Guide to Elementary School Education

Physical Education
June 1989
Ministry of Education, Japan
Chapter One    General Remarks

A. Reasons for Modifying the Physical Education Curriculum

In September 1985, the Ministry of Education requested that the Curriculum Council deliberate on ways to raise school curriculum standards. The Council submitted its findings to the Ministry in December 1987.

In its report, the Council first of all gave reasons why curriculum standards for kindergartens, elementary schools, and junior and senior high schools should be raised, then indicated areas to be improved to obtain a more suitable curriculum for each course.

The Council's report listed the following basic guidelines to be adhered to when improving the elementary school curriculum.

First of all, the Council stressed the following with regard to the need to revise the physical education curriculum: "Physical education classes should emphasize sports and the enhancement of physical strength so that students will remain active throughout life. Children should be instilled with the desire and ability to enjoy physical exercise, and should, through physical education, develop a sound mind in a sound body, participating in exercise and sports in a way that matches their own physical and psychological stage of development. Elementary schools should develop basic skills in each type of physical movement so that children develop a liking and zest for sports and exercise."

The Council's report then made the following three recommendations:

[i] The physical exercise and gymnastics course should be improved to meet the demands of each learning level, thereby making classes more effective in enhancing students' physical strength.

[ii] Outdoor exercise and sports, such as playing in the snow and skiing, should to given greater emphasis in a way appropriate for the school and its area, so that children can get closer to nature.

[iii] The curriculum for group activities should carefully consider the basic movement patterns of each sport or game; guidance in group activities that occur during the practice of any physical movement discipline should be more effective.

Secondly, the Council stressed the following with regard to health science: "Children should be given a basic understanding of ways to maintain health and safety, so that they learn to respect the lives of others as they do their own, and so that
they live in health and safety throughout their lives. Therefore, the health science curriculum should concentrate on developing, in a manner that is appropriate for their own individual stage of development, children's ability and desire to lead healthy lives."

Taking into account the basic guidelines for improvement, described above, the Council's report listed the following elementary school physical education curriculum items in need of improvement:

[i] The physical movements taught should remain the same. However, students are physically and psychologically developed enough to begin swimming at an earlier age, so swimming should be introduced one year earlier -- this would be more effective pedagogically.

[ii] The curriculum for the basic movements and games taught during the first four years of elementary school should be improved upon, so that the teaching of these disciplines matches students' current physical and psychological stages of development.

[iii] The basic curriculum for physical exercises and gymnastics should emphasize movements that raise physical strength.

[iv] Health science should stress how to maintain health and safety in one's daily life. Health science should provide knowledge of physical and psychological development, should show how to prevent injuries and sickness, and should give pointers on how to lead a healthy life.

[v] The physical education curriculum is to specify content that should be taught over a period of more than one school year. This will permit a wide variety of activities that match the children's physical and psychological stages of development, and that also matches their individual personalities.

B. Major Improvements Made

Having taken into consideration the Curriculum Council's findings, the Ministry of Education improved the physical education curriculum, basing its approach on the following guidelines:

[i] Physical education classes should prompt students to lead active, sporting lives well into their adulthood. Children should be encouraged to develop the desire to partake in a wide variety of sports and physical exercises.

[ii] Students should be prompted to proceed on their own volition in developing sound minds in sound bodies, while at the same time making themselves physically stronger.
The curriculum should be designed to match students' physical and psychological stages of development.

The curriculum should be improved so that it raises basic knowledge of ways to maintain and improve healthful practices in daily living, thereby developing a sound mind in a sound body.

The objectives and curricula determined for each school year should be blended in with curricula for other school years, so that teachers can provide guidance suited to individual students and the overall curriculum can be made more flexible.

The new objectives sought after and the improvements made are detailed immediately below.

1. Pedagogical Objectives

The ultimate object of the physical education curriculum is to foster the ability and desire of all students to partake in exercise throughout their lives, and to lead healthy, safe lives. The Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum now states more clearly that physical education classes are to pursue these two equally important objectives at the same time.

In principle, the curriculum combines the objectives of the first and second school years, those of the third and fourth years, and those of the fifth and sixth years. The objectives of these three periods are similar to the objectives of the overall six-year program: fostering an enjoyment of physical exercise, enabling students to learn body movement skills, and enhancing physical strength. All three objectives are considered as equally important.

