



Strategic development of a quality PE system in Cambodia

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Abstract: Cambodia is currently undergoing comprehensive education reform, with Physical Education (PE) emerging as a distinct and strategically important area. This study explores the structural and systemic development of PE within Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), emphasizing the role of international collaboration, particularly through the NGO Hearts of Gold (HG) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Since 2006, several initiatives have been implemented to develop PE curricula and teacher training systems across primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels. However, despite policy progress, PE implementation remains inconsistent due to gaps in teacher training, unclear curriculum alignment, and inter-departmental coordination. This study uses a qualitative, documentary-based approach to analyze curriculum frameworks, institutional structures, and training systems. Findings highlight the critical need for integrated planning among key departments (DPESS, NIPES, and GDS) and a consistent training pipeline for PE teachers. Moreover, the study identifies a lack of pedagogical content in earlier PE classes, where activities were limited to basic physical drills without educational objectives. The research proposes a strategic plan that focuses on improving curriculum implementation, reinforcing teacher training through pre-service and in-service alignment, and ensuring systemic oversight for sustainable development. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a holistic PE system that is inclusive, quality-oriented, and aligned with Cambodia's broader educational reforms, to foster lifelong physical literacy and student development.

Keywords: physical education, curriculum implementation, educational reform, policy integration

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INTRODUCTION

Physical Education (PE) plays a critical role in promoting holistic development among students, encompassing physical health, cognitive growth, and socio-emotional well-being. In the context of Cambodia, the development of a comprehensive and inclusive PE system has gained increased attention as part of broader educational reforms. Following the devastation of the education sector during the Pol Pot regime (1975–1979), Cambodia has undertaken significant steps to rebuild its education system, including PE. Since 2006, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has collaborated with national and international stakeholders such as the NGO Hearts of Gold (HG) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to reestablish and enhance PE curricula at primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels. These initiatives align with global policy frameworks, including UNESCO's Quality Physical Education (QPE) guidelines, and reflect a national commitment to promoting health, equity, and lifelong physical activity.

NPO/NGO Hearts of Gold (HG) had supported the Angkor International Half Marathon since 1998, cooperating with the National Olympic Committee of Cambodia, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), Ministry of Tourism and Khmer Amateur Athletic Federation. Because there had not been many sport-related cooperation projects with MoEYS prior to this, HG was asked to support the development of Physical Education (PE) for primary schools in 2005. After several discussions with MoEYS, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the University of Tsukuba, HG initiated a project to develop a curriculum and Teachers' Manual for PE in primary schools in 2006 under the JICA Partnership Program. This marked the beginning of sustained collaboration between MoEYS and



HG. Although the initial scope was limited to primary schools, the program laid the groundwork for integration into lower secondary and higher education PE curricula. Before this initiative, PE practices in Cambodian schools were rudimentary. Students performed basic exercises such as running, stretching, soccer, and volleyball without a defined pedagogical structure or learning objectives. Traditional Khmer exercises were occasionally included, but these also lacked instructional coherence. PE classes, nominally allocated 45 to 50 minutes depending on the school level, were often reduced to 10-15 minutes with minimal educational value (Smith et al., 2015).

The role of PE and sports in character building has been well-documented globally. Research by Nansel et al. (2001) in the United States found that around 32% of students aged 12-18 reported experiencing harassment in school, indicating a lack of moral and social development. Similarly, Hemphill et al. (2014) observed that juvenile delinquency manifested through theft, violence, and substance abuse, was linked to deficiencies in character education. In Indonesia, adolescents make up a significant demographic (BPS, 2024), yet face substantial character development challenges. According to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, over 8,000 cases of juvenile delinquency have been recorded, encompassing drug abuse, alcohol use, gambling, and other deviant behaviors. These findings underline the need for comprehensive character education, which can be effectively supported through structured sports and PE programs (Permana, 2024).

Sports, when integrated with educational values, offer a powerful medium for character development. According to Yaumuhak et al. (2023), sports can instill fundamental values such as cooperation, discipline, responsibility, and fair play. These attributes contribute not only to personal development but also to societal harmony. Sports foster respect through teamwork and collaboration, as young athletes learn to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts (Chaudhary, 2024). Hardiansyah et al. (2024) further emphasize that youth sports can enhance ethical reasoning and social skills. If designed systematically, sports also develop emotional skills, such as empathy and self-regulation, which are crucial for social interactions (Rivas-Valenzuela et al., 2024). Risyanto (2023) highlights the importance of integrating sports values into everyday life, while Sorbo (2023) discusses the potential of sports in combating bullying and promoting ethical behavior. However, social and infrastructural differences between urban and rural areas significantly affect youth participation and the internalization of sports values (Pujiato et al., 2025). Kellstedt et al. (2021) found that limited access to sports facilities in rural areas correlates with lower participation rates and weaker character development outcomes.

