

REVOLUTIONIZING THE TEACHING OF PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

AKINMUSERE AYO KAYODE

Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo

Email: yokinsere@yahoo.com

&

FATOBA MERCY TITILAYO (DR.) MRS.

Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo

Email: fatobamercy@yahoo.com

&

OGUNLEYE SEUN MICHAEL

Email: oluseunmichael77@gmail.com

Abstract

Physical and Health Education (PHE) is a cornerstone of holistic education, promoting the physical, mental, and social well-being of students. In Nigeria, however, the teaching of PHE in secondary schools remains underdeveloped, under-resourced, and undervalued. This study critically examines the current state of PHE instruction in Nigerian secondary schools and presents a strategic framework for revolutionizing its delivery. Drawing upon a wide range of literature, curriculum analysis, and educational theory, the paper explores the concepts, scope, and curriculum of both physical and health education within the Nigerian context. It evaluates the aims and objectives of PHE, identifies prevailing challenges such as insufficient infrastructure, lack of trained educators, policy neglect, and low societal valuation, and proposes innovative pedagogical and technological strategies for improvement. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating global best practices, enhancing student engagement, and adopting interdisciplinary and inclusive teaching methods. Furthermore, it situates PHE within the global education agenda, showing its potential to foster international connectivity, life skills development, and career readiness among Nigerian youth. Recommendations focus on curriculum reform, teacher training, digital resource integration, and policy advocacy. This work argues that revolutionizing the teaching of PHE is not only essential for national educational development but also for equipping students with lifelong health competencies and global competitiveness.

Keywords: *Revolutionizing, Teaching, Physical Education, Health Education, Innovation*

Introduction

The Concept of Physical Education

Physical Education (PE) is a discipline that integrates body movement with cognitive development, emotional resilience, and social engagement. It serves not merely as a means of promoting physical fitness but also as an avenue for fostering discipline, cooperation, confidence, and lifelong wellness among students (Bailey, 2006). As a formal component of educational curricula, PE has evolved over the decades to encompass not only athletic and exercise training but also the promotion of healthy lifestyles, injury prevention, and mental well-being (Hardman, 2011).

In Nigeria, Physical Education has been formally integrated into the school curriculum at all levels. However, the conceptual understanding and implementation of PE vary widely across institutions. Many stakeholders still perceive it narrowly—as “sports” or “games”—failing to appreciate its broader educational and developmental objectives (Okuneye & Ayeni, 2013).

Definitions and Evolution of Physical Education

The term "Physical Education" encompasses all forms of systematic instruction aimed at developing physical fitness, motor skills, social behaviours, and emotional resilience. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015), Physical Education is "a fundamental right for all children" and serves as a foundation for holistic development. The American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD, 2009) defines PE as "a process through which an individual obtains optimal physical, mental, and social skills and fitness through physical activity."

Historically, the roots of PE can be traced back to ancient civilizations, including Greece, Rome, and China, where physical training was linked to military readiness, citizenship, and moral education (Lumpkin, 2002). In Nigeria, Physical Education was institutionalized during the colonial era, often influenced by British military drills and games. However, it gradually transformed into a broader subject area aligned with global educational standards, particularly following independence and the adoption of the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

Theoretical Foundations of Physical Education

Several learning theories underpin the philosophy and methodology of Physical Education. These include:

Behaviourism: Suggests that motor behaviours and physical skills are learned through repetition, reinforcement, and feedback. Teachers use drills and positive reinforcement to shape student performance (Skinner, 1953).

Constructivism: Emphasizes active learning, where students construct meaning through experiences. PE classes that incorporate problem-solving, peer collaboration, and games are grounded in constructivist approaches (Piaget, 1950).

Humanism: Focuses on the development of the whole person, encouraging personal growth, self-direction, and empathy through physical activity. This is particularly relevant in PE when activities promote self-esteem and teamwork (Rogers, 1969). These frameworks inform the selection of teaching strategies, lesson planning, and assessment techniques in modern Physical Education programs.

