

Study on the Enlightenment of the American SPARK Program on the Physical Education Curriculum in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract

In recent years, the physical fitness and health levels of primary and secondary school students in China have been declining, with increasing incidences of obesity and scoliosis. The primary reasons for these issues are insufficient exercise time and the limitations of traditional physical education teaching methods. This paper analyzes the content of the SPARK program in the United States to explore its implications for physical education in Chinese primary and secondary schools. The study finds that the SPARK program excels in the aspects of enjoyment, innovation, scientific basis, and lifelong impact of its teaching content. Considering the current situation in China, this paper suggests introducing diverse and practical teaching content, developing and utilizing both local and international sports resources to enhance students' interest and participation in physical activities. This approach aims to foster the concept of lifelong physical fitness and improve the quality of physical education teaching in Chinese schools.

Keywords

American SPARK Program; Primary and Secondary School Physical Education and Health Curriculum; Physical Education Classroom Teaching.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a continuous decline in the physical fitness and athletic abilities of primary and secondary school students in China. National data indicates that the rates of obesity and scoliosis among students are increasing annually. The primary reasons for these issues include insufficient time allocated for physical exercise and the persistence of traditional teaching methods in physical education classes in China. These classes often lack innovation and engagement, making it difficult to stimulate students' enthusiasm for participation. Consequently, many students enjoy sports but are reluctant to attend physical education classes.

Given these challenges, this study analyzes the content of the SPARK program in the United States to uncover its potential implications for physical education in Chinese primary and secondary schools. The aim is to provide a theoretical foundation for enhancing the quality of physical education teaching in China.

2. Overview of the SPARK Program in the United States

2.1. Introduction to the SPARK Program

The SPARK program, initiated by a research team at San Diego State University in June 1989, is a research project designed to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of physical education and health curricula for primary and secondary schools. The SPARK program advocates for reforming physical education through activities that incorporate sports, play, and

active recreation, aiming to enhance the health levels of young students. SPARK, an acronym for Sport, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids, integrates leisure, play, and sports into a comprehensive curriculum, blending recreational activities with physical education. The SPARK curriculum is noted for its innovation and diversity in its teaching content.

2.2. Teaching Objectives of the SPARK Program

The SPARK program in the United States sets forth a hierarchical framework of three levels of objectives: general objectives, learning objectives, and lifelong learning objectives. These objectives can be summarized into three primary goals:

To help both teachers and students develop healthy living habits and lifestyles.

To enable students to acquire solid knowledge and skills in sports.

To cultivate students' social skills and enhance their ability to interact socially.

Furthermore, the SPARK program aims for students to improve their health and physical fitness through the physical education and health curriculum. It emphasizes the acquisition of basic sports skills, ensuring that students experience joy and a sense of achievement while completing necessary exercises. The program also aims to teach students interpersonal skills through sports activities. It is evident that the objectives of the SPARK program align closely with the goals of physical education and health curricula in Chinese primary and secondary schools, which are primarily focused on promoting students' physical and mental health.

2.3. Key Modules of the SPARK Program

2.3.1. School Physical Activities

The SPARK program emphasizes active student participation in moderate-intensity physical activities. It eliminates monotonous teaching methods in favor of engaging instructional tools and interesting content to draw students into the activities. The primary goal is to make students the masters of their own physical activities. School physical activities provide opportunities for students to engage in physical exercise, increase their active time, and ensure that every student participates. The program is divided into three parts: elementary, middle, and high school physical education and health plans. The SPARK physical education curriculum consists of multiple chapters, each requiring approximately four weeks to complete, with sessions held three times a week. Each physical education class includes components related to health, focusing on sports skills and physical activities.

2.3.2. Teacher Training

Teacher training within the SPARK program is approached from the perspective of lifelong education, ensuring that physical education teachers understand and can effectively implement the SPARK curriculum. The training aims to enhance teachers' management and instructional skills. It emphasizes concise instruction combined with ample practice, reducing time spent on classroom management and fostering a relaxed, enjoyable, and engaging physical education environment.

2.3.3. Physical and Health Activity Plan

The physical and health activity plan of the SPARK program focuses on two main aspects:

Developing students' abilities to engage in extracurricular physical activities.

Establishing healthy eating habits.

The primary goal is to cultivate students' abilities to participate in physical activities outside of school while also encouraging the development of good dietary and lifestyle habits.

2.4. Characteristics of the SPARK Program

2.4.1. Enjoyment in SPARK Curriculum Content

The SPARK program incorporates a significant degree of enjoyment in its instructional content. Compared to traditional curricula, SPARK places a higher emphasis on the use of games within the lessons. It removes the monotonous and dull content typical of traditional physical education classes and introduces novel and engaging sports activities. This approach enhances the enjoyment of physical education classes, invigorates the classroom atmosphere, and stimulates students' interest in physical education.

2.4.2. Innovation in SPARK Curriculum Content

The SPARK program exhibits considerable innovation in both teaching methods and content. It breaks away from the conventional approach where teachers give commands and students perform actions accordingly. Instead, it integrates music into the lessons, using musical cues to organize student formations and groups. This not only reduces the time spent on reconfiguring formations but also enlivens the atmosphere of the physical education class, thereby increasing student engagement. Additionally, the SPARK program changes the traditional model of one teacher per class to a collaborative approach where multiple teachers conduct the lessons together, thereby improving teaching efficiency. In terms of instructional content, traditional physical education mainly includes activities such as running, jumping, throwing, and sit-ups, which students often find tedious. The SPARK program, however, introduces adjustments to the curriculum by incorporating activities such as rock climbing, mountain biking, breakdancing, rollerblading, frisbee throwing, and yoga, replacing some of the conventional sports activities and breaking the mold of traditional physical education.