In addition to general sports activities, formal education provides a unique avenue to embed sportsmanship and moral values. Penney et al. (2005) argue that school-based PE can serve as a platform for realizing educational objectives grounded in physical and moral development. According to the Committee on Physical Activity and Physical Education in the School Environment, Food and Nutrition Board, and Institute of Medicine (2013), PE contributes to physical well-being, motor skill enhancement, and health literacy, with added benefits such as obesity prevention. Furthermore, Mustafa et al. (2024) suggest that PE promotes self-confidence, social interaction, and cognitive development. Other studies affirm that values of respect, equality, and moral reasoning are best cultivated through structured PE (Syarifatunnisa et al., 2023). Nonetheless, a prevailing misconception persists that sports are solely for competitive achievement. This limited perspective undermines the broader educational value of sports and PE, potentially contributing to rising juvenile delinquency. Hasnah et al. (2023) advocate for a paradigm shift where sports are recognized as tools for moral and character development rather than just performance metrics. Disparities in community support and infrastructure between urban and rural settings further compound the issue, leading to inconsistent exposure to positive sports values.

Given these multifaceted challenges and opportunities, this study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of Cambodia's PE system development and implementation across different educational levels. It specifically explores how PE curricula are applied, how teacher training aligns with curriculum goals, and how institutional coordination supports or hinders implementation. The research also investigates strategic frameworks needed to ensure sustainability and inclusivity in PE delivery. This study is both timely and significant. As Cambodia prepares to expand its educational and sports sectors which highlighted by events such as the Southeast Asian Games in 2023, a well-functioning PE system can contribute to national health, youth development, and social cohesion. Moreover, this research addresses critical knowledge gaps by providing a multi-level analysis that integrates curriculum evaluation, teacher capacity building, and institutional coordination. The findings aim to inform

policymakers, educators, and development partners seeking to enhance educational equity and quality through PE.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using documentary and institutional analysis methods to examine the development and implementation of Cambodia's Physical Education (PE) system. The research is grounded in a policy analysis framework, with data drawn from various educational documents, government policies, and institutional reports. This study aims to understand the structural, pedagogical, and strategic elements involved in reforming PE at the primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school levels in Cambodia.

The data utilized in this study consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data include official PE curriculum documents issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), teacher training manuals, and structural charts depicting the organization of PE-related departments. Secondary data are drawn from project reports implemented by the NGO Hearts of Gold (HG) in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as well as from international references such as UNESCO's "Quality Physical Education" (QPE) policy guidelines. Supporting visual illustrations in this study include the Khmer Exercise example, the organizational structure of MoEYS (Figure 1), Departmental roles and functions (Figure 2), PE content distributions for lower and upper secondary levels, the PE Class Assessment Sheet (Figure 3), and a synthesized strategic overview of the national PE system (Figure 3).

