with the broader vision of education as a means of promoting social harmony and national development. The integration of patriotism and national identity through school sports and health programs reflects a crucial shift in curricular priorities.

This is one of the most important aspects of life as an individual, as long as you are mindful of your goals and your social responsibility. It is important to note that the basic principles of product development and national sustainability. Breathe, the investment in importing physical education programs, is a program for the sustainable and long-term implementation of physical education programs in all Sri Lankan schools. A program for the educational, inclusive, and culturally sensitive development of students, with a focus on divisions and religions, promoting cooperation and mutual respect for their values within different backgrounds. The potential for education to be particularly relevant in the Sri Lankan context, but also for the interests of the social structure. In light of these findings, the study calls for a renewed commitment from policymakers and educators to position health and sports as a cornerstone of holistic education in Sri Lanka. Creating space in the education system for comprehensive and inclusive sports is not only timely but also crucial to building a healthy, united and progressive society.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the historical development and evolution of physical education and sport in Sri Lanka, highlighting both the successes and the ongoing challenges. The study concluded that despite the introduction of formal educational pathways such as the Certificate of Teaching and the Bachelor of Physical Education (COE), many qualified physical education teachers tend to move on to teach other subjects. The study could not determine the exact reasons behind this trend, indicating a need for further investigation in this area.

Furthermore, repeated efforts to make the curriculum more practical, from colonial times through various post-independence governments, have largely been unsuccessful. These attempts include reforms initiated in the 1840s, 1870s, 1910s, 1930s, and more formally in the 1992 NEC Report, implemented from 1998. Understanding why these reforms consistently failed and evaluating the effectiveness of the more recent initiatives remains a critical area for future research.

In summary, while progress has been made in establishing Physical Education as a component of the national curriculum, structural, policy, and implementation-level gaps continue to hinder its effectiveness. Addressing these gaps through targeted research and evidence-based reform is essential for the advancement of PE in Sri Lanka.

6. Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations, but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

7. Ethical Statement

Sumatera Medical Journal (SUMEJ) is a peer-reviewed international electronic journal. The following statement clarifies the ethical behavior expected from all parties involved in the publication process of articles in Sumatera Medical Journal (SUMEJ), including authors, the Editor-in-Chief, the Editorial Board, peer reviewers, and the publisher, TALENTA Publisher Universitas Sumatera Utara. This statement is based on the Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors developed by Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

8. Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the design and implementation of the research, data analysis, and finalizing the manuscript.

9. Funding

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11. Conflict of Interest

Authors declares no conflict of interest.

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