

Transforming School Health and Fitness: Physical Education under NEP 2020

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Abstract: *Physical education plays a vital role in promoting holistic development, health, and wellbeing among students. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the integration of physical education into the school curriculum to foster physical fitness, mental health, and life skills alongside academic learning. This study explores how NEP 2020 envisions transforming school health and fitness by encouraging regular physical activity, sports participation, and health education. It examines strategies such as activity-based learning, incorporation of wellness programs, and infrastructure development to ensure accessible and inclusive physical education for all students. The research also highlights the role of teachers, school administrators, and policy frameworks in implementing effective physical education programs. Furthermore, it investigates the potential of modern tools, digital platforms, and community engagement in enhancing students' participation and motivation. By aligning physical education with holistic educational goals, NEP 2020 seeks to create healthy, active, and resilient learners prepared for lifelong wellbeing. The study underscores that systematic planning, innovation, and inclusivity in school fitness programs are essential for achieving sustainable health outcomes and nurturing a generation that embodies physical, mental, and social vitality.*

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Introduction: Education in the 21st century is no longer confined to academic excellence alone; it encompasses the comprehensive development of an individual, including physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions. Physical education (PE) is a crucial component of this holistic approach, as it contributes significantly to students' overall wellbeing and personality development. However, traditional education systems often marginalized physical education, treating it as a secondary or extracurricular activity.

The introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a paradigm shift in India's educational landscape. It emphasizes experiential learning, multidisciplinary approaches, and the integration of physical education into mainstream education. NEP 2020 recognizes that a healthy body supports a healthy mind and that physical activity is essential for cognitive development, emotional stability, and social interaction.

Objectives of the Study: The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the role of physical education in holistic student development.
2. To analyze the provisions related to physical education in NEP 2020.
3. To explore strategies for effective implementation of school fitness programs.

4. To assess the role of teachers, institutions, and technology in promoting physical health.

Research Methodology: This study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It is based on secondary data collected from policy documents, research journals, government reports, and scholarly articles related to physical education and NEP 2020. A qualitative approach has been adopted to interpret and analyze the available information.

Conceptual Framework: Physical Education and Holistic Development: Physical education extends beyond mere participation in sports or physical exercise; it is a structured educational process aimed at fostering physical competence, health awareness, teamwork, leadership, and discipline among students (Bailey, 2006; UNESCO, 2015). It plays a crucial role in nurturing multiple dimensions of human development.

In terms of physical development, physical education enhances strength, endurance, flexibility, and coordination, thereby improving overall physical fitness and reducing health risks (WHO, 2018). Regarding mental development, regular physical activity has been found to improve concentration, memory, and cognitive functioning, while also helping in stress reduction and emotional regulation (Ratey, 2008; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008).

From a social perspective, physical education promotes teamwork, cooperation, communication skills, and respect for diversity, which are essential for effective social interaction (Bailey et al., 2009). Furthermore, it contributes to emotional development by building self-confidence, resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of achievement among learners (Hagger et al., 2003).

Holistic development, as emphasized in contemporary educational paradigms, integrates physical, mental, social, and emotional growth. In this context, physical education becomes an indispensable component of schooling, ensuring the balanced development of learners (NEP, 2020).

NEP 2020 and Its Vision for Physical Education: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a transformative and forward-looking framework that redefines the role of physical education within the Indian education system. It recognizes physical education as an essential component of the school curriculum rather than an optional or co-curricular activity (Ministry of Education, 2020). By emphasizing holistic and multidisciplinary learning, the policy seeks to integrate physical wellbeing with intellectual, emotional, and social development, thereby promoting the overall growth of learners (NEP, 2020; UNESCO, 2015).

Integration into Curriculum: NEP 2020 underscores the importance of embedding physical education within the regular academic timetable to ensure that all students engage in daily physical activities. This integration reflects the policy's commitment to treating physical education on par with academic subjects, thereby fostering a balanced approach to education (Ministry of Education, 2020). Regular participation in structured physical activities has been linked to improved academic performance and better classroom behavior among students (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008).

Experiential and Activity-Based Learning: The policy strongly advocates experiential learning approaches, wherein students learn through active participation in games, sports, and physical exercises. Such methods enhance student engagement, motivation, and retention of knowledge by connecting theoretical concepts with practical experiences (Kolb, 1984; NEP, 2020). Activity-based learning also promotes creativity, problem-solving skills, and collaborative learning, which are essential competencies in contemporary education (Bailey et al., 2009).

Emphasis on Health and Wellness: NEP 2020 places significant emphasis on integrating health education, nutrition awareness, yoga, and mental wellbeing into the school curriculum. This comprehensive approach

addresses both physical and psychological aspects of student health, aligning with global health frameworks (WHO, 2018). The inclusion of mindfulness practices and wellness programs helps students manage stress, improve emotional regulation, and develop healthy lifestyle habits from an early age (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Inclusive and Equitable Access: Ensuring inclusivity and equity is a central principle of NEP 2020. The policy aims to make physical education accessible to all students, including girls, children with disabilities, and those from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. By promoting inclusive practices and removing barriers to participation, the policy seeks to create equal opportunities for all learners (UNESCO, 2015; NEP, 2020). Such inclusivity not only enhances participation rates but also fosters social cohesion and mutual respect among students.

Multidisciplinary Approach: NEP 2020 encourages a multidisciplinary approach by integrating physical education with subjects such as biology, psychology, and environmental studies. This interconnected framework enables students to develop a deeper understanding of the human body, health, and the environment (Ministry of Education, 2020). For instance, concepts of nutrition, anatomy, and mental health can be effectively linked with physical activities, thereby enriching the learning experience and promoting scientific awareness (Bailey, 2006).