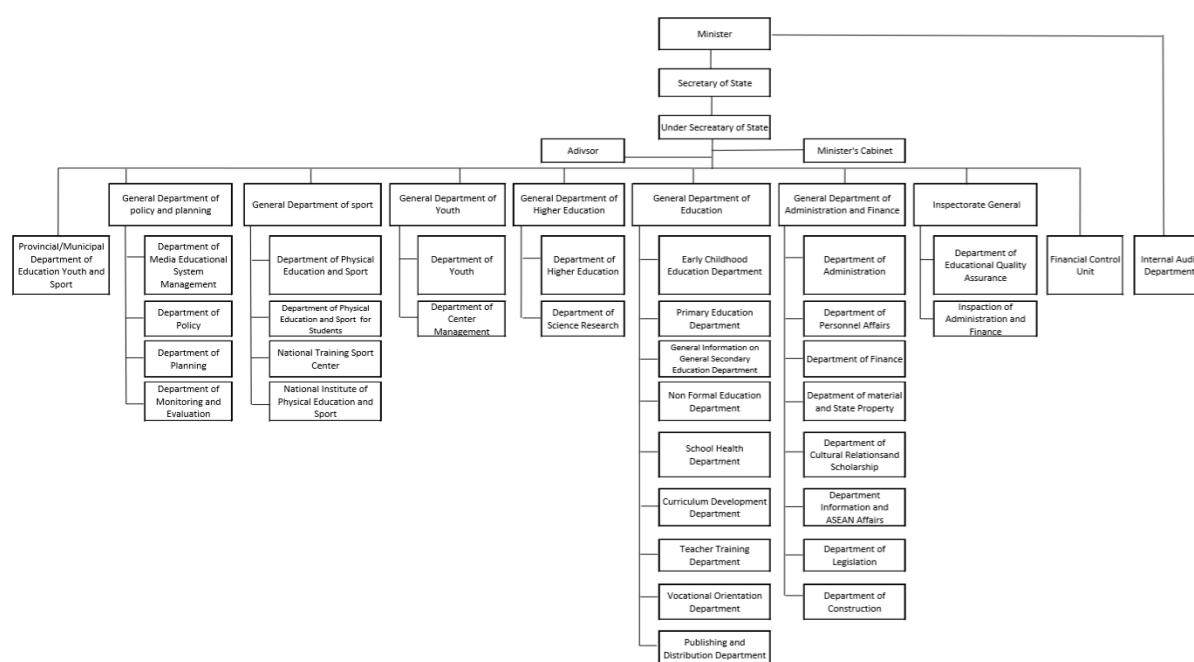


Figure 1. The Organization Chart of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports

Data were collected through document review and institutional analysis. This included examination of national education policies, curriculum frameworks, and PE project documentation from 2006 to 2021. The review focused on identifying how policy documents translate into curricular content and teacher development strategies. These data were then analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify patterns and relationships between institutional roles, pedagogical objectives, and field-level implementation. The content analysis addressed the degree of alignment between national education policies and PE curriculum design, the functional distribution of responsibilities among MoEYS departments (namely DPES, NIPES, and GDS), and the impact of these structures on teacher training and monitoring systems. One notable tool applied in this study is the PE Class Assessment Sheet (Figure 7), which was developed and adapted from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) framework to evaluate PE lesson delivery across five domains: lesson flow, learning

outcomes, professionalism, vocational skills, and classroom management. This instrument was field-tested during monitoring activities in selected provinces.

The overall analytical framework in this study includes three central areas: analysis of curriculum implementation in schools, evaluation of teacher training programs (both pre-service and in-service), and a systemic review of Cambodia's PE governance and strategy. These three components are interrelated and serve as the foundation for constructing a holistic and sustainable approach to PE system development in Cambodia. By drawing on empirical evidence and policy review, this study aims to provide meaningful insights into how developing countries can strengthen their national PE frameworks through institutional synergy, curriculum clarity, and human resource development.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was conducted using qualitative content analysis to interpret the institutional documents, curriculum frameworks, and project evaluations related to the development of Physical Education (PE) in Cambodia. This approach enabled the researcher to extract thematic patterns and underlying structures from textual materials, allowing for the identification of critical issues within PE policy design, curriculum implementation, and teacher training systems.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses them in relation to the analytical framework outlined in the methodology. The discussion is structured into four key thematic areas: (1) Curriculum Implementation, (2) Teacher Capacity Building, (3) Institutional Coordination, and (4) Strategic System Review. Each sub-section synthesizes evidence from documentary analysis, curriculum evaluation, and project implementation outcomes to assess the effectiveness and challenges in the development of Cambodia's Physical Education (PE) system.

Curriculum Implementation

One of the primary focuses of this study was the implementation of the national Physical Education curriculum at different educational levels in Cambodia. Since the launch of the PE curriculum for primary schools in 2007, followed by lower secondary in 2016 and upper secondary in 2018, there has been a concerted effort to systematize PE as an essential part of holistic education. However, the degree of implementation and uptake varies widely across regions and school levels. The primary school curriculum, which combines PE and health education, introduced structured learning objectives and pedagogical content that were absent in earlier practices. The curriculum emphasizes developing students' attitude, knowledge, skill, and cooperation, with clearly defined time allocations for each activity type, such as rhythmic exercises, athletics, ball games, and physical fitness tests. As shown in Figure 2, the structure and time allocation reflect a comprehensive yet adaptable model aimed at encouraging movement literacy and lifelong physical activity.

