

# Physical Masking and Regression: The Direction, Obstruction and Approach of Physical Education Reform

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**Abstract:** Through an in-depth discussion on the direction of PE reform in the modern era, we carefully examined the dual challenges posed by technological and value rationality. We delved deeper into the philosophical complexities inherent in PE reform. Our analysis uncovered that the exploration of bodily cognition, viewed through the lens of embodied philosophy, holds the key to comprehending school PE, shaping curriculum frameworks, and grasping the deeper educational value of PE. This perspective proves more insightful than merely studying the influence of societal, cultural, and political factors on PE from a purely physical standpoint.

**Keywords:** Physical Education; Dualism; Embodied Philosophy; Technological Rationality; Value Rationality

## 1. Introduction

Since 2012, under the leadership of Comrade Xi Jinping as the core of the Party Central Committee, school sports work has been given significant importance. It has been emphasized that school sports should contribute to the realization of the “two hundred years” struggle goals. The General Secretary’s discussions on “moral cultivation and the four in one” have provided a top-level framework for the reform of school physical education. The physical education curriculum serves as a central

component of school physical education, and its reform acts as a crucial starting point for overall reform efforts. However, over the past few decades, despite theoretical questioning and criticism, the conceptual opposition within university physical education curriculum has not been adequately addressed. The logical relationships remain unclear, and the understanding of technical rationality and value rationality in the curriculum’s orientation is often repeated in a convoluted manner. Therefore, it is essential to engage in theoretical construction of the



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college physical education curriculum system, guided by the visionary top-level design outlined by the General Secretary.

## **2. The reform direction of school physical education**

School physical education is not only related to the physical fitness of individuals, but also closely related to the future of the country and the destiny of the nation, and plays an important role in the development of the country, society and individuals.<sup>[1]</sup> Since 2012, numerous policies have been implemented to deepen and adjust previous reforms, resulting in a systematic and integrated approach to school physical education from top to bottom. School physical education has now become a national strategy. In light of this, the reform of school physical education in the new era must prioritize the value orientation of “moral cultivation” and emphasize the educational goal of achieving the “four in one” development.

## **3. Physical masking: the obstruction and philosophical dilemma of school physical education reform**

At present, the reform of school physical education is faced with complicated obstacles, and the concept of technical rationality and value rationality profoundly affects the reform path.

### **3.1 Obstruction in physical education reform: technical rationality**

According to the previous research, China’s physical education is a technical and rational education.<sup>[2]</sup> The fundamental task of physical education is to teach sports skills, and when the acquisition of sports skills is put in the first place, the body will be reduced to a mechanized and instrumentalized body. At the same time, the thought of physical education, which runs through the whole course of school physical education reform, regards the body as a simple organism with obvious traces of materialization, and human beings are abstracted as isolated fragments or instrumental existence, and their integrity is greatly damaged.<sup>[3]</sup> It results in the long-term lack of physical perception, and the teaching process also makes the intrinsic spiritual value of sports to people unable to manifest. At present, the attention of the state and society to students’ physique has largely covered up the subject

nature and educational function of physical education, so that school physical education tends to express a functional means.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, the skill-based physical education curriculum system has always been regarded as the public enemy by the physical education circles at home and abroad. Facing the obstruction of PE curriculum reform, national policy departments and scholars believe that the key to correct the development of sports is to take sports value as the theoretical orientation of sports development.

### **3.2 The obstruction of physical education reform: value rationality**

#### **3.2.1 The idea of physical education reform has made a leap forward**

Value rationality points out that the essential problem of technical rationality in physical education curriculum is “decomposition” and “distortion”; That is, the knowledge, skill and attitude of technical rational physical education are broken down, and physical education is distorted into simple external physical activity. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to put forward the logic oriented by value rationality, that is, “integration”. Placing value rationality at the center of integration and seeking the harmonious development of body and mind, physical education curriculum implements the unity of teaching value (external value + internal value) through the integrated statement of goals (knowledge, skills, attitudes) and the integrated systematization of content (understanding content, implementation content, attitude content, appreciation content). And the integrated teaching and learning method (personal experience + indirect experience) embodies the meaning and way of integration. This not only leads the researchers and practitioners who are accustomed to the technical rationality course to the new theory and practice direction, but also solves the problem of PE curriculum reform and teaching site, which is evaluated as a revolutionary attempt to solve this problem at the theoretical level.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### **3.2.2 An analysis on practical problems of school physical education curriculum reform**