Classes in health and safety are to emphasize physical and mental health, and are to promote an understanding of both physical and psychological development.

2. Improved Curriculum Content

(a) Guidance to fit the individual student

The former curriculum was divided into six levels, one for each year of elementary school. In principle, this system has been made less rigid, changing the divisions into three levels: first and second years, third and fourth years, and fifth and sixth years. In this way, the basic curriculum can be better applied to each individual student -- each student participates in physical education classes at his or her own level of ability, and finds it easier to attain individual goals.

(b) Systematization of physical exercise disciplines
Students are physically and psychologically developed enough to begin swimming at an earlier age, so the curriculum was changed to introduce swimming one year earlier (in the fourth year, instead of in the fifth). The subjects taught in the physical education curriculum have not changed. The sporting disciplines taught are as follows: for Grades 1 and 2, basic movements and games (two disciplines); for Grades 3 and 4, these two disciplines, plus (see note immediately below) expressive movements, sports using special equipment, and swimming (five disciplines); and for Grades 5 and 6, physical exercises and gymnastics, sports using special equipment, track and field, swimming, ball games, and expressive movements (six disciplines).

Note, though, that, in principle, sports using special equipment and swimming are introduced only in Grade 4 (not Grade 3). Furthermore, in Grade 4, sports using special equipment and floating and swimming techniques are not taught as part of basic movement classes.

(c) Basic movements

The classification for different basic movements was changed as follows. 'Walking, running and jumping' was changed to 'running and jumping.' 'Exercises using fixed facilities and individual devises and objects' (for Grades 1 and 2), and 'exercises using devices and objects' (for Grades 3 and 4) were changed, being classified for all four years as 'exercises using special equipment and devices' and 'exercises manipulating objects.' Thus, basic movement classes are now composed of the following: [i] running and jumping; [ii] challenging exercises; [iii] exercises using special equipment and devices; [iv] exercises manipulating objects; [v] playing in water (Grades 1 and 2); [vi] floating and swimming techniques (Grade 3); and [vii] imitation exercises.

It was specified in the Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum that walking exercises are to be taught as part of lessons in every physical education discipline.

The curriculum also states that the teaching of each physical movement should involve competition with others and should be pursued with improvement in mind.

The Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum states for the first time that "classes can include play accompanied by song and simple folk dance movements."

(d) Games

The following games and sports were eliminated from the curriculum: relay games (Grades 1 and 2), relay races (Grades 3 and 4) and dodge-ball (Grade 3). One sport, hand baseball (a
game based on baseball), was added to the physical education curriculum for Grades 3 and 4.

(e) Physical exercises

Compared with some years ago, children's bodies have tended to become less supple. For this reason, exercises to improve physical suppleness were added to the physical exercises and gymnastics curriculum. Rhythmic movement, exercises to improve sense of timing, and exercises to improve speed were combined, being classified as 'exercises to improve dexterity.' These two types of exercises (to improve suppleness and dexterity) are classified as 'exercises to raise suppleness and dexterity,' and are now included in the curriculum, along with one type previously included, 'exercises to improve the ability to perform movements requiring physical strength and endurance.'

(f) Sports using special equipment

It was determined that horizontal bar gymnastics and mat exercises placed too much emphasis on follow-through, with not enough priority being given to individual techniques. The emphasis on follow-through skills was changed to an emphasis on repeating each individual skill and on combining skills.

The names given to some techniques were changed, to match names used in junior and senior high school for the same techniques. For example, the name for one horse vaulting technique was changed from "udetate tobikoshi" (hand spring) to "shiji tobikoshi" (support spring).

(g) Track and field

Under the changes, students are now expected to achieve certain objectives for the running long jump and running high jump over a period of several school years, rather than one. Even though objectives are no longer specified for any one year, the Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum does mention that "teaching of these jumps can be specific to any given school year."

(h) Swimming

Two strokes are to be taught in swimming classes: the crawl and the breaststroke. Diving is not to be taught as a specific technique, but as a technique to use when starting the crawl or the breaststroke. The need for safety precautions when diving was clearly specified in the Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum for Each School Year.