However, while the curriculum was ambitious in scope, actual implementation revealed several gaps. In many schools, health education components were neglected due to administrative separation between the DPSS and the School Health Department. This lack of interdepartmental integration meant that the health education sections were often overlooked by teachers, who lacked the training and materials necessary to deliver this content effectively. In lower secondary schools, the curriculum extended the foundation laid at the primary level by introducing more complex physical activities and traditional games such as Labok Kator and petanque. As illustrated in Figure 2, the PE content for this level not only builds physical capacity but also integrates local culture and cooperative play. These additions reflect an effort to incorporate cultural identity within PE, making it more relevant and engaging for students. Furthermore, the curriculum aims to foster not just physical development, but also problem-solving, cooperation, and strategic thinking through various team sports and recreational activities. Despite these improvements, implementation challenges persist. Many schools lack the

necessary infrastructure, such as swimming pools and gymnasiums, and qualified teachers to deliver the diverse curriculum content.

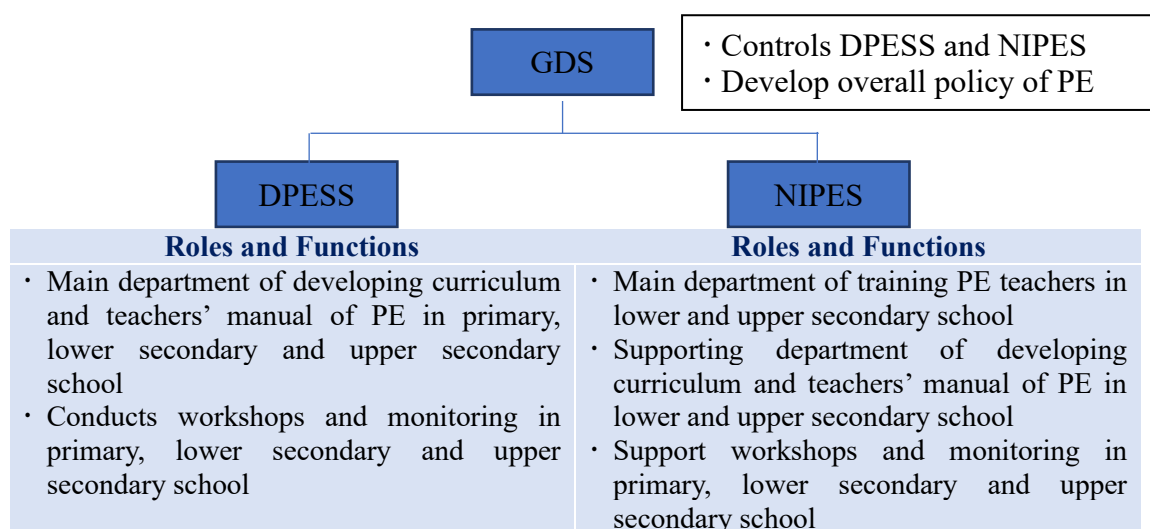


Figure 2. Roles and Functions of DPESS, NIPES and GDS

The upper secondary school curriculum, although established, initially mirrored the lower secondary content too closely. Its objectives were not adequately distinguished, leading to redundancy and lack of progression. A 2019 revision sought to address these issues by introducing greater flexibility, allowing teachers to select sports and activities that matched both their competencies and students' interests. As shown in Figure 3, the revised curriculum includes differentiated objectives and activity clusters designed for higher autonomy and student engagement. Nonetheless, issues such as resource constraints and inconsistency in curriculum dissemination remain barriers to effective implementation.

Teacher Capacity Building

The second thematic focus is the training and professional development of PE teachers, which plays a pivotal role in the success of curriculum implementation. In Cambodia, PE teacher education is managed at different levels by Provincial Teacher Training Centers (PTTCs) for primary school teachers and the National Institute of Physical Education and Sport (NIPES) for secondary school teachers. For primary education, teachers undergo a two-year pre-service training program that covers multiple subjects, including PE. However, given that these generalist teachers must cover all academic areas, the depth of PE training is often insufficient. Recognizing this gap, efforts have been made to transition selected PTTCs into Teacher Education Colleges (TECs) offering four-year degree programs with more specialized training in PE. Nonetheless, these programs are still in developmental phases and not uniformly available across the country.

