

The Historical Evolution and Future Strategies of Physical Education Teacher Education in China

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Abstract

Using literature review and logical analysis, this study systematically examines policies and scholarship on physical education teacher education since the founding of the People's Republic of China. It characterizes the historical evolution as comprising three stages—"initial formation," "basic establishment," and "the formation of a system with Chinese characteristics"—and distills the evolutionary features across four dimensions: institutions, educational philosophy, forms, and content. On this basis, it proposes four forward-looking strategies: improving the institutional framework, renewing educational concepts, strengthening multi-form collaboration, and optimizing curricular content.

Keywords

Physical education; physical education teacher education; school physical education.

1. Introduction

Physical education bears the vital mission of cultivating socialist builders and successors with well-rounded development in morality, intellect, physique, aesthetics, and labor, and physical education teachers are its principal force^[1]. The high-quality development of physical education teacher education not only helps to forge a corps of teachers with strong ethics, solid instructional competence, and notable social contributions, but also significantly elevates the quality of physical education in China, enabling the PE and Health curriculum to play its key role in fitness-oriented education. This study reviews the trajectory of PE teacher education since the founding of the People's Republic of China, synthesizes its evolutionary features, and proposes future strategies, with the aim of advancing the high-quality development of China's PE enterprise in the new era and providing theoretically meaningful and practically valuable support for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

2. Historical Trajectory

2.1. Period of Initial Formation

At the founding of the People's Republic of China, school physical education faced an acute shortage of qualified teachers and generally low educational attainment among existing staff, making it imperative to establish a normal-education system that could basically meet instructional needs. Against this backdrop, China drew actively on the Soviet model and issued a series of policy documents—including the Decision on the Reform of the School System, the Provisions (Draft) on Higher Normal Schools, and the Provisional Regulations (Draft) for Normal Schools—to build a closed PE teacher-education system coordinated under national education plans, whereby sports institutes directly under the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission and normal universities trained PE teachers. In line with the six administrative regions, six major sports institutes—East China, Central, South-Central, Southwest, Northwest, and Northeast—were established to train personnel and assign them on a targeted basis to the regions in which the institutes were located. This initiative partially alleviated the acute

shortage of PE teachers. In terms of instructional content, the Soviet model embraced a “specialist” philosophy, viewing PE teachers as professionals in teaching athletic skills. Accordingly, during this period the syllabi and teaching plans across institutions focused primarily on specialized sport skills—such as gymnastics, track and field, and ball games^[2]—alongside political and historical theory (e.g., Marxist principles and the history of the Chinese revolution) and disciplinary foundations including psychology, pedagogy, and anatomy.

During this period, China’s policy focus was on addressing the shortage of PE teachers^[3], with insufficient attention paid to in-service training. Even so, institutional development gradually took shape: in 1951 the Circular on Issues Concerning the Further Training of Primary and Secondary School Teachers was issued, and in 1957 the Provisions on Several Issues Regarding Correspondence Normal Colleges and Part-Time Normal Schools established clear requirements to build systems for further training and correspondence education. Meanwhile, universities such as Beijing Institute of Physical Education set up training courses and classes for PE teachers, providing correspondence study and cultural remedial education for in-service teachers to help them understand the syllabus and master textbooks and teaching methods.

2.2. Period of Basic Establishment

During the reform and opening-up period, with the reinstatement of the national college entrance examination, sports institutes and normal universities resumed admissions, and PE teacher education, having addressed the issue of teacher quantity, began to focus on improving teacher quality. In 1978, China issued the Notice on Strengthening School Physical Education and Health Work, affirming the major value of school PE and the important status of PE teachers. In 1979, the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Communist Youth League Central Committee jointly held an exchange conference on school PE and health work in Yangzhou, which, in a milestone move, emphasized the importance of PE teacher quality and called for cultivating a high-caliber corps that is both “politically committed and professionally proficient.” Guided by the spirit of this conference, China began to attach greater importance to enhancing the quality of PE teacher education. To adjust and optimize the goals and curricular content of pre-service PE teacher preparation, beginning in 1980 China successively issued documents such as the Teaching Plan for Physical Education Programs at Higher Normal Colleges (Provisional Draft), the Undergraduate Teaching Plan for Physical Education Programs at Regular Institutions of Higher Education, and the National Curriculum Scheme for Undergraduate Programs in Physical Education at Regular Institutions of Higher Education. These required PE teachers to develop in an all-round manner—morally, intellectually, physically, aesthetically, and in labor—and to study political theory (e.g., the history of the CPC), educational theory (e.g., educational psychology), foundational disciplinary knowledge (e.g., sports health), and specialized sport techniques.

