

# Experiential Learning in a Canadian Physical Education Class: A Comparative Perspective from Pre-service PE Teachers in Canada and China

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## Highlights

- This article focuses on a comparative analysis of traditional Physical Education games and experiential learning on the part of teacher candidates enrolled in an Ontario Faculty of Education and one in Southwest China.
- Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) partnership grant for research on Reciprocal Learning between Canada and China, the researchers conducted a qualitative study interviewing ten teacher candidates from the reciprocal Faculties of Education.
- Emergent themes included risk-taking and resilience, willingness to implement foreign practices, division of sport-related skills, and daily physical activity (DPA).
- Findings suggest that DPA is overlooked in Canadian classrooms; Chinese teachers are more likely to implement foreign practices, and skills development in traditional PE games is disparate between Canada and China.

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## Keywords

Canadian, Chinese, daily physical activity, games comparison, pedagogy, physical education

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## Introduction

Reciprocal learning projects (RLPs) in schools are proven to be beneficial as both parties “can benefit from participating in networks in many ways, such as learning new organizational forms of education, new teaching and learning strategies, justifications of the new knowledge, informal leadership and educational innovations” (Huang, 2016, p. 14). The unique perspective of this specific RLP between the University of Windsor in Canada and Southwest Normal University in China helped field an inquiry into experiential learning of preservice teachers in both Canada and China while investigating the nature of physical education (PE) in both countries.

The lack of accessible and relevant data in the Western Hemisphere surrounding Chinese PE activities is especially concerning. The field of research investigated in this article shines a light on traditional Chinese PE activities through a comparison to traditional Canadian games. For this study, we will define traditional as common and long-established (Lexico, n.d). This unique comparison of Chinese and Canadian PE demonstrates the broad range of games in the profession and analyzes the differences in qualities of the two countries’ practices.

The growing statistics of childhood obesity in Canada and the Western world exhibits an expanding need for new practices. The contrasting lower (but still growing) rates of child obesity in China may present a valuable opportunity to examine their PE practices. Also, this article explores the perceived lack of resilience in Canadian children. The Chinese participants are also asked about resilience in their students, and connections are made concerning the rationale of traditional PE activities.

This article may give education practitioners insight into the strengths and weaknesses of both Chinese and Canadian PE systems while providing a unique perspective from preservice teachers. Policymakers and government officials in both educational boards can benefit from either country’s respective policies and curriculum mandates outlined in this study. At the same time, teachers can add games and general principles of PE into their professional repertoire.

## Literature review

The purpose and definition of PE differs across the world. However, the 2016 *Curriculum and Teaching* study found that globally “PE has been influenced by two philosophies: (1) body viewed

as an object; and (2) the view of the whole person; body, mind, spirit, and well-being” (Lynch & Soukup, 2016, p. 3).

While specific definitions of PE have evolved differently around the world, this article will compare and analyze the unique perspectives of the Canadian and Chinese curriculum. In both Chinese and Canadian school systems, PE has merged with health education to encompass both health and physical education (HPE) as one subject (“HPE,” 2015; Jin, 2013). The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China (2004) defines the basic task of HPE as:

Promot[ing] development of students’ physical and psychological health, and improve their physique to help students acquire basic PE knowledge and cultivate capabilities and habits in physical exercises to upgrade students’ skills in sports and to train reserve sports talents for the country to carry out moral education and help students develop a sense of discipline and spirits of courage, bravery, and progress-making. (p. 1)

This Chinese explanation of PE differs significantly from the Canadian interpretations; however, as Canada chooses to govern education provincially, there are multiple definitions of PE.

For this study’s purpose, we will use the PE definition and corresponding curriculum documents of the study location, Ontario. The Ontario government describes PE as attributing the following skills upon completion of the program: “benefit[s] students throughout their lives and help[s] them to thrive in an ever-changing world. Students will acquire physical and health literacy, and develop the comprehension, capacity, and commitment needed to lead healthy, active lives and to promote the benefits of healthy, active living” (“The Revised H&PE Curriculum,” 2015).

Both the Chinese and the Ontario definitions similarly depict the importance of PE literacy/knowledge and physical health. However, while the Chinese government places more of an emphasis on sports and moral development, the Ontario definition places significance on lifelong physical activity.

The emphasis of sports is recognized by the General Administration of Sport in China, which promotes the development of PE from elementary to college levels through a well-organized curriculum, which includes annual athletic competitions at various levels (Tsai & Zhou, 2017). This is unique to China, as, in Canada, there are no competitions for PE in school settings.