NIPES is responsible for training PE teachers for both lower and upper secondary schools. It has traditionally offered a two-year certificate program, but in recent years, a new four-year bachelor's degree program has been developed in collaboration with Hearts of Gold and JICA. Figure 4 outlines the structure of this pre-service training program, highlighting its expanded focus on pedagogy, inclusive education, and curriculum implementation. Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Many graduates from NIPES still focus heavily on skill development in specific sports rather than on pedagogical strategies for inclusive and student-centered teaching. Moreover, in-service training opportunities are limited, particularly for teachers in rural areas. Without ongoing professional development, even well-designed curricula may fail to achieve their intended outcomes.

To address this, the PE Class Assessment Sheet was introduced as a tool not only for evaluation but also for reflective practice. As illustrated in Table 1, this tool assesses five core teaching dimensions: lesson flow, learning outcomes, professionalism, vocational skills, and classroom management. Its implementation in teacher training workshops has fostered greater self-awareness and improved instructional quality.

Table 1. Contents Area of PE in Upper Secondary School

Chapter of Contents Area	Unit	Grade 10		Grade 11		Grade 12	
		Contents	hr	Contents	Hr	Contents	hr
I. Non-competitive/ Self and Others	Physical Fitness	Recreation Physical Fitness Test	6	Recreation Physical Fitness Test	6	Recreation Physical Fitness Test	6
	Rhythm Exercise	Dance	10	Dance	10	Dance	10
II. Non-competitive/ Culture & Tradition	Traditional Sports / International Sports	Labok Kator Petanque Taekwondo Karate etc.	16* ¹	Labok Kator Petanque Taekwondo Karate, etc.	16* ¹	Labok Kator, Petanque Taekwondo , Karate, etc.	16* ¹
	Athletics	Athletics	10	Athletics	10	Athletics	10
III. Closed Skill/ Challenge	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	10	Gymnastics	10	Gymnastics	10
	Swimming	Swimming	8* ¹	Swimming	8* ¹	Swimming	8* ¹
IV. Open Skill/ Tactics, Agreement	Ball Games	Inv asi on Ty pe Net Ty pe Etc.	18* ²	Soccer Basketball Handball Rugby Etc. Volleyball Table Tennis Tennis Etc.	18* ²	Soccer Basketball Handball Rugby Etc. Volleyball Table Tennis Tennis Etc. Baseball Softball Etc.	18* ²
	Other Sports	Baseball Softball Etc.		Baseball Softball Etc.		Baseball Softball Etc.	
Total Hours			70		70		70

*¹ Schools select two sub-subjects among designated sub-subjects.

*² Schools select at least 2 sub-subjects from 2 categories of Invasion type, net type and others

Institutional Coordination

The organizational structure of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) significantly influences the implementation of the PE curriculum and teacher training programs. The relevant bodies (DPSS, NIPES, and GDS) operate under the same overarching ministry but maintain independent decision-making channels. This institutional separation often leads to fragmented planning and delays in program implementation. As depicted in Figure 3, the current organizational structure reveals a parallel system of authority that often complicates collaboration and program synchronization.

For instance, during the development of the lower secondary school curriculum, Hearts of Gold had to navigate between DPSS and NIPES, each led by different directors. While both institutions technically fall under the General Department of Sport (GDS), there is limited operational integration. Coordination becomes even more complicated when projects require collaboration with other departments, such as the School Health Department or provincial education offices. The study found that successful project execution often depended on fostering strong personal relationships with key decision-makers within these departments. For example, direct engagement with the director of GDS facilitated smoother negotiations and approvals. However, relying on informal relationships is not a sustainable or scalable strategy. To improve coordination, there is a pressing need for formal mechanisms that ensure collaboration among departments involved in PE. Additionally, the lack of a unified monitoring and evaluation system complicates efforts to measure progress across schools and regions. While the PE Class Assessment Sheet is a step in the right direction, its usage is not yet institutionalized across all levels. Creating a centralized database for curriculum implementation and teacher performance data could significantly enhance accountability and strategic planning.