With educational order restored, China recognized problems in the Soviet model—such as irrational resource allocation and overly narrow channels for teacher education—and sought a development path for PE teacher education suited to China’s national conditions. Accordingly, in 1996 the State Education Commission issued the Opinions on the Reform and Development of Teacher Education, proposing the construction of an open teacher-education system and encouraging non-normal institutions—comprehensive universities, ethnic universities, science and engineering universities, and medical universities—to participate. On this basis, the system for physical education programs was basically established.

2.3. Period of Basic Establishment

Entering the 21st century, in order to gain a proactive position amid increasingly intense international competition, China launched a new round of basic-education reform. In 2001, the State Council issued the Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education, which

called for improving a teacher-education system with existing normal universities as the mainstay and other higher-education institutions participating. This marked another expansion in the scale of PE teacher education and the full formation of an overall pattern in which sports institutes and normal universities play the leading role, with comprehensive universities, medical universities, and other types of institutions jointly involved. Against this backdrop, enhancing the quality of teacher education became a focal concern, and a series of important policy documents successively identified “becoming a professional^[4]” as the core objective of PE teacher education. On one front, since 2012 the Ministry of Education has issued the Interim Measures for the Qualification Examination for Primary and Secondary School Teachers and the Interim Measures for the Accreditation of Teacher-Training Programs at Regular Institutions of Higher Education, thereby deepening the standardized development of teacher education. On another front, the Healthy China 2030 blueprint stipulates that health education should be incorporated into both pre-service preparation and in-service training for PE teachers. Normative documents such as the National Standards for Undergraduate Teaching Quality in Sports Disciplines at Regular Institutions of Higher Education set explicit requirements for the integrated competencies of sports majors, including disciplinary knowledge and skills. The Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Physical Education in the New Era elevates teacher ethics and professional conduct to the first criterion in evaluating PE teachers, further advancing the comprehensive development of PE teacher-education content.

During this period, physical education teacher education exhibited a trend toward diversification and interdisciplinarity. On the one hand, implementation of the Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards promoted the shift toward PE teachers with comprehensive competencies; on the other, with the advancement of teacher-education accreditation, quality construction in physical education entered a new stage centered on the core concepts of student development, outcomes orientation, and continuous improvement. PE teacher education became increasingly standardized and aligned with international practice in areas such as instructional goals, curriculum standards, and practicum systems. Meanwhile, some universities explored integrating physical education with health education, exercise rehabilitation, and community sports, thereby expanding pathways for talent cultivation.

3. Evolutionary Features

3.1. Institutional Change

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the political and economic contexts of successive eras have driven institutional changes in physical education teacher education^[5].

From the political dimension, physical education teacher education has undergone adaptive adjustments in step with social development and practical needs. First, in the early years of the PRC, a closed training system was initially established with reference to the Soviet model: specialized PE teachers were trained on a targeted basis by administrative region (e.g., East China, Central China, etc.) across six major regions; during the Cultural Revolution, this arrangement suffered severe disruption and training work was largely suspended. Second, after the launch of reform and opening-up, China gradually expanded the scale of PE teacher education and encouraged non-normal universities to participate in talent cultivation and disciplinary development. Third, in the new era, the path of Chinese-style educational modernization has been clarified: (i) expand the size of the teaching force by further authorizing more institutions to offer PE teacher-education programs and leveraging their distinctive strengths; and (ii) broaden entry channels so that students from non-sports majors may enter primary and secondary school PE teaching posts upon obtaining the PE teacher qualification certificate. Second, enhance the quality of the teaching force—replace the

narrower formulation of “normal education” with “teacher education,” and launch the construction of an integrated teacher-education system with Chinese characteristics.

