



## THE HISTORICAL INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the dialectical relationship between educational thought and the development of physical education in schools from a historical and comparative philosophical perspective. The research adopts a historical-analytical methodology supported by critical literature in educational philosophy and addresses how the content of physical education has been shaped by shifts in societal values and educational systems. The findings reveal that physical education has never been neutral or autonomous but has consistently mirrored dominant ideologies ranging from the idealism of Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau's natural freedom then Dewey's pragmatism and finally the emancipatory visions of Freire. The study highlights the transformation of physical education from a tool of discipline and control into a means of empowerment and self-expression especially within contemporary democratic and pluralistic contexts. It recommends reframing physical education within the modern educational curriculum as a fundamental domain for shaping the holistic human being in body thought and values in alignment with the demands of social justice and inclusive education

### Keywords

educational thought physical education body school philosophical analysis educational justice

### Introduction

Understanding the progression of physical education throughout history requires deep attention to the shifts in educational thought which shaped different visions of the body schooling and human development across eras. Educational philosophy has long served as a lens through which societies constructed their understanding of physical activity and the role of schools in fostering physical emotional and social growth.

In the classical era thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle viewed the integration of body and mind as essential to forming virtuous citizens who could contribute meaningfully to civic life (Kirk, 2010). The educational systems of Sparta and Athens illustrated two divergent approaches. Sparta emphasized rigorous physical discipline for military aims while Athens promoted a more holistic education valuing beauty reason and bodily strength (Bailey, 2006).

In medieval Europe religious doctrine became dominant and placed the soul above the body which led to a decline in physical training within formal education. The Renaissance later reawakened interest in the human form as part of a broader return to classical humanism and balance between mind and body (Tubbs, 1995).

The Enlightenment brought with it a wave of rationalist and experiential philosophies that reshaped education. Jean-Jacques Rousseau for example argued in *Emile or On Education* (1762) that a child's natural development—both physical and emotional—should guide learning. His influence paved the way for educational practices that included movement and activity especially in early childhood settings (Darling, 2004).

By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries physical education had become institutionalized through national education systems. Thinkers like John Dewey and Herbert Spencer highlighted its value in cultivating disciplined healthy and socially responsible individuals prepared for modern life (Dewey, 1916).



In recent decades new paradigms such as constructivism critical pedagogy and holistic education have reimagined physical education with emphasis on justice identity and human agency. Paulo Freire's work has been central in this regard urging educators to create spaces where bodily expression becomes part of conscious and liberatory engagement (Freire, 1970).

From these historical shifts it is clear that physical education has never evolved in isolation but has always reflected the dominant educational ideologies of each time. Analyzing this evolution provides important insight into present challenges and offers a path forward toward more inclusive and human-centered approaches to physical education.

#### **4. Theoretical and Historical Framework**

The theoretical framework forms the cornerstone for understanding the dialectical relationship between educational thought and the evolution of physical education. It reveals how physical practices and concepts have been shaped within educational systems influenced by philosophy religion politics and economics.

##### **4.1 Educational Thought in Ancient Civilizations**

In early civilizations such as Egypt and Mesopotamia physical education was closely tied to military and religious functions. With the emergence of philosophical thinking in ancient Greece a new perspective developed in which physical education became a means to human perfection. Plato emphasized the importance of harmony between soul and body in shaping virtuous citizens (Kirk, 2010). Aristotle linked physical activity to moral and rational ends stressing its contribution to civic virtues.

##### **4.2 The Decline of Physical Education in the Middle Ages**

The theological worldview of medieval Europe regarded the body as a source of temptation and sin leading to the marginalization of physical education. Spiritual cultivation took precedence while bodily practices were seen as indulgent and incompatible with religious austerity. Some monastic communities however maintained physical discipline through sport as part of religious service.

##### **4.3 The Renaissance and the Rebirth of the Educational Body**

The Renaissance marked a profound shift in the perception of human nature restoring the value of the body within the broader project of the integrated human influenced by Humanist thought. This revival introduced physical activity into aristocratic education especially for the upbringing of elites (Tubbs, 1995).

##### **4.4 Modern Educational Thought and Bodily Integration**

With Rousseau's work in 1762 a clear call emerged to incorporate the body into education through a natural pedagogy that respects the psychological and physical development of the child. His ideas strongly influenced educators like Pestalozzi and Froebel who introduced play and movement as foundational elements in early childhood curricula (Darling, 2004).