Components of Physical Education

Physical Education is a multifaceted subject that includes several interrelated components:

Motor Skill Development

PE helps students develop gross and fine motor skills such as coordination, balance, agility, and reaction time. These skills form the foundation for various sports and physical activities (Gallahue & Ozmun, 2006).

Physical Fitness

A key objective of PE is to promote cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, flexibility, and body composition. Regular fitness activities reduce the risk of lifestyle diseases and enhance mental well-being (Corbin & Lindsey, 2007).

Sports and Games

Team and individual sports teach strategic thinking, cooperation, and leadership. They also cultivate a sense of fairness and respect for rules—values that extend beyond the playing field (Siedentop, 2009).

Personal and Social Responsibility

Through group activities, students learn social skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and empathy. PE thus contributes to social cohesion and character development (Hellison, 2003).

Health and Wellness

Modern PE integrates aspects of health education, including nutrition, stress management, hygiene, and injury prevention. This holistic approach prepares students for lifelong well-being (WHO, 2010).

Importance of Physical Education in Adolescent Development

The adolescent stage is marked by significant physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. PE plays a pivotal role during this period in the following ways:

Physical Growth: PE supports the musculoskeletal and cardiovascular development necessary for healthy adulthood (Malina et al., 2004).

Cognitive Functioning: Regular physical activity has been shown to improve concentration, memory, and academic performance (Hillman et al., 2008).

Mental Health: PE helps in managing stress, anxiety, and depression among adolescents through endorphin release and social interaction (Biddle & Asare, 2011).

Social Skills: By participating in group activities and team sports, students learn critical life skills like cooperation, conflict resolution, and leadership (Bailey, 2006).

Global Perspective and the Role of Physical Education (PE) in 21st Century Education

Across the globe, PE is gaining renewed attention as an essential component of 21st-century education. UNESCO (2015) advocates for PE as a vehicle for promoting sustainable development, equity, and lifelong learning. In technologically advanced countries, PE curricula increasingly include virtual fitness platforms, gamified movement, and global sports literacy—connecting students to international trends and opportunities (Kirk, 2010).

Countries such as Finland and Japan have integrated daily PE into school routines with measurable improvements in student health and academic achievement. Nigeria must therefore align its PE programs with global best practices to ensure its youth are not left behind in the knowledge economy and global health movement.

Physical Education as a Career Pathway

In addition to its developmental benefits, PE opens up numerous career opportunities in fields such as: Sports coaching and athletic training; Physical therapy and rehabilitation; Health and fitness consultancy; Recreation management and sports administration, and Teaching and academic research in kinesiology. Promoting PE in Nigerian schools can thus play a critical role in economic diversification and youth employment (Akindutire & Ayodele, 2012).

2. The Concept of Health Education

Health education is a vital component of the school curriculum that aims to equip individuals with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their health and well-being. In the context of Nigerian secondary education, health education has been recognized as essential in combating the nation's public health challenges, including infectious diseases, malnutrition, drug abuse, and poor hygiene practices (Ajala, 2011). While often taught alongside Physical Education, Health Education is a distinct and broad discipline that integrates aspects of biology, psychology, sociology, and environmental science to promote personal and public health.

Definitions and Philosophical Underpinnings of Health Education

Health education can be defined as the process of creating awareness and imparting knowledge to people so that they make choices conducive to health and avoid health-risk behaviours. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1986), health education is “any combination of learning experiences designed to help individuals and communities improve their health, by increasing their knowledge or influencing their attitudes.”

Health education encompasses both formal instruction (as part of a school curriculum) and informal community-based learning (Green & Kreuter, 2005). In Nigerian secondary schools, formal health education seeks to create health-conscious citizens who understand the implications of their daily choices on their personal and communal well-being.

Philosophically, health education draws from:

Biomedical perspective: Emphasizes disease prevention, hygiene, and nutrition through scientific understanding.

Behavioural change model: Focuses on modifying health-risk behaviours through awareness, motivation, and skill-building (Rosenstock et al., 1988).

Socio-ecological model: Recognizes that individual behaviour is influenced by relationships, community structures, and public policies (McLeroy et al., 1988).