From the economic dimension, transformations in the economic system have profoundly shaped the institutional form of physical education teacher education. In the early years of the PRC, under a planned-economy mindset, PE teacher preparation followed an “train to meet demand, allocate by assignment” model, relying on administrative means to satisfy the state’s needs for PE teaching personnel. After the advent of reform and opening-up, the government, oriented toward overall social interests and adhering to the principle of “filling what the education market lacks^[6]”, promoted a shift from closed to open systems in PE teacher education—expanding institutional scale and raising degree levels to ease bottlenecks such as insufficient teacher numbers and low academic qualifications. Entering the 21st century, universities were granted greater autonomy, empowering the endogenous development and high-quality upgrading of PE teacher education.

3.2. Changes in the Conceptual Dimension

The conceptual dimension exhibits a “two-end shift” over time: instrumental value has gradually receded, while personal value has steadily strengthened. As the “mother engine” of the physical education system, PE teacher education was initially grounded in instrumental rationality oriented toward serving the state and schooling; with the spread of humanistic thought, this orientation waned and individual value came to the fore. By stages: (1) In the early years of the PRC, the emphasis was on rapidly meeting the needs of school PE; training goals were fixed on sport skills and technical execution, and demobilized soldiers and community youths were selected to teach. (2) During the reform and opening-up period, instrumental and personal orientations carried equal weight: under the national priority of “economic development as the central task,” the state, on the one hand, pursued “efficiency first” to boost supply capacity by strengthening academic qualifications and overall competence, while, on the other hand, practicing a “people-oriented” approach that allowed normal-university graduates to choose placements in line with their aspirations. (3) Since the beginning of the 21st century, PE teacher education has placed greater emphasis on “teacher-centered” institutional provision and scholarly support: at the legal level, the Teachers Law and Sports Law safeguard rights related to education and training; at the policy level, the Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Teaching Force in the New Era and the Teacher Education Revitalization Action Plan (2018–2022) stress professional growth and lifelong development; at the research level, the articulation of core-competency frameworks^[7] and standards frameworks^[8] has provided theoretical and practical baselines for teachers’ holistic development. Consequently, under an overarching “people-oriented” philosophy, China’s PE teacher education has progressively transitioned from an instrumentality-dominated model to one guided by personal value.

3.3. Changes at the Formal Level

The forms of preparation and in-service training in China’s PE teacher education can be summarized, along the dual dimensions of agent–field, as (i) a steady enhancement of PE teachers’ autonomy in engaging in educational activities and (ii) the integrated advancement of teacher-education venues with sites of teaching practice^[9], exhibiting a clear “three-step” trajectory.

In the early years of the PRC, in-service preparation centered on correspondence study and further training. The principal trainers were experts or well-known scholars in school physical education research, and the training venues were mainly off-campus institutions or universities (e.g., correspondence PE programs offered by Beijing Institute of Physical Education and Shanghai Institute of Physical Education). After the launch of reform and opening-up, core-teacher training primarily took the form of expert lectures combined with seminars for key teachers. Experts remained the main training agents, with PE teachers in a supplementary role,

and the venues were still largely off-campus institutions. Entering the 21st century, school-based teaching–research became the main channel. PE teachers shifted to the center as the primary agents of training, and their own schools became the principal training venues—bringing training that had long been detached from authentic PE teaching scenarios back into practice. Within schools, PE teachers form professional communities and “master-teacher studios,” and, under the guidance of lead teachers and teaching–research staff, engage in ongoing inquiry around real, frontline instructional problems—achieving simultaneous progress in teacher agency and the integration of venues.

This trajectory reflects a threefold shift in training orientation: a gradual move from an emphasis on “theoretical experience” toward “practical wisdom”; a re-centering of training on PE teachers’ professional competencies (e.g., collaborative inquiry, communication); and an increasingly rational attitude toward the “reverence” for educational experts.

3.4. Changes at the Content Level

The evolution of curricular content in physical education (PE) teacher education exhibits both stability and development. Its stability is reflected in two respects: On one side, Relatively constant content dimensions: curricula have consistently centered on three domains—teacher ethics and conduct, professional knowledge, and practical skills. Teacher ethics and conduct encompass political literacy, moral cultivation, and norms of speech and behavior. Professional knowledge includes both content knowledge (CK) (e.g., sport skills, health, anatomy) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (e.g., instruction of sport skills, pedagogy). Practical skills cover specialized areas such as gymnastics, track and field, and ball games. on the other side, A persistent “pyramid” structure: teacher ethics and conduct function as the apex and organizing principle—requiring firm political stance, sound character, and appropriate demeanor—while professional knowledge (e.g., pedagogy, health education, sport anatomy) and practical skills (e.g., track and field, ball games, ethnic traditional sports) form the base that supports teachers’ professional practice and social roles.