2.4.3. Scientific Basis of SPARK Curriculum Content

The SPARK program's instructional content is designed with a strong scientific foundation. As a project of the National Institutes of Health, SPARK addresses prevalent issues such as student obesity. All curriculum content within the SPARK program has been tested in several schools and adjusted based on experimental results, undergoing repeated research and validation. The SPARK development team also uses extensive data to substantiate their findings, making the program rigorous and scientifically grounded.

2.4.4. Lifelong Impact of SPARK Curriculum Content

The teaching objectives of the SPARK program emphasize lifelong impact. The program aims to cultivate students' interest in physical activities and encourage active participation. The curriculum is designed to ensure that students acquire skills and experience the joy and sense of accomplishment that comes from physical activity, fostering healthy habits and behaviors. By influencing students' awareness and changing their behavior, the SPARK program's impact is more profound and enduring than mere knowledge dissemination, highlighting its lifelong significance.

3. Challenges in the Content of Physical Education Classes in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools

3.1. Lack of Enjoyment and Innovation in Teaching Content

The teaching content of physical education classes in Chinese primary and secondary schools often lacks enjoyment and innovation. The curriculum predominantly consists of traditional activities such as running, jumping, and throwing. The teaching materials are simple, monotonous, and boring, lacking systematic structure, scientific basis, and appeal. Additionally, the focus on preparing for physical fitness exams leads to a narrow concentration on exam-related exercises. Physical education teachers often focus solely on achieving pass rates by

repeatedly practicing and testing exam items. The teaching methods are also quite monotonous, centered around the teacher's instructions with students merely receiving and practicing them. This teacher-centered approach neglects the students' active roles, applying uniform requirements regardless of the content. Consequently, students' interest in physical education classes diminishes, along with the overall effectiveness of the instruction.

3.2. Overemphasis on Academic Content at the Expense of Practical Relevance

The teaching content in Chinese primary and secondary school physical education classes places excessive emphasis on professional knowledge and skills that are not readily applicable in everyday life. Teachers find it challenging to break away from established knowledge frameworks and to integrate physical education materials with real-life contexts. As a result, they fail to extend familiar and interesting life situations and game activities into their teaching. This lack of practical relevance in physical education diminishes students' engagement and initiative, thereby hindering the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

3.3. Conservative Approach to Teaching Content with Excessive Considerations

The current teaching content of physical education and health courses in Chinese primary and secondary schools is overly conservative, with a strong focus on the safety of sports activities. To avoid disputes arising from injuries during physical education classes, many teachers, while adhering to the curriculum guidelines, independently lower the risk of classroom activities. For instance, although the curriculum includes gymnastics, teachers often exclude more dangerous elements such as single and double bars, opting instead for simpler movements like forward rolls, backward rolls, and splits. Additionally, some physical education activities are avoided due to concerns over being perceived as "punishment." This cautious approach has led to the exclusion of many potentially risky sports activities from the curriculum, resulting in a more conservative teaching content in current Chinese primary and secondary school physical education classes.

4. Insights from the SPARK Program for Enhancing Physical Education Content in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools

4.1. Innovating Teaching Content to Increase the Enjoyment of Physical Education Classes

The diverse teaching content of the SPARK program is precisely what the current Chinese physical education and health curriculum needs. China should pursue continuous reforms to break away from established thinking patterns. Teachers need to expand their perspectives and draw on the pedagogical principles of the SPARK program to innovate and develop indigenous physical education content suitable for the Chinese context, thereby enriching the curriculum. In developing and innovating content, it is crucial to emphasize a "people-centered" approach. This includes not only traditional competitive sports but also lifelong fitness and recreational activities. Introducing new and engaging projects can enhance students' enthusiasm, curiosity, and creativity, fostering a lasting interest in sports and promoting the concept of lifelong physical activity.

4.2. Enriching Teaching Content to Make It More Relevant to Everyday Life

Analysis of the SPARK program's teaching content reveals that these courses respect the developmental stages of students, considering various aspects and designing content that is closely related to real-life experiences. For example, the early childhood SPARK curriculum is designed with consideration of children's natural tendencies to be active, curious, and imitative. It integrates classroom teaching content with everyday life and incorporates corresponding music into lessons, which effectively motivates students. By connecting physical education with

real-life scenarios, the knowledge imparted becomes more engaging and easier for students to accept.

4.3. Developing Teaching Content and Utilizing Physical Education Resources

The SPARK program actively develops and utilizes curriculum resources. For instance, it has adapted the traditional Chinese activity of bamboo pole jumping, replacing bamboo poles with elastic bands to create a variety of jumping patterns. This example highlights the potential for developing physical education resources in Chinese schools. From a breadth perspective, China possesses a wealth of traditional ethnic sports that can be adapted for primary and secondary school students. Physical education teachers can critically introduce emerging foreign sports to cultivate students' ability to accept new things and broaden their horizons. From a depth perspective, existing teaching content can be further explored by modifying rules, increasing task difficulty, and expanding participant numbers. Various methods can be employed to delve deeply into current physical education resources, developing and effectively utilizing them to enrich the teaching content of physical education classes in China.

5. Conclusion

The latest physical education curriculum standards in China have introduced numerous new concepts and achieved undeniable results. However, the issues present in the teaching content of physical education classes in Chinese primary and secondary schools require significant attention. In terms of teaching content, it is essential for physical education teachers to continually innovate, and for relevant departments to provide necessary support. Given the current situation in China, the diverse and innovative teaching content of the SPARK program can serve as a valuable reference. By stimulating students' interest in participating in sports and enhancing their enthusiasm for physical activities, it is possible to better realize the educational philosophy of lifelong physical fitness and promote the overall health of the population.

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