Schools with no place to teach swimming are not required to teach playing in water, floating and swimming techniques, or swimming. (Thus, no change was made in the curriculum in this regard.)
However, the Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum for Each School Year specifies that these schools, too, must nevertheless teach safety precautions to be taken when swimming.

(i) Ball games

The ball games to be taught -- basketball and soccer -- remain the same. The Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum specifies that schools which have outdoor grounds "may add softball to the ball games they teach."

(j) Expressive movements

Because of a new emphasis placed on prompting students to lead active, sporting lives throughout their childhood and adulthood, the teaching of folk dance was added to the curriculum for expressive movements (thereby making two subjects, expression and folk dance). In order to give more leeway to the teaching of expression, such phrases as "students are to express feelings of softness and lightness" were dropped from the curriculum.

(k) Group activities

No change was made in the curriculum with regard to the fact that group behavior is to be taught during the practice of basic movements and physical exercises and gymnastics at respective grade levels. Newly added to the Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum for Each School Year was mention that group activity guidance is to be given in all other physical exercise disciplines as well.

(l) Playing in snow and on ice, skiing, skating, etc.

These activities are to be introduced not only in snowy and cold regions of the country but also in other parts of Japan where such activities are possible. This was mentioned in the Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum for Each School Year, in an effort to promote activities that bring students closer to nature.

(m) Health science

The teaching of health science is to place a certain emphasis on mental health -- former mention in the curriculum of "physical development" was modified to "physical and psychological development."

The health science curriculum specified the teaching of: [i] physical and psychological development; [ii] prevention of injuries; [iii] disease prevention; and [iv] healthy living. The Guide to the Physical Education Curriculum specifies that physical and psychological development and the prevention of
injuries are to be taught in Grade 5, with disease prevention and ways to live healthily to be taught in Grade 6.

Chapter Two  Physical Education: Objectives and Curriculum Content

Part I  Physical Education Objectives

A. Curriculum Objectives

The physical education curriculum indicates the role that physical education should play in elementary school education, and identifies approaches to be taken when teaching sports, exercise and health science. This is made clear in Part I-3, Chapter One (General Provisions) of the Outline of Teaching and Guidance, in the discussion on the teaching of physical education as part of overall pedagogical school activities.

The recently modified objectives of the physical education curriculum are as follows.

To instill a love of physical exercise by providing appropriate experience in exercise; to help students learn how to maintain health and take safety precautions in their daily lives; to help children become more healthy and physically stronger; and, as a result, to foster a positive attitude that leads to an optimistic outlook and a happy life.

In essence, these objectives are a further clarification of the concepts embodied in the physical education objectives listed until the recent modifications. Each of these objectives is closely bound to the others. The ultimate objective of the physical education course is: "To foster a positive attitude that leads to an optimistic outlook and a happy life."

The recent modifications list "to instill a love of physical exercise" on a par with "to help children become more healthy and physically stronger." In other words, enjoying and taking relish in sports and physical movement is placed on a par with bettering one's health and strengthening one's body; the new version of the curriculum clearly states that both are these are important objectives of physical education.

An analysis of the various concepts embodied in these objectives yields the following.

"Providing appropriate experience in exercise": By having children partake in sports and exercise at a level that is appropriate for their own stage of physical and psychological
development, students will develop an enjoyment and zest for physical movement. These positive experiences will lead to enjoyment and development of the person as a whole. Therefore, it is important that the teaching of sports and exercise is geared to the students' actual abilities, aptitudes and interests. To accomplish this aim, every attempt must be made to understand the present level of physical and psychological development of the children, to match classes to the facilities available and the weather, to develop appropriate class content, to draw up teaching plans, to plan learning activities, and to evaluate learning.

"To help students learn how to maintain health and take safety precautions in their daily lives": This is a matter that should be particularly stressed in health science classes in Grades 5 and 6.

"In their daily lives": Daily lives, as defined for health science classes, refers to time children spend at school, home, and the like.

"To help students learn how to maintain health and take safety precautions": The fundamental matters to be taught here are physical and psychological development, prevention of injuries, disease prevention, and healthful living.