##### **4.5 Physical Education within the Industrial and Nationalist Paradigm**

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries physical education became a formal component of public education systems shaped by concerns related to national health social control and productivity. Functionalist views prevailed at the time framing physical education as a tool for discipline obedience and bodily development to serve the modern state (Bailey, 2006).

##### **4.6 Pragmatism and Constructivism**

John Dewey advanced an experiential model of learning where knowledge arises from lived experience and the body plays an active role in thinking and participation (Dewey, 1916). Contemporary constructivist thought redefined physical education as an interactive space for identity formation and personal development moving beyond mechanical physical training.

##### **4.7 Critical Pedagogy and Bodily Liberation**

With the rise of critical educational movements in the second half of the twentieth century especially in the



works of Paulo Freire the body was reconceived as a site of liberation and self-expression. Advocates called for a more inclusive and equitable approach to physical education accounting for gender disability and the needs of marginalized groups (Freire, 1970).

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Research Type and Approach

This study adopts a historical analytical methodology which serves to examine educational ideas and practices within their temporal contexts by tracing their development and transformations across different periods. In selected parts a comparative approach is also applied to explore the similarities and differences between classical and modern educational thought and how these reflect on the structure of physical education in schools.

### 5.2 Data Sources

Two types of sources were utilized

- Primary sources include original philosophical and educational texts by major thinkers such as Plato Aristotle Rousseau Dewey Freire and others as well as historical educational legislation related to physical education
- Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic studies theoretical books and research articles indexed in international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science in addition to references from journals specializing in education and sports history

### 5.3 Analytical Tools

Qualitative content analysis was employed to interpret the educational texts and examine philosophical discourses concerning the body and schooling. The intellectual content was thematically classified under the following axes

- The perspective of educational thought on the body and sport
- Educational goals associated with physical activity
- The relationship between physical education and its political or moral contexts

### 5.4 Scope and Limitations

This research focuses primarily on the evolution of educational thought in Western cultures including Greek Roman and modern European traditions with selective references to Islamic and Arab contributions. The applied scope is limited to school-based physical education and does not extend to professional or recreational sports

### 5.5 Operational Objectives

The study aims to

- Identify the philosophical features of each historical stage and their influence on the structure of physical education
- Analyze the educational and social impacts of ideological shifts on concepts of the body and physical activity
- Provide a critical reading that connects contemporary educational thought with physical education practices in school settings

## 6. Comparative and Analytical Discussion

### 6.1 A Comprehensive Comparison between the Functions of Physical Education in Ancient and Modern Times

In ancient civilizations such as Sparta and Athens physical education was an essential part of the broader project of state-building and social identity and served various purposes including discipline and military preparation (Scanlon, 2010). In contrast modern functions have evolved to meet public health needs promote fitness encourage democratic values and more recently act as a tool for combating discrimination and advancing bodily justice (Hardman and Green, 2011)



Physical education in ancient societies was deeply embedded in sociopolitical structures while modern programs reflect broader concerns of health citizenship and inclusion (Kirk, 2010, p. 34)

## 6.2 Analysis of Physical Education Philosophies

### 6.2.1 Idealist and Classical Philosophy

Classical philosophy introduced the idea of bodily perfection as a reflection of intellectual and moral beauty a concept deeply rooted in the thought of Plato and Aristotle (Whitehead, 2001)

### 6.2.2 Naturalist and Empirical Philosophy

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was among the first to include physical movement as part of natural development insisting that the child learns through interaction with nature (Rousseau, 1762). Friedrich Froebel further emphasized that physical play represents the highest form of individual freedom during early childhood (Jarvis, 2006)

### 6.2.3 Pragmatist Philosophy

John Dewey proposed that every physical activity is an opportunity for learning a principle that became foundational in progressive education (Dewey, 1916). Subsequent research has affirmed that experiential physical education directly supports the development of critical thinking and collaboration skills (Ennis, 2011)

### 6.2.4 Critical and Emancipatory Philosophy

Paulo Freire argued that traditional education systems suppress bodily expression and reproduce power hierarchies stressing that authentic education enables individuals to express themselves through their bodies (Freire, 1970). This perspective was later expanded by Tinning who emphasized the importance of making physical education a space for bodily dialogue and resistance (Tinning, 2010)