2.2 Objectives of Health Education

The objectives of health education at the secondary school level include:

- Imparting accurate and age-appropriate health information.
- Promoting attitudes and behaviours that support personal and public health.
- Encouraging the prevention and early detection of diseases.
- Fostering critical thinking about health-related issues.
- Building students' capacity to act as health advocates in their families and communities (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013).

These objectives align with Nigeria's national goals of reducing disease burden, promoting reproductive health, and ensuring the well-being of its youth population.

Core Components of Health Education

Health education comprises multiple interrelated components. In secondary schools, the subject is organized into thematic areas that reflect the major health challenges facing adolescents and the broader society.

Personal Health and Hygiene

Students are taught how to maintain physical cleanliness, prevent communicable diseases, and understand the relationship between hygiene and health. This includes topics such as oral health, handwashing, skin care, and menstrual hygiene (Uwakwe, 2001).

Nutrition Education

Nutrition education addresses the principles of balanced diets, food groups, micronutrients, and the effects of malnutrition. It equips students to make healthy food choices and understand the importance of dietary habits for physical and cognitive development (Oninla, 2010).

Disease Prevention and Control

Students learn about common diseases—such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis—and strategies for prevention, vaccination, and community health intervention. Awareness is also raised about non-communicable diseases such as hypertension and diabetes (WHO, 2010).

Drug Education

Health education tackles the dangers of drug abuse, addiction, and substance use among adolescents. It emphasizes decision-making, resisting peer pressure, and accessing help for substance-related issues (Nnodum & Ajoku, 2006).

Mental and Emotional Health

Topics under this component include stress management, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and resilience building. Mental health education is increasingly vital due to rising cases of depression, anxiety, and suicide among teenagers (WHO, 2021).

Reproductive Health

This includes sexuality education, menstrual health, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and responsible parenting. Culturally sensitive approaches are necessary, given societal norms and religious influences in Nigeria (Adebayo & Oladepo, 2007).

Environmental Health

Students explore how environmental factors such as pollution, waste disposal, water safety, and housing conditions affect health outcomes. They are encouraged to adopt sustainable practices and participate in school sanitation programs (Olayiwola, 2015).

Importance of Health Education in Adolescent Development

Adolescents face numerous health challenges stemming from peer pressure, misinformation, and risky behaviours. Health education helps address these challenges by:

Empowering informed decision-making: Adolescents gain the ability to assess risks and make choices that promote long-term health (UNICEF, 2011).

Reducing vulnerability to diseases: Accurate knowledge leads to better hygiene, nutrition, and protective behaviours, which reduces disease incidence (Adeyemo, 2009).

Promoting mental and emotional balance: Adolescents are taught to identify mental health problems and seek help, thus improving academic performance and social adjustment (Babatunde, 2013).

Fostering gender equity: Reproductive health education can help eliminate stigma around menstruation, promote shared responsibility for contraception, and empower girls (Olukoya, 2004).

Integration of Health Education into School Curriculum

In Nigeria, Health Education is typically taught under the broader subject of Physical and Health Education (PHE) in junior and senior secondary schools. The National Curriculum (NERDC, 2007) prescribes specific content for each year of study, spanning both theoretical and practical elements.

However, implementation challenges exist. Many schools lack trained health educators, adequate resources, and teaching aids. In some cases, health topics are covered superficially or ignored entirely due to time constraints or teacher bias (Okafor & Okeke, 2014).

To address these issues, the integration of Health Education should involve:

- A standalone health curriculum in senior secondary levels.
- Use of audiovisual and interactive tools.
- Collaboration with health professionals for guest lectures and community outreach.
- Capacity building for teachers through workshops and certification programs.

The Role of Health Education in Sustainable Development

Health education contributes directly to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including:

SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being): Promotes preventive care and reduces premature mortality.

SDG 4 (Quality Education): Fosters life skills that support lifelong learning and well-being.

SDG 5 (Gender Equality): Supports comprehensive sexuality education that empowers girls and combats gender-based violence.

SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation): Raises awareness about water safety and sanitation behaviours (UNESCO, 2015).