The developmental dimension is chiefly reflected in structural optimization, quality enhancement, and value augmentation, driving connotation-oriented development: first, ideological–political requirements have evolved from an early emphasis on principles and historical theory to prioritizing teacher ethics and professional conduct as the primary criterion, and now to advocating the spirit of PE educators, stressing a shift from individual political literacy to positive social influence; second, professional knowledge has extended from merely “knowing techniques” to “promoting health,” signaling a role transition from skill transmitter to facilitator of students’ physical and mental well-being in service of the Healthy China initiative; third, the practice orientation has expanded from single sport skills to the cultivation of comprehensive competencies, with greater emphasis on collaboration, communication, inquiry, information use, and leadership to meet the practical demands of school PE in the new era.

4. Future Strategies

4.1. Toward a More Sound Institutional System

First, improve the open system of PE teacher education to promote rational resource allocation. On the one hand, continue to build an overall pattern in which normal universities serve as the mainstay while comprehensive and non-normal universities participate collaboratively, thereby easing imbalances in the supply of PE teachers. On the other hand, in line with the spirit of the Notice on Implementing the Collaborative Quality-Enhancement Plan for Teacher Education, integrate the strengths of different types of institutions to form mechanisms for cooperative co-training. For example, sports institutes and normal universities can

collaborate—each leveraging its strengths in sport-skill instruction and in the cultivation of teaching competence, respectively; medical universities and normal universities can partner to strengthen pre-service PE teachers' capacity for health education.

Second, tighten teacher-qualification and entry regimes. On the one hand, for pre-service PE teachers, treat teacher ethics and professional conduct, level of professional development, and performance in teaching practice as key indicators for entry into the profession. On the other hand, as retired athletes transition into school coaching roles, devise aligned preparation programs, selection criteria, and assessment mechanisms^[10] to prevent a recurrence of appointments marked by deficits in professional ethics.

Finally, build an integrated, lifelong learning system for PE teachers.

First, promote online–offline integration to align with digital transformation: increase effective use of digital resources such as the National Public Education Service Platform and the “One Teacher, One Excellent Lesson” resource platform, and expand digitally oriented learning modalities. Second, bridge pre-service and in-service education by organically linking degree and non-degree, formal and non-formal learning. Design training programs in accordance with teachers' career life cycles, and integrate objectives, curricula, assessment, and governance to achieve articulation and internal coherence across subsystems.

4.2. Updating Educational Philosophy

First, use the core-competency framework as a fulcrum to drive PE teachers' professional growth. Looking ahead, PE teacher education should move beyond merely meeting the needs of the PE system to also supporting teachers' personal development. Guided by a core-competency framework, it should shape value orientations—such as views of the profession, students, and institutions—cultivate humanistic literacy in sport, scientific spirit, and character, and strengthen key capacities including athletic proficiency, curricular understanding, and instructional execution. In doing so, it can transcend past limitations that overemphasized technical skills while neglecting values and character.

Second, leverage interdisciplinary teaching literacy to convert professional competence into demonstrable instructional impact. The Compulsory Education Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) incorporates interdisciplinary thematic learning for the first time, aiming to guide students to apply multi-disciplinary knowledge to real, complex problems. Correspondingly, in practice PE teachers must mobilize cross-disciplinary knowledge and higher-order thinking to address situations such as coordinating venues and equipment and integrating digital technologies into instruction. On this basis, both pre-service and in-service preparation should move beyond a single-discipline perspective at the goal level, focusing on comprehensive capacities—interdisciplinary literacy, collaboration and communication, leadership, and creativity—to help teachers meet the complex challenges of frontline PE teaching.

Finally, establish a scientific and reasonable assessment system for PE teachers' competencies. Traditional evaluation focuses largely on performance records and examinations, whereas competency assessment requires performance-based evaluation. Accordingly, researchers and training providers should further develop assessment contents, methods, and standards grounded in teachers' actual performance, and apply them across multiple scenarios—for example, including the use of digital devices in teaching competitions as evidence of information literacy, and inviting multiple stakeholders (such as school leaders, students, and PE department heads) to conduct joint evaluations of teacher ethics, professional conduct, and everyday performance.

