



## Integrating Physical and Health Education into National Frameworks for Sustainable Development

Yohanna, Peter

Department of Physical and Health Education, Adamawa State College of Education, Hong, Nigeria

**Correspondence:** [babashaye094@gmail.com](mailto:babashaye094@gmail.com) +234 803 712 9899

### Abstract

*The role of structured, school-based physical and health education (PHE) in shaping sustainability behaviors and promoting national development remains critically underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by examining the synergistic potential of PHE within the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework. A comprehensive narrative review was conducted, synthesizing literature on sustainable development (SD), ESD, and the physiological, social, and cognitive benefits of PHE. The analysis focuses on curriculum design, policy implications, and practical implementation strategies. The findings indicate that PHE is a powerful vehicle for ESD, capable of instilling pro-environmental behaviors, promoting health equity, and developing transferable skills like cooperation and critical thinking. However, its potential is largely untapped due to systemic under-prioritization, inadequate funding, and insufficient policy support, particularly in developing nations. PHE to effectively contribute to sustainable national development, it must be strategically integrated into national education policies and supported by coordinated action from government, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions. This requires adequate funding, robust policy formulation, and full implementation that recognize PHE as a core component of holistic education.*

**Keywords:** Physical Education, Health Education, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Sustainability Behavior, National Development, Curriculum Design.

### Introduction

The global pursuit of Sustainable Development (SD), defined as meeting present needs without compromising future generations' abilities to meet their own (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), demands transformative educational approaches. While the theoretical discourse on SD is robust, a significant gap exists in the development and implementation of effective, school-based programs designed to systematically change students' sustainability behaviors (Bentsen, Mygind, & Schneller, 2022).

This paper posits that Physical and Health Education (PHE) is an underutilized yet essential component of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). PHE, traditionally focused on physical competence and health literacy, offers a dynamic platform for experiential learning that can translate sustainability concepts into tangible actions. Through its unique focus on the body, community interaction, and the environment, PHE can foster behaviors such as reduced

consumption, sustainable dietary choices, responsible waste management, and the adoption of active transportation (Bentsen et al., 2022).

This review aims to synthesize existing literature to argue for the formal integration of PHE into national SD agendas. It will explore: (1) the concept of Sustainable Development, (2) the framework of Education for Sustainable Development, and (3) the specific, multifaceted roles PHE can play in achieving sustainable national development.

### **Sustainable Development (SD)**

SD is understood as a dynamic process of change that seeks to balance three interdependent dimensions: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (Hauff, 1987; Overwien & Rode, 2013). This tripartite model recognizes that these elements cannot be pursued in isolation; progress in one dimension constantly influences the others. The urgency of SD has been amplified by acute global challenges, most notably climate change, which poses severe risks to social and economic systems worldwide (Powell, 2016; Lade et al., 2020).

### **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)**

ESD emerged from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro as a comprehensive educational framework. It moves beyond traditional environmental education by encompassing the development of social skills, political and economic understanding, and the capacity for participatory engagement in societal transformation (United Nations, 1992; UNESCO, 2013). The ultimate goal of ESD is to equip individuals with the competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, and normative decision-making to make responsible choices that consider the long-term future of the planet and its inhabitants (De Haan, 2008). ESD is explicitly anchored in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly United Nations, 2015).

### **Physical and Health Education (PHE)**

PHE is defined as an educational process that uses physical activity as a medium to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes conducive to holistic well-being. It aims not only at physical development but also at the education of the whole person through well-planned physical

activities, fostering lifelong health and active citizenship. The World Health Organization (1948) foundational definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" aligns perfectly with the holistic objectives of PHE.

### **Integrating ESD and PHE: The Healthy School Framework**

The integration of ESD and PHE can be effectively visualized through the Healthy School Framework (Figure 1). This model positions the student at the center and highlights five interconnected domains that schools can strengthen to foster sustainable and health-promoting learning environments:

- Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
- School and Classroom Leadership
- Student Engagement
- Social and Physical Environments
- Home, School, and Community Partnerships

These domains are reinforced by three foundational pillars:

1. Integrated Approach – Establishing a unified strategy that addresses a wide range of health-related and sustainability topics, consistent with ESD's interdisciplinary and participatory orientation.
2. Health-Related Topics – Encompassing areas such as physical activity, healthy eating, mental health, safety, personal development, and substance-use prevention, which align directly with the goals of PHE.
3. Positive School Climate – Promoting inclusivity, safety, and support, thereby enabling both personal growth and collective responsibility.

By merging these pillars, the Healthy School framework creates an enabling context where ESD's sustainability competencies and PHE's holistic health goals converge, equipping learners to thrive as healthy, responsible, and active contributors to sustainable societies.