Educating young Nigerians about these interconnections positions them to become proactive, health-literate citizens capable of advancing national and global development.

Global Trends in Health Education

Across the world, health education is undergoing a transformation. Digital platforms, gamified health tools, peer education, and mobile health (mHealth) initiatives are increasingly used to deliver content and monitor outcomes (Kumar et al., 2013).

Countries like Finland, Canada, and Singapore have integrated digital health tools into school programs, allowing students to track their diet, exercise, sleep, and mental wellness. Nigeria can harness similar innovations—especially mobile-based solutions—to expand access and engagement in health learning.

Furthermore, global health crises such as COVID-19 have reinforced the importance of school-based health literacy in disease prevention and response. The pandemic demonstrated how misinformation can exacerbate public health problems when students and communities are not equipped with critical thinking and accurate health knowledge (UNICEF, 2021).

Challenges in Defining and Implementing Health Education in Nigeria

Despite its potential, health education in Nigeria faces definitional and operational challenges:

Cultural and religious barriers: Topics such as sexuality education are often avoided due to societal taboos (Ajuwon et al., 2006).

Teacher competency gaps: Many teachers lack specific training in health-related topics.

Curriculum overload: Health education is often overshadowed by "core" subjects like mathematics and English.

Resource limitations: Lack of educational materials, laboratories, and community health partnerships (Okonkwo, 2012).

To address these barriers, it is essential to reconceptualize health education not as an add-on, but as a vital aspect of national development and youth empowerment.

3. The Place of Physical Education in Connecting Nigerian Secondary School Students to the World

Physical Education (PE) plays a vital role in preparing Nigerian secondary school students to engage with global practices, values, and careers in health, sports, and wellness. By providing students with essential physical, cognitive, and social competencies, PE acts as a bridge that links local knowledge with international standards (UNESCO, 2015).

Promoting Global Citizenship

PE promotes values such as teamwork, respect, fairness, and leadership which are universally accepted and necessary for active global citizenship:

- Participation in international sports competitions fosters cultural exchange and diplomacy
- Collaboration in global campaigns on health (e.g., World Health Day) builds awareness of global health challenges
- Exposure to international sporting icons and global health initiatives inspires students to think beyond local boundaries

Access to International Opportunities

PE opens doors to scholarships, professional sports careers, and global training opportunities:

- Talented students can access international sporting scholarships and exchange programs
- Global organizations like FIFA, IOC, and WHO support youth-based PE and health initiatives
- Certification in sports coaching, officiating, and first aid can be internationally recognized

Alignment with Global Standards

The Nigerian PHE curriculum, when updated, can align with UNESCO's Quality Physical Education Guidelines:

- Emphasizes inclusive, safe, and health-promoting environments
- Encourages lifelong engagement in physical activity

- Advocates for cross-border educational collaborations and benchmarking

Digital Connectivity and Learning

Technology-enabled PE connects students to international resources:

- Online fitness and health platforms such as WHO School Health Toolkit and YouTube-based training sessions
- Participation in international webinars, workshops, and e-learning programs
- Access to up-to-date research, trends, and professional networks in health and fitness

International Recognition and Certification

Participation in internationally benchmarked programs builds credibility:

- Involvement in global certifications such as Red Cross First Aid Training or International Coaching Courses
- Students can be assessed using fitness benchmarks like the Cooper Test or the Eurofit Physical Fitness Test
- Schools can participate in UNESCO-associated school networks promoting PE and health

4. Revolutionizing the Teaching of Physical and Health Education in Nigerian Secondary Schools

Revolutionizing the teaching of Physical and Health Education (PHE) in Nigerian secondary schools involves a holistic transformation in philosophy, methodology, curriculum design, infrastructure, and stakeholder engagement. This change must address current deficiencies while embracing global standards to ensure that students are equipped with 21st-century health and fitness competencies (Ogunleye & Osho, 2023).