## 6.3 The Influence of Societal Values on the Content of Physical Education

Recent studies indicate that the prevailing values within a society largely determine the nature of physical education practiced therein. Sport is employed either as a mechanism of social control or as a tool for empowerment depending on the cultural and political environment (Evans Davies and Wright, 2004). In authoritarian societies standardized and rigid physical education models tend to dominate whereas in democratic settings interactive and inclusive activities are more likely to flourish (Kretchmar, 2005)

### 6.4 School Curricula and Motor Content

A study conducted by Hardman found that over 40 percent of school curricula in developing countries continue to emphasize traditional activities which do not adequately address the psychological and social needs of students (Hardman, 2008)

In contrast a study by Bailey et al highlighted that the integration of interactive motor activities such as modified sports and specialized movement education leads to significant improvements in students' empathy and self-discipline (Bailey et al, 2009)

Based on the analysis of educational philosophies and the shifts in societal values the following conclusions can be drawn

- Physical education is not an isolated activity but a direct reflection of the educational intellectual and political framework in which it exists
- Historically it has transitioned from a tool of authority discipline and control to a humanistic educational space for growth and liberation
- Current practices are grounded in a deep philosophical tradition and require ongoing critical reflection to ensure the realization of values such as justice empowerment and both physical and mental well-being

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1 Conclusions

Through an in-depth analysis of the historical trajectory of physical education in relation to the evolution of



educational thought several central conclusions emerge that reveal the dialectical connection between philosophical ideas and the role of the body in educational systems  
1 Physical education directly reflects prevailing educational thought Across time it has never been a neutral practice but has consistently responded to dominant educational philosophies whether idealist empirical pragmatic or emancipatory

2 A shift in function from control to empowerment The aims of physical education have moved from enforcing discipline and obedience in traditional societies toward promoting participation identity and both physical and psychological well-being in contemporary educational settings

3 Societal values shape the content of physical education Authoritarian education systems often produce rigid and modeled physical programs whereas democratic and open societies emphasize play expression and bodily freedom as vehicles for learning

4 A lack of philosophical coherence in modern practices Despite conceptual advancements many current curricula still lack a clear philosophical orientation which results in superficial or standardized practices that fail to reflect deeper educational progress (Hardman, 2008; Tinning, 2010)

5 The necessity of rethinking the educational meaning of the body The body should not be viewed merely as a tool for performance but as a medium of awareness identity and belonging It must be incorporated as a central element in shaping the learner especially in the context of current psychological crises

## 7.2 Recommendations for Researchers in Education and History

1 Conduct comparative studies analyzing how different educational philosophies approach the body and physical activity with special attention to the Arab world

2 Critically examine traditional curricula which continue to marginalize physical education and advocate for the development of inclusive contemporary frameworks grounded in pluralism and justice

3 Strengthen interdisciplinary research between education philosophy and sociology of sport in order to reconstruct critical narratives around physical education

4 Encourage the analysis of gender and disability dimensions in physical education content as key indicators of educational advancement

## 7.3 Recommendations for Policymakers and Educational Institutions

1 Adopt a clear educational philosophy based on justice and empowerment to guide the content of physical education in schools and universities

2 Integrate physical education within school mental health initiatives using it as a core tool to address stress violence and social isolation

3 Provide advanced training programs for teachers that emphasize the philosophical psychological and social aspects of physical education beyond mere technical instruction

4 Establish educational policies that ensure physical education is a safe and inclusive space which respects bodily and cultural differences and upholds every individual's right to movement-based expression

5 Support community-based physical education initiatives outside the formal school system through youth and sports centers to enhance civic engagement and strengthen the connection between schools and society

## Conclusion

Physical education is not merely a scheduled school activity but a reflective space that embodies how a society perceives the individual and its aspirations in shaping a balanced citizen capable of engaging with both self and others. By tracing its philosophical and historical roots we recognize that the body has always been a contested ground between authority and freedom between oppression and liberation between performance and belonging.



This study has demonstrated that physical education cannot be separated from the value systems produced by societies nor from the educational philosophies that guide institutional practices. While in certain historical periods it served as an instrument of control and discipline it has today evolved into a symbol of movement justice and a space for reclaiming the human in their full dimension.

In a time marked by growing psychological pressures and increasing struggles around identity and belonging the call for a form of physical education rooted in contemporary educational philosophy is no longer a methodological luxury but a pedagogical necessity. It is an invitation to reimagine the human being as whole able to think to feel and to move in a harmony that emerges not from imposed order but from the depths of the self.

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