Since the reform of physical education curriculum in 2012, although the harmonious development of body and mind has been emphasized, the internalization or idealization of values can easily lead to educational contradictions. In technical rational physical education,

the internalized knowledge of cultural value brings challenges. Teachers often focus on goals rather than practice, resulting in empty content and difficult to achieve multiple goals. Overemphasizing the function of school physical education is easy to misunderstand its comprehensiveness and aggravate the criticism of technical rationality to value rationality. Classifying the intrinsic value of physical education may marginalize other cognitive or emotional aspects, causing tension, affecting health and clarity of curriculum content. Discussions on integration of body and mind often focus on body and mind, which leads to tension between different integration methods. Although the integration of values has its pursuit, it fails to solve the physical and mental problems, and the integration is still incomplete. Failure to critically discuss the relationship between body and mind will lead to dualism bias and hinder the pursuit of harmonious development of body and mind. Physical education aims at harmony of body and mind, and its essence lies in the interweaving of body and mind. To realize the integration of physical education, it is necessary to explore the essence of the body and its relationship with human behavior. In the field of physical education, solving physical and mental problems is the fundamental problem supporting theory and practice.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, the philosophical discussion of mind-body relationship can determine the direction of integration problem solving.

### **3.3 Philosophical Dilemma of School Physical Education in the West's Dichotomy of Body and Mind**

The modern school physical education originates from the West and our country's school physical education is influenced by the Western theory. Our understanding of the body is closely related to the mind-body view of Western philosophy. In the West, the body has long been marginalized, stemming from dictatorship and rationalism. This duality of mind and body, sense and reason can be traced back to early Greek philosophy, such as Anaxagoras's "source of mind" theory.<sup>[7]</sup> Since modern times, spiritual philosophy has led the academic society to dualism. The Western understanding of body has changed from the separation of spirit and body to the return of body. Plato, Christian philosophy, Descartes and other philosophers all embody the duality of body and mind.

This separation of mind and body became the basis of Western rational thinking about the body. Philosophers such as Nietzsche and Meg Ponti later emphasized the importance of the body, which went from being devalued to being fundamental to existence. In Chinese and Western philosophy, the body has changed from being hated to being manifested, and the understanding of the relationship between body and mind has also changed from duality to harmony and unity.

Dewey once pointed out that philosophy is the most general theory of education, and different philosophical views have led to changes in educational research. Due to the experience of the body in philosophy and the topic of its speech will also be transplanted into the field of education, and the body view of school physical education as a component of education has also experienced "the change from the biological body to the physiological and spiritual body, which makes the" dichotomy of body and mind to "the dialectical unity of body and mind." In recent years, many fields and scholars in China have examined the "body and mind" in school sports, and the attention to the body has gradually shifted from focusing on the physical body to the physical body and the mental body. The physical and mental body view has laid the ideological foundation for the health first thought and the mind-body body view. But for decades, although the institutionalized goal system has been growing and developing in the process of theoretical questioning and criticism, some viewpoints have not yet been adjusted, some logical relationships are still to be clarified, and some "cognition" of technical rationality and value rationality in the direction of goals is still circuited and repeated.

Since the mid-1990s, physical education and physical philosophy have diverged, with physical philosophy shifting from epistemology to axiology. However, physical education has failed to explore the connection between the physical and mental aspects. In the 21st century, discussions on the physical and mental dimensions of PE curriculum reform have often fallen into attribute dualism, neglecting the philosophical and educational significance of the body. Although physical education aims for the harmonious development of body and mind, its justification and practical logic are inadequately explained. Compared to the symbolic cognitive curriculum, which emphasizes

the body as the object of knowledge and self-expression, the relationship between sports learning, understanding of the external world, and the recognized object of body composition in sports learning has received insufficient attention in our country's sports curriculum. Consequently, discussions lacking rigorous epistemological exploration of the mind-body relationship are likely to become mired in dualistic frameworks.