Strategies for Transforming School Health and Fitness

Activity-Based Learning: Schools are encouraged to adopt activity-based pedagogies that incorporate physical movement and interactive participation into daily learning processes. Such approaches not only enhance physical fitness but also improve cognitive engagement and academic achievement (Ratey, 2008; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). Integrating movement into classroom instruction can make learning more dynamic and enjoyable.

Structured Fitness Programs: The implementation of structured fitness programs, including aerobic exercises, sports drills, yoga sessions, and recreational activities, is essential for maintaining students' physical health. Regular and well-designed fitness routines contribute to improved cardiovascular health, muscular strength, and overall wellbeing (WHO, 2018). Schools should ensure that these programs are age-appropriate and inclusive.

Infrastructure Development: Adequate infrastructure, such as playgrounds, sports facilities, and safe activity spaces, is crucial for the effective delivery of physical education. NEP 2020 highlights the need for increased investment in school infrastructure to support fitness and sports activities (Ministry of Education, 2020). Access to proper facilities significantly influences students' participation and performance in physical education (UNESCO, 2015).

Teacher Training and Capacity Building: Teachers play a pivotal role in implementing physical education programs. Therefore, continuous professional development and specialized training are necessary to equip them with modern pedagogical skills and knowledge (Bailey et al., 2009). Well-trained educators can design inclusive, engaging, and effective physical activity programs that cater to diverse student needs.

Integration of Technology: The use of digital tools, fitness applications, and virtual platforms can enhance student engagement and help monitor physical activity levels. Technology-enabled learning also allows for innovative approaches such as online fitness sessions and gamified physical education (OECD, 2020). These tools are particularly useful in ensuring continuity of physical education during disruptions such as pandemics.

Community and Parental Involvement: Active involvement of parents and local communities in school fitness initiatives creates a supportive environment for students. Community engagement encourages the

adoption of healthy lifestyles beyond the school setting and reinforces the importance of physical activity (Epstein, 2011). Collaborative efforts between schools and communities can lead to sustainable health outcomes and lifelong fitness habits.

Role of Teachers and School Administration: Teachers and school administrators play a pivotal role in the effective implementation of physical education policies and the realization of the vision outlined in NEP 2020. Their active involvement ensures that physical education is not treated as a peripheral activity but as an integral component of holistic education (Ministry of Education, 2020; UNESCO, 2015). Educators are responsible for creating a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages students to participate in physical activities irrespective of their abilities or backgrounds.

Their roles extend to designing inclusive and engaging physical activities that cater to diverse student needs and abilities, thereby promoting equal participation (Bailey et al., 2009). Teachers also play a crucial role in motivating students to actively engage in sports and fitness programs by fostering interest, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude towards physical activity (Hagger et al., 2003). Additionally, continuous monitoring and assessment of students' physical progress help in identifying individual strengths and areas for improvement, ensuring personalized development (WHO, 2018).

School authorities are also responsible for organizing sports events, competitions, and extracurricular activities that provide students with opportunities to showcase their skills and develop teamwork and leadership qualities (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). Ensuring safety, discipline, and proper supervision during physical activities is another critical responsibility, as it minimizes the risk of injuries and promotes a secure learning environment (UNESCO, 2015).

Effective leadership and administrative support are essential for sustaining physical education programs. School leaders must prioritize resource allocation, infrastructure development, and teacher training to ensure the long-term success of these initiatives (OECD, 2020). Collaborative efforts between teachers and administrators can significantly enhance the quality and impact of school health and fitness programs.

Challenges in Implementation: Despite the progressive and comprehensive vision of NEP 2020, several structural and socio-cultural challenges continue to hinder the effective implementation of physical education in schools. One of the primary challenges is the lack of adequate infrastructure and resources, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas, where schools often lack playgrounds, sports equipment, and trained personnel (UNESCO, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2020).

Another major constraint is the shortage of qualified and trained physical education teachers. Many schools either do not have specialized instructors or rely on untrained staff, which affects the quality of physical education delivery (Bailey et al., 2009). Additionally, the prevailing emphasis on academic achievement often results in limited time allocation for physical activities, as schools prioritize examination-oriented subjects over holistic development (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008).

Socio-cultural factors, including gender biases and traditional norms, also restrict participation, especially among girls. In many contexts, girls face barriers such as lack of encouragement, safety concerns, and limited access to sports facilities (UNESCO, 2015). Furthermore, there is a general lack of awareness among parents and communities about the importance of physical fitness and its long-term benefits, which further reduces support for school-based physical education programs (WHO, 2018).

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated and sustained efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities. Strategic investments in infrastructure, teacher training, awareness campaigns, and policy enforcement are essential to overcome these barriers and ensure the successful implementation of physical education under NEP 2020 (OECD, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020).

Conclusion: Physical education is a cornerstone of holistic education, contributing to the physical, mental, and social development of students. NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for transforming school health and fitness by integrating physical education into the core curriculum. By adopting innovative strategies, fostering inclusivity, and leveraging technology, schools can create a dynamic environment that promotes active and healthy lifestyles. The successful implementation of NEP 2020's vision requires collective efforts from educators, policymakers, and communities. Ultimately, transforming school health and fitness is not just about improving physical activity levels; it is about nurturing a generation of healthy, confident, and resilient individuals capable of leading fulfilling lives.

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