"To instill a love of physical exercise": The aim here is to let children fully enjoy and take relish in sports and exercise, prompting them to be active throughout life. The objective is not only to help students learn skills needed in sports and physical activities, but also to let them enjoy physical movement. Physical education guidance should let children experience the enjoyment that can be attained through competition and achieving goals. This love of physical exercise is to be instilled in each and every student. Once students truly feel this "love" of physical exercise, they will develop an attitude which prompts them to continue being physically active throughout life.

"To help children become more healthy and physically stronger": This aim is as important as "to instill a love of physical exercise." The purpose here is to develop a strong mind in a strong body for each and every student, and to build the foundation on which children will develop the health, knowledge of safety precautions, and physical strength they will need throughout their lives.

"To foster a positive attitude that leads to an optimistic outlook and a happy life": This is the ultimate objective of physical education classes at the elementary school level. Recent trends seen in Japan -- mechanization, urbanization, computerization, and the aging of society, to mention only a few -- have made it even more important that physical exercise and
sports be used to develop sound minds in sound bodies, promoting healthy, active lives. Physical exercise helps develop an optimistic outlook and a happy life for all time, something which all people desire. Thus, physical education-related guidance at the elementary school level -- whether during sports and exercises, during health science classes, or during the school day as a whole -- should foster an enjoyment and zest for physical exercise and develop an understanding of healthful, safe practices in daily life; guidance should also instill a love of exercise, foster good health, and raise physical strength, building the base on which students will develop an optimistic outlook that leads to happiness throughout their entire lives.

B. Curriculum Objectives for Each School Year

Keeping in mind the overall objectives of physical education, objectives for each of the six school years at the elementary level have been divided into three levels: low level (Grades 1 and 2); middle level (Grades 3 and 4); and high level (Grades 5 and 6). This arrangement has been established to provide more flexibility in physical education teaching.

While the overall curriculum objectives determine directions to be taken by the six-year elementary school physical education program, curriculum objectives for each school year determine the direction to be taken when teaching physical education during each specific year.

The interrelationship formed by objectives and each year's course content is: course content provides a concrete way to attain the objectives, while the objectives define, in general terms, the course content.

Curriculum objectives for each school year are systematized as follows. For Grades 1 and 2, and for Grades 3 and 4, there are two areas of concentration: [i] objectives related to specific types of physical exercise and achieving physical strength; and [ii] objectives related to the development of the social traits of cooperation and fairness, and to the development of behavior patterns that foster health and safety. These two areas of concentration are continued for Grades 5 and 6, with a third area added: [iii] objectives related to the maintenance and enhancement of healthy practices in daily life.

Part II Physical Education Curriculum Content

The content of the physical education curriculum is divided into two disciplines: physical movement and health science. Physical movement occupies by far the greater part of the curriculum. Health science is included in the physical education curriculum for Grades 5 and 6.

1. Physical Movement Disciplines
The following table illustrates how the physical movement discipline is systematized.

[1] Grade
[2] Disciplines
[3] Basic movements
[4] Games
[5] Physical exercises and gymnastics
[7] Track and field
[8] Swimming
[9] Ball games
[10] Expressive movements

One improvement made was to separate curriculum content into three levels -- low, middle and high. This permits a more flexible approach in teaching physical movements at each grade level, and offers more flexibility when planning the physical education program for the entire year. This arrangement promotes the development of a wide variety of learning activities that take into account differences among individual students.

For the low and middle levels (i.e., Grades 1 through 4), no change was made to teaching basic movements and games. This is because, in order "to instill a love of physical exercise" through "appropriate experience in exercise," a general sports education program would not be appropriate for children at this level of development -- therefore, emphasis is placed on play as part of a child's daily life.

The curriculum for movement disciplines remains the same -- learning skills, acquiring positive attitudes, and assimilating social behavior. When teaching skills, priority is to be placed on enjoying physical movement.

2. Health Science

In order to establish the foundation on which children will learn to respect the lives of others as they do their own, and to live in health and safety throughout life, health science courses at the elementary school level concentrate on four basic factors which promote healthful, safe practices in daily life: [i] physical and psychological development; [ii] prevention of injuries; [iii] disease prevention; and [iv] healthy living.