4.3. Strengthening Multi-Form Cooperation

First, establish learning communities. Under the guidance of teaching–research staff or experts, set up PE master-teacher studios and teacher learning teams at the school or regional level. On the one hand, jointly conduct theoretical study, interpreting and discussing the frontiers of PE instruction and the core tenets of the new curriculum standards; on the other, carry out regular school-based research, systematically enhancing PE teachers’ instructional practice through cycles of teaching, observation, lesson explication, and evaluation.

Second, integrate self-reflection, peer support, and professional guidance into training^[11]. Teachers should conduct reflection and inquiry driven by authentic classroom problems—for example, investigating the instructional difficulty of helping students understand strategies for breaking a full-court press in basketball. Emphasize collaboration and critical peer review to avoid a return to the solitary, correspondence-style model of the past. Uphold two-way linkage between school-based practice and academic research, inviting domain scholars to provide sustained professional support.

Finally, establish online exchange platforms for PE teachers. Leveraging digital devices and resources, build shared online networks across regions to promote balanced development in teacher education^{[12][12]}. For example, teachers in more developed areas—through master-teacher studios and teaching–research offices—can share up-to-date interpretations of the PE & Health curriculum on the platform; meanwhile, teachers in less-developed or remote areas can exchange experiences in implementing traditional Chinese sports, discuss instructional challenges, and propose improvement strategies, thereby achieving co-construction and sharing of resources and narrowing regional disparities.

4.4. Optimizing Educational Content

First, place the cultivation of teacher ethics and professional conduct at the forefront and promote the spirit of exemplary PE educators. Implement the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education: at the pre-service stage, leverage “ideology-and-politics in the curriculum” to integrate elements such as the spirit of the women’s volleyball team and narratives of hard struggle into both theory and technique classes. Enforce strict entry standards for the profession by making teacher ethics the primary criterion in qualification certification, examinations, and evaluations. Identify and publicize role models, and systematically disseminate the spirit of PE educator exemplars and outstanding cases throughout the training process.

First, place the cultivation of teacher ethics and professional conduct at the forefront and promote the spirit of exemplary PE educators. Implement the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education: at the pre-service stage, leverage curriculum-embedded ideological and political education to integrate elements such as the “women’s volleyball spirit” and narratives of hard struggle into both theory and technique classes. Enforce strict entry standards by making teacher ethics the primary criterion in qualification certification, examinations, and evaluations. Identify and publicize role models, and systematically disseminate the spirit of PE educator exemplars and outstanding cases throughout the training process.

Second, make health promotion a core component. The “health first” concept has evolved from relative detachment from PE to deep coupling, and this integration should intensify going forward. Accordingly, on the one hand, enhance PE teachers’ own health literacy by strengthening education around five themes: healthy behaviors and lifestyles, growth and adolescent health, mental health, disease prevention and emergency response, and safety preparedness and risk avoidance. On the other hand, facilitate a shift from “PE teacher” to “PE-and-health teacher”: increase the weight of courses such as health education and sports health in both pre-service and in-service training, and invite participation from public health

physicians, health education specialists, and other stakeholders to advance the integration of sport and health.

Finally, make digital literacy a core component. In 2022, the Ministry of Education issued the industry standard Teachers' Digital Literacy, which explicitly calls for enhancing teachers' awareness, competence, and responsibility in using digital technologies to optimize, innovate, and transform instruction; digital literacy has thus become a key enabler of educational modernization and the implementation of education digitalization. Accordingly, pre-service preparation should add relevant courses—for example, analyzing game footage with sensors and high-precision video motion capture—while in-service training should adopt tiered, category-specific programs that help teachers, as they acquire digital knowledge, master technologies, and apply them proficiently, to gradually build robust digital literacy.

5. Summary

The high-quality development of physical education teacher education is the key “variable” for achieving high-quality school physical education in the new era. In China, PE teacher education has moved from quantitative expansion to quality enhancement and connotation-oriented development. Looking ahead, we should build a PE teacher-education system that both accords with China's national conditions and embraces an international vision, thereby propelling PE teacher education into a new era.

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