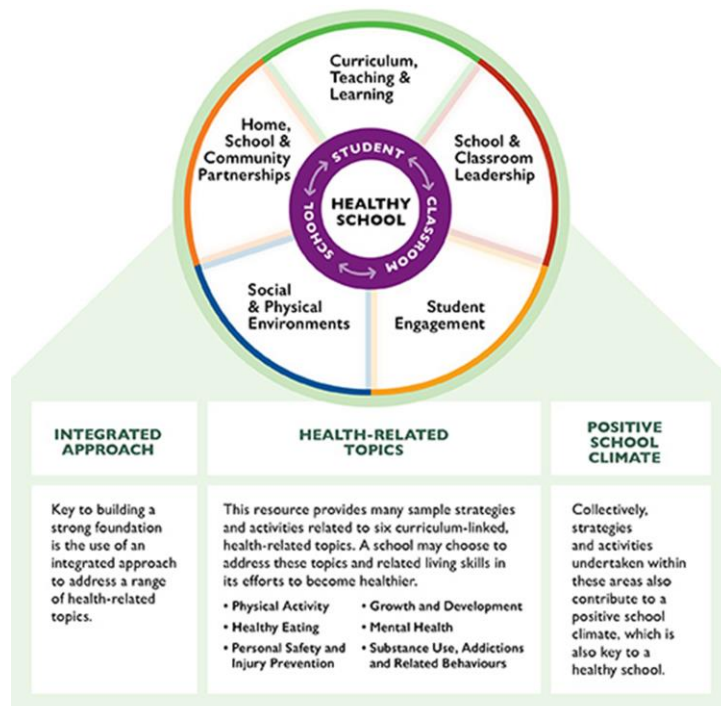


Figure 1: The Healthy School Framework linking ESD and PHE  
 (Note. From *The Ontario Curriculum...* (p. 12), by Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019. Copyright 2019 by the Queen's Printer for Ontario.)

### The Role of PHE in Advancing Sustainable Development

The integration of PHE into the ESD framework offers a unique and powerful pathway to achieve SD goals through three primary channels: promoting individual well-being, fostering socio-emotional learning, and encouraging sustainable community practices.

### Developing Healthier Populations for a Productive Future

A nation's health is a fundamental pillar of its sustainable development. PHE directly combats sedentary lifestyles, which are a major independent risk factor for global mortality (WHO, 2009). By providing structured opportunities for physical activity, PHE helps reduce the prevalence of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and other chronic conditions (CDC, 2010). This leads to a more productive workforce, reduces healthcare burdens, and contributes to economic stability a key aspect of SD. Furthermore, physical activity is proven to enhance cognitive function, memory retention, and academic performance (Ratey, 2014), thereby creating a more educated and capable citizenry.

## **Fostering Core Competencies for Sustainability**

The PHE environment is a natural laboratory for cultivating the very competencies ESD aims to achieve. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 2004, 2010) outlines benefits that directly support ESD:

**Cooperation and Collaboration:** Team sports and group activities teach students to work together towards a common goal, mirroring the collaborative action needed for global sustainability challenges.

**Self-Discipline and Responsibility:** PHE facilitates development of responsibility for personal health and safety, which can extend to responsibility for the environment and community.

**Improved Judgment and Leadership:** Students learn to make fair decisions, assume leadership roles, and accept responsibility for their own behavior.

**Stress Reduction and Resilience:** Physical activity is an outlet for releasing tension and anxiety, promoting emotional stability necessary for engaged citizenship.

## **Modeling and Promoting Sustainable Practices**

PHE can move beyond theory to model sustainable behaviors directly. Curriculum can be designed to:

**Promote Active Transportation:** Encouraging walking, cycling, or using public transport for school activities.

**Encourage Sustainable Consumption:** Discussing the environmental impact of food choices (e.g., local, plant-based diets) and sports equipment manufacturing.

**Teach Ecological Stewardship:** Organizing activities like gardening or outdoor education that foster a direct connection with and respect for the natural environment.

**Advocate for Social Inclusion:** Ensuring all activities is gender-equitable and inclusive of people with disabilities, directly supporting SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

## Challenges and Barriers to Integration

Despite its proven benefits, PHE is systematically marginalized, particularly in developing nations like Nigeria. It has often lost its status as a compulsory subject, with allocated time frequently reallocated to other academic pursuits (Sitzer, 1997). This under-prioritization stems from:

**Inadequate Funding:** A lack of dedicated financial resources for facilities, equipment, and trained personnel.

**Weak Policy Frameworks:** Policies supporting PHE are either absent or poorly implemented.

**Cultural and Academic Priorities:** A prevailing focus on high-stakes academic testing often sidelines the perceived "non-academic" value of PHE.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The evidence is clear: Physical and Health Education is not a peripheral activity but a critical investment in human capital and a practical vehicle for Education for Sustainable Development. Its multifaceted approach—building healthy bodies, fostering collaborative mindsets, and modeling sustainable behaviors—makes it indispensable for any nation serious about achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

To harness this potential, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Policy Reform and Implementation:** Governments must formulate and, crucially, fully implement national policies that mandate qualitative, daily PHE as a core subject from primary through secondary education. These policies must be integrated into broader national sustainability and health strategies.
2. **Strategic Funding:** Both governmental and non-governmental organizations must prioritize adequate funding for PHE. This includes investing in teacher training, curriculum development, and the creation of safe, accessible facilities and equipment.

3. **Administrative Support:** School administrators must be champions for PHE, recognizing its equal importance to other academic disciplines and ensuring that allocated time is respected and used effectively.

4. **Curriculum Alignment:** PHE curricula should be explicitly aligned with ESD objectives, incorporating lessons on sustainability, ethical consumption, and ecological stewardship into practical physical activities.

By taking these steps, nations can transform PHE from a marginalized subject into a cornerstone of sustainable national development, cultivating a generation that is not only healthier but also more equipped to build a sustainable future.

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