#### **4. Physical Regression: Reform of Physical Education in Schools from the Perspective of Physical Philosophy**

##### **4.1 The Physical Becomes a Unique Paradigm for Modern Academics**

In recent years, the concept of “body” has emerged as a significant focal point in modern academic thought, serving as a unique thinking paradigm. This paradigm extends beyond the context of dualism and encompasses all human activities as physical activities. It not only influences the study of philosophical problems but also impacts various disciplines. In the field of sports, scholars have introduced a new research direction for the preservation of sports culture through the theory of body knowledge, which has its roots in philosophy. Additionally, some researchers have explored the philosophical connotations and sociological significance of the body and physical fitness phenomenon by drawing upon Mike Featherstone's consumption theory.<sup>[8]</sup> It also discusses the highest goal pursued by school physical education from the perspective of educational philosophy, proposes that the goal of school physical education “should go beyond biological evaluation and individual self-evaluation”, “beyond the duality of body and mind and affirm the humanistic spirit”, and also interprets the way of understanding the “body” world in physical education curriculum on the theoretical basis of curriculum theory.

##### **4.2 Study on Physical Education Thought in School from the Perspective of the Physical**

Currently, research is increasingly focusing on understanding the body as the foundation and starting point for school physical education. There is also a growing recognition of the importance of exploring school physical education from a body-centered perspective. While many researchers raise questions

and criticisms regarding school sports policies or pay attention to curriculum issues at a micro level, the core issue that hinders physical education curriculum reform is the misunderstanding of school sports. If we fail to grasp how educators understand the body in the context of school sports, we risk developing misconceptions at the ideological level. This situation places the physical education curriculum in an awkward position within the broader educational curriculum system, undermining its ability to engage in equal dialogue with other subjects.

##### **4.3 Embodied Philosophy Is the Way Forward for Physical Education Reform in Schools**

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in the importance of the body, indicating the need for a fundamental shift in the cognitive paradigm of school physical education in the new era. This shift involves moving from traditional disembodied cognition to modern embodied cognition, which reveals the value and significance of the body. Educational theory has transitioned from a traditional knowledge-centered view that emphasizes knowledge transmission to a practical cognition theory that prioritizes individual cognition. Educational practices are gradually shifting from “disembodied” education that focuses on intellect but neglects the body to “embodied” education that emphasizes individual cognitive experiences. Embodiment, a philosophical concept, highlights the idea that the functioning of the mind is grounded in the body. Scholars like M. Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of the embodied body, demonstrating the role of middle perception in connecting higher understanding (the realm of the mind) and lower senses (the realm of the body), bridging the gap between them. The notion that human intelligence is rooted in the sensory actions that constitute the body schema is termed “embodied.” In the late 20th century, advancements in neuroscience revealed the physical basis of the mind through scientific evidence of its functions, such as concentration, consciousness, memory, judgment, and planning. This led to a decline in the dualistic mind-body theory in spiritual philosophy and the emergence of embodiment as a new concept within the scientific field. The dualism between material and spiritual entities, which originated with Plato in ancient Greece and was further developed by Descartes in modern times, is being abandoned. The

body is now viewed as a symbolic and meaningful subject, elevating its philosophical status from a mere physical and mechanical object. With the development of embodied cognition theory in cognitive psychology, research has increasingly focused on the cognitive function of the body. Studies have highlighted that embodied cognition challenges traditional educational and teaching concepts based on a division between mind and body.

### Concluding remarks

In the new era, Chinese school physical education policy documents also require to follow the embodied cognitive orientation, so as to achieve a breakthrough and surpass the traditional physical education, that is, to transcend technical rationalism and value rationalism, highlight the significance of the body, highlight the education of students' physical shape and the pursuit of life value, in order to cultivate all-round development of human practice goals. Physical regression provides the main logical and conceptual basis for establishing the concept of physical education and developing the physical education curriculum in the future. Only by focusing on the "body" scope of physical education curriculum and understanding the value of physical education curriculum itself from the curriculum theory can school physical education get out of the epistemological misunderstanding.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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