Redefining Educational Philosophy

There must be a shift in mindset from seeing PHE as a recreational or supplementary subject to acknowledging it as a core academic discipline:

- PHE should be prioritized equally with core subjects like Mathematics and English
- Policies must enshrine the right to health and physical literacy for all students
- National examinations and certification systems should include PHE

Curriculum Reform and Content Modernization

The curriculum should reflect contemporary health issues and align with global developments:

- Incorporate emerging topics like mental health, digital fitness, environmental health, and preventive medicine
- Embed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within health education content
- Localize curriculum examples while retaining universal principles

Teacher Training and Empowerment

Teachers are critical agents in the reform process:

- Establish specialized teacher training institutions for PHE
- Introduce mandatory continuous professional development programs
- Provide competitive salaries and incentives for excellence in PHE teaching

Infrastructure Development

Adequate physical resources are essential to support effective learning:

- Construct standard multipurpose sports facilities and health labs
- Provide equipment for diverse sports and health demonstrations
- Ensure accessibility for students with disabilities

Strategic Partnerships

Collaboration with stakeholders is vital:

- Partner with sports federations, NGOs, and health institutions for program support
- Engage private sector investment in school wellness and sports initiatives
- Foster international partnerships for knowledge exchange and sponsorships

Integration of ICT

ICT should be harnessed for delivery and evaluation:

- Develop national e-learning platforms for PHE
- Introduce health-monitoring apps and virtual coaching tools
- Utilize AI and data analytics to assess student health trends and performance

School and Community Synergy

Bridging the gap between schools and communities enhances impact:

- Encourage student-led health campaigns in communities
- Involve parents in fitness programs and health literacy events
- Use schools as health resource centres for rural populations

Monitoring and Quality Assurance

Ongoing evaluation is key to sustainability:

- Set national performance indicators for PHE outcomes
- Implement school inspections specific to PHE quality
- Support evidence-based policymaking using data from school reports

Conclusion

This study has traced the concepts, scope, curricular content, and objectives of PHE while critically assessing the challenges hindering its effective implementation. It is evident that while the current programme offers a foundation, it falls short of meeting contemporary standards. Numerous challenges—from inadequate infrastructure and insufficiently trained teachers to curricular limitations—must be addressed. Innovative strategies, such as technology integration, inclusive pedagogies, teacher training, and strategic partnerships, offer practical pathways for transforming the subject.

Moreover, physical and health education has a powerful role in connecting students with global opportunities and instilling values that transcend the classroom. A reimagined PHE curriculum can contribute meaningfully to national development goals, youth empowerment, and global health initiatives.

To realize this vision, stakeholders must embrace a new educational philosophy that prioritizes wellness, equity, and holistic development. A revolutionary approach to

teaching PHE is not just timely—it is imperative for fostering a generation of physically active, health-conscious, and globally connected Nigerian citizens.

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis presented in this study, the following recommendations are proposed to effectively revolutionize the teaching of Physical and Health Education (PHE) in Nigerian secondary schools:

Policy Reform: The Nigerian government should enact policies that recognize PHE as a core subject and allocate adequate funding for its development and implementation.

Curriculum Enhancement: Curriculum developers must update the PHE syllabus to include contemporary health issues, digital fitness, mental health, and align with global health and education standards.

Teacher Training: Establish specialized training programs and continuous professional development to equip PHE teachers with modern pedagogical skills and knowledge.

Infrastructure Investment: Schools should be equipped with adequate sports facilities, health laboratories, and learning resources to support practical and theoretical components of PHE.

Technology Integration: Promote the use of ICT tools and e-learning platforms to enhance student engagement and provide access to global health and fitness resources.

Community Engagement: Encourage collaboration between schools, parents, health professionals, and community organizations to foster a supportive environment for student health and physical activity.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Implement regular assessment and quality assurance mechanisms to track the effectiveness of PHE programs and inform policy adjustments.

Inclusive Practices: Ensure PHE programs are inclusive, accommodating students with disabilities and promoting gender equity in sports and health activities.

International Collaboration: Foster partnerships with international organizations to exchange best practices, secure funding, and provide students with global exposure.

Public Awareness: Conduct nationwide campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of physical and health education for youth development and national progress.

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