Kingdom of Cambodia			
Nation Religion King			
Ministry of Education Youth and Sport			
General Directorate of Sport		Date :	
PE Class Assessment (Total :/100)			
Observer:		Teacher Name:	Grade:
School:		Number of Student: ()	Girt: ()
Content Area: (Physical Fitness, Rhythm Exercise, Gymnastic, Athletic, Traditional Sport (Labokator & Petanque), Swimming (Water Instruction & Swimming Practice), Ball Game (Soccer, Basketball, Volleyball & Table Tennis)			
I-Lesson Flow			
1	1 hour for a whole class (Start:..... End:.....) (49-51min=5, 48-48.59 or 51.01-52min= 4, 47-47.59 or 52.01-53min= 3, 46-46.59 or 53.01-54min= 2, <46/>50min= 1)		
2	There are 5 steps for whole class (5 steps=5, 4 steps=4, 3 steps=3, 2 steps=2, 1 step=1)		
3	Students are engaged Physical Activity meaningfully a minimum of 60 % of whole class. (28-30min=5, 25-27.59min=4, 20-24.59min=3, 15-19.59min=2, <15min=1)		
4	The class matches to unit plan, yearly plan & Lesson Plan which following from Curriculum and TM (Curriculum, TM, Yearly Plan, Unit Plan & Lesson Plan=5, 4 of them=4, 3 of them=3, 2 of them=2, 1 of them=1)		
Comment			
II-Learning Outcome			
5	Most of students understand the objective and lesson content after the explanation of teacher at the beginning and the end of the class. (80%~ of them=5, 70-79% of them=4, 60-69% of them=3, 50-59% of them=2, <50% of them=1)		
6	Students take their role to organize ground space and lesson effectively. (80%~ of them=5, 70-79% of them=4, 60-69% of them=3, 50-59% of them=2, <50% of them=1)		
7	Most of students have enough time to discuss to find out the way for good performance. (rate 1-5) (80%~ of them=5, 70-79% of them=4, 60-69% of them=3, 50-59% of them=2, <50% of them=1)		
8	Most of students enjoy the class. (rate 1-5) (80%~ of them=5, 70-79% of them=4, 60-69% of them=3, 50-59% of them=2, <50% of them=1)		
Comment			
III-Professionalism			
9	Teacher wears appropriate clothes for PE. (Pant, shirt, stopwatch, shoes) (All=5, 3 among them=4, 2 among them=3, 1 among them=2, Non=1)		
10	Teacher is an advocate for the profession such as appropriate clothes of students, time-table, space and equipment. (All=5, 3 among them=4, 2 among them=3, 1 among them=2, Non=1)		
11	Teacher adheres to professional and ethical standards. (Mastery=5, Proficient=4, Basic=3, Needs improvement=2, Unacceptable=1)		
12	Teacher is seeking opportunities for personal growth and reflects upon students into practice (Mastery=5, Proficient=4, Basic=3, Needs improvement=2, Unacceptable=1)		
Comment			
IV-Vocational Skill			
13	Teacher organizes his/her class based on National Curriculum and TM. (Exemplary=5, Very good=4, Good=3, Poor=2, Needs significant attention=1)		
14	Teacher gives consistent assessment with the objective at the end of the lesseon. (Outstanding=5, Above average=4, Satisfactory=3, Below average=2, Unsatisfactory=1)		
15	Positive feedback and individual feedback is provided to students (Clearly exceeds standards=5, Stong=4, Meet standard=3, Developing=2, Does not meet standard=1)		
16	Teacher setes apporiate and successful tasks sequences in the lesson (Exemplary=5, Very good=4, Good=3, Poor=2, Needs significant attention=1)		
Comment			
V-Management			
17	Instructional Management is safe, orderly, and supports learning activities. (Exemplary=5, Very good=4, Good=3, Poor=2, Needs significant attention=1)		
18	Adequate and developmentally appropriate equipment of school is accessible and utilized (Exemplary=5, Very good=4, Good=3, Poor=2, Needs significant attention=1)		
19	Groupes are well organized to work cooperatively to achieve objectives in the lesson. (Exemplary=5, Very good=4, Good=3, Poor=2, Needs significant attention=1)		
20	There is a safe, secure, learning environment that promotes, success, appropriate risk taking, positive self-expression and enjoyment (Exemplary=5, Very good=4, Good=3, Poor=2, Needs significant attention=1)		
Comment			

