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## A Comparative Study of National Physical Education Curricula in Secondary Education in Japan and Cambodia

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### Abstract

This study conducted a comparative analysis of national physical education curricula at the secondary level in Japan and Cambodia, focusing on their written curricula. While the written curriculum serves as a foundational element for educational quality, existing international comparative data—such as the OECD (2019) report—have predominantly targeted middle- and high-income countries, with developing nations largely absent from the analysis. Cambodia represents a noteworthy case, as a resource-limited country that has developed its own physical education curriculum with international support, reflecting its cultural and social contexts. Therefore, using Bereday's three-stage comparative method (description, juxtaposition, comparison), the study examines official documents from both countries. Findings reveal structural similarities in curriculum goals and content areas, including an emphasis on lifelong sports participation and social competencies. Conversely, some distinctive characteristics of Cambodia's curriculum became evident through differences observed in comparison with Japan. These include the curriculum revision policy informed by alignment with ASEAN frameworks and the incorporation of bokator, an indigenous martial art, in the martial arts content areas. These differences suggest that Cambodia's written curriculum reflects contextual characteristics shaped by the country's unique cultural background and constraints in educational resources. Since this study focused exclusively on a comparison of written curricula, future research should explore other dimensions—such as the taught curriculum and the learned curriculum—in order to further clarify the specific features of Cambodia's curriculum in actual teaching and learning contexts.

**Keywords:** Physical Education; Comparative Curriculum Analysis; National Curriculum; Written Curriculum; Sport for Development

### 1. Introduction

The "written curriculum," including the national curriculum, forms a critical foundation for ensuring the quality of education (Glatthorn et al., 2019). To address the lack of internationally comparable data on written curricula, the OECD (2019) conducted a structured questionnaire survey targeting educational authorities in 18 countries and regions, mainly from Europe and North America. These agencies were asked to respond with reference to their national physical education curriculum documents, which revealed significant differences in the definitions and positioning of physical and health education. While this survey provided useful insights for comparative curriculum studies, its focus was limited to middle- and high-income countries, and it did not sufficiently include developing countries such as those in Southeast Asia or Africa. In developing countries, structural constraints such as teacher shortages and a lack of teaching materials and facilities—along with differences in educational systems and cultural factors—have also been identified as challenges (Hardman, 2008). Therefore, understanding how written curricula are designed and function in resource-limited countries and regions is an important perspective for grasping the realities of educational policy in developing contexts.

Among such resource-limited contexts, Cambodia is a noteworthy case for international comparative research on physical education curricula. While receiving international support in the field of physical education, Cambodia has developed curricula adapted to its own cultural and social context. Whitley et al. (2022) point out that when program developers fail to account for local contexts in sport education support, the effectiveness of those programs may be undermined. Following the collapse of its

education system under the Pol Pot regime, Cambodia has since independently developed a national curriculum for physical education that reflects its national context, while receiving international support from organizations such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the non-profit organization Hearts of Gold (HoG) (JICA, n.d.; HoG, 2021; Shibuya, 2024). Cambodia thus presents a valuable case that, despite its developing country status, has demonstrated how a national curriculum can be constructed while considering cultural and social realities. This offers important insights for other regions as well.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the characteristics of Cambodia's written curriculum by comparing the national physical education curricula of Japan and Cambodia. Specifically, it seeks to identify the distinctive features of Cambodia's curriculum as shaped in response to its national context and constraints as a developing country.

## 2. Methods

To compare written curricula at the national level, this study analyzed the Commentary on the Course of Study for Physical Education published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT, 2018, 2019) and the National Curriculum documents of Cambodia (MoEYS, 2016, 2018). The analysis employed the four-stage comparative method proposed by Bereday (1964), consisting of description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison. Following the precedent set by Park and Murata (2013), the interpretation stage was omitted, and a three-stage approach (description, juxtaposition, comparison) was adopted. In the description stage, core information about each country's physical education curriculum was systematically extracted. In the juxtaposition stage, a common analytical framework was established based on the components of the written curriculum proposed by Glatthorn et al. (2019) and the approach of Park and Murata (2013), focusing on (1) the fundamental policy of curriculum revision, (2) curriculum goals, and (3) content areas. This framework was then used for the comparative analysis.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The comparison revealed several commonalities and differences between the two countries.

Regarding the fundamental policies of curriculum revision, Japan emphasized developing competencies to respond to social transformations such as population aging and technological advancement, specifically within the context of Society 5.0. Cambodia, on the other hand, introduced a phased learning approach informed by 21st-century skills and alignment with ASEAN frameworks, reflecting its goals of educational and economic development. Both countries emphasized human resource development in collaboration with society amid rapid social change, whereas Japan's curriculum additionally reflected its demographic context of population aging.

In terms of curriculum goals, both countries explicitly emphasized lifelong sports participation and health promotion. They also shared a focus on cultivating competencies such as attitude and social skills. Japan's lower- and upper-secondary curriculum in health and physical education is organized around three pillars: "knowledge and skills," "abilities to think, make judgments and express themselves," and "motivation to learn and humanity" (MEXT, 2018, 2019). Cambodia's lower-secondary PE curriculum specifies four pedagogical competencies—attitude, knowledge, skill, and cooperation—while the upper-secondary curriculum reorganizes these into three components: knowledge, skill, and attitude. Elements of collaborative learning are explicitly assessed under the "cooperation" competency at lower-secondary level and implicitly through the "attitude" domain in upper-secondary PE (MoEYS 2016, 2018).

Park & Murata (2013) distinguish two contrasting structures for PE content: Korea's value-based framework and Japan's sport-discipline approach. Japan and Cambodia likewise employ a seven-content-areas structure grounded in a sport-discipline approach. However, specific content varies. For example, in the area of martial arts, Japan includes traditional disciplines such as judo and kendo, whereas Cambodia incorporates bokator, a traditional martial art, and taekwondo.

Overall, both countries' written curricula share many structural features. However, differences such as Cambodia's emphasis on ASEAN alignment and the inclusion of bokator in the martial arts content area exemplify characteristics of its national curriculum. These features suggest that Cambodia's curriculum construction has been shaped in accordance with its cultural and social context, as supported by previous research (Shibuya, 2024).

## 4. Conclusion

This study compared the national physical education curricula for secondary education in Japan and Cambodia, identifying both similarities and differences. While there were many shared structures in terms of curriculum goals and content areas, distinct differences were found in specific contents. These differences reflect characteristics unique to Cambodia's national context, such as cultural identity and educational resource constraints. Although this study was limited to a comparison of the written curricula, future research should extend the analysis to other curriculum forms defined by Glatthorn et al. (2019), such as the taught curriculum and the learned curriculum, to further elucidate the characteristics of Cambodia's curriculum in actual educational settings.

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