Figure 3. PE Class Assessment Sheet

Strategic System Review

A comprehensive strategic framework is essential to guide the development of a quality PE system that is inclusive, scalable, and sustainable. Based on the analysis, three strategic pillars emerge as

critical: curriculum implementation, teacher training integration, and system-wide policy alignment. Curriculum implementation must go beyond distribution. MoEYS needs to invest in workshops, on-site coaching, and community engagement to ensure that schools understand and apply the curriculum effectively. The example of Battambang Province, where local authorities used their own budget to conduct training workshops, illustrates the potential of decentralized initiative when supported by central policy. Teacher training must be better aligned across pre-service and in-service systems. For primary education, the involvement of DPES in both types of training creates an opportunity for integrated planning. However, this integration must be supported with adequate resources, including updated manuals, audiovisual teaching aids, and digital platforms for remote learning. For secondary education, NIPES needs to embed the full range of competencies outlined in the national curriculum, including inclusive practices and psychosocial skills.

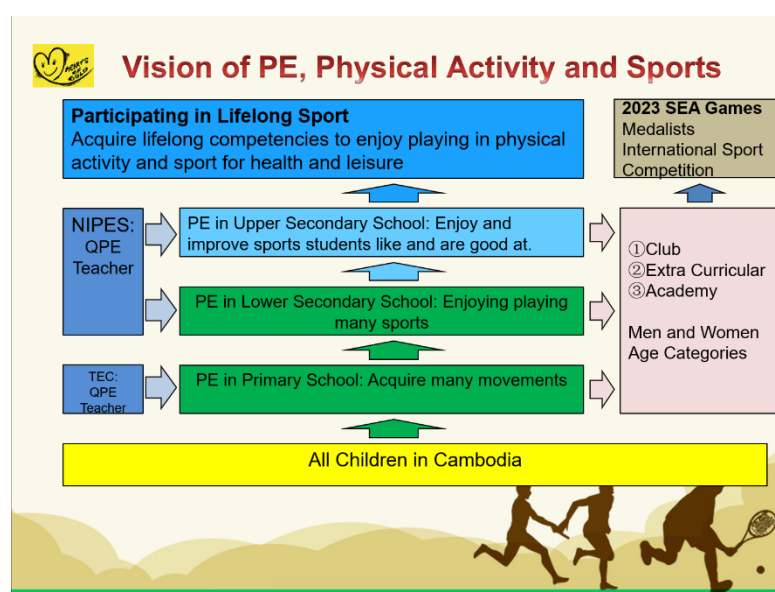


Figure 4. Overall View of PE System

Finally, policy coherence is essential. PE should not be treated in isolation but as part of a broader educational and health promotion strategy. The strategic vision illustrated in Figure 4 demonstrates the interconnectedness of curriculum, teacher development, and institutional support in delivering an effective PE system. Students should build upon their previous learning, and teachers should be trained to understand the trajectory of student development from primary through to upper secondary school. Moreover, national investment in infrastructure, particularly for sports facilities, is crucial if the intended curriculum is to be realized in practice. The strategic review also highlights the importance of monitoring and evidence-based policymaking. Without reliable data, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of interventions or identify areas needing improvement. A centralized information system, periodic national assessments, and active collaboration with NGOs and international agencies could significantly strengthen the foundation for continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the strategic development of Cambodia's Physical Education (PE) system within the broader context of national education reform. The key argument presented is that while Cambodia has taken significant steps in developing PE curricula and teacher training mechanisms, the full realization of a quality, sustainable, and inclusive PE system requires systemic coordination, institutional integration, and consistent implementation strategies. As outlined in the introduction, the research aimed to evaluate how PE in Cambodia has evolved through collaboration between the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), international partners such as Hearts of Gold (HG) and JICA, and how the resulting policies and programs have impacted the curriculum, teacher training, and institutional frameworks. This study has shown that, although progress has been made in developing PE

curricula for primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels, major challenges remain in terms of curriculum coherence, teacher training continuity, and departmental coordination.

In response to the central question of how Cambodia can develop a quality PE system, the findings demonstrate that successful implementation depends on aligning PE objectives across educational levels, enhancing both pre-service and in-service teacher training, and fostering synergy among key institutions such as DPES, NIPES, and GDS. Reinforcing the main theme of the paper that PE is a vital part of national education with the potential to shape physical, moral, and social development, the study concludes that only through a strategic, holistic approach can PE in Cambodia evolve from fragmented initiatives to a fully integrated component of the country's educational vision. With proper investment and policy alignment, Cambodia has the potential to model an inclusive and future-ready PE system.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest related to this research or the publication of this manuscript

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