Additionally, the Chinese standards for HPE include expectations on movement forms, knowledge, fitness, individual responsibility, lifestyle, participation, communication and cooperation, and attitude (Liang et al., 2005). This differs from Ontario’s HPE fundamental principles, which prioritize developing movement skills and concepts, movement strategies, understanding health concepts, making healthy choices and connections, safety, physical fitness, and active participation (“HPE,” 2015).

This article focuses on the experiential learning of the RLP between China and Canada. This literature review will explore emergent themes in PE through a Canadian and Chinese context.

### *Resiliency*

One specific theme explored in this study is resilience. This theme is emphasized within the Chinese definition of HPE as the government describes promoting “courage and bravery” (“Physical Education in China,” 2004) within its PE curriculum. This differs from the Ontario government’s definition of PE, which does not mention resiliency. However, the Ontario government recognizes the significance and has numerous online resources and connections to the curriculum (Armstrong, 2018; “HPE,” 2015).

The differences in student resiliency between China and Canada were demonstrated in a 2017 study that supported the Chinese government’s serious foundation of resilience in schools and found that “compared to Western peers, Chinese students reported higher mean levels of buoyancy and adaptability” (Li et al., p. 924).

### *Willingness to implement foreign practice*

Another theme examined in this study is the willingness to implement the foreign practice. Social scientist Huang found that throughout his RLP, Shanghai teachers had more reflections of pedagogy than Canadian teachers (2018), showing that they spent more time reflecting on their experiences than the Canadian participants. Additionally, the majority of Canadian teachers in this study prioritized exporting the Canadian method of teaching rather than learning from their Chinese peers (Huang, 2018), highlighting the willingness to share rather than learn from their RLP partners.

### *Division of skills*

Another difference examined in this study is the division of skills taught in standard PE games in both Canada and China. The government of China lists the basic elements of PE as “fundamental motor skills, athletics, games, gymnastics, martial arts, and other traditional sports” (Kajanus, 2016, p. 6). In contrast, Ontario lists a more general approach to teaching skills “the movement competence needed to participate in a range of physical activities, through opportunities to develop movement skills and to apply movement concepts and strategies in games, sports, dance, and various other physical activities” (“HPE,” 2015).

### *Daily physical activity (DPA)*

The last theme explored in this article is the differences in DPA. The World Health Organization maintains that “children and youth aged 5–17 should accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate-to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily” (“Physical activity and young people,” 2015).

In China, there is a policy mandating “time must be allocated for students to participate in physical activities every day to meet national fitness standards” (Liang et al., 2005, p. 15), which is usually formatted as a calisthenics program where students line up every morning and perform exercises to music (Kajanus, 2016). Although this mandate was put in place in 1995, in 2016, the National Physical Activity Survey by the General Administration of Sport of China reported that “only 33.2% of sampled Chinese children and adolescents aged 6–19 years participated in PA at least seven times per week” (Xu & Gao, 2018, p. 120).

Similarly to China, the Ontario government has implemented a policy that ensures that elementary children have a minimum of 20 min of vigorous and moderate physical activity each school day (Government of Ontario, 2017). Not unlike China, in 2016, “40% of [Canadian] children and youth aged 5 to 17 met the physical activity target” (Clarke, 2019). A separate article found that only 50% of Canadian teachers reported fidelity to the policy at a classroom level (Allison et al., 2016).

## **Methodology**

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences between Chinese and Canadian PE systems through a broad comparison of traditional PE games.

### *Method*

This study was conducted at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. It was collected as part of the SSHRC partnership grant between Ontario, Canada, and Southwest China. Data were collected and analyzed using Yin’s (2011) case study design. This design was used to examine the difference between traditional Chinese and Canadian PE activities and their distinct implementation in the classroom. To further the understanding of the case study, data were collected using face-to-face interviews and written questionnaires.

### *Participants*

*Canadian PE teacher candidates.* Five current bachelor of education students at the University of Windsor who are enrolled in Prof. Ryan Essery’s HPE Teachable class were asked to participate in a face-to-face interview (Table A1) with researcher Sydney Hector. Of the invited five participants, all five volunteered to participate in the study and complete the interview.

*Chinese RLP participants.* Five Chinese RLP participants (pre-service teachers) who participated in Prof. Ryan Essery’s HPE Teachable class were invited to participate in this study through an email invitation. Of the invited group, all five volunteered to participate in the research study and submit written answers to a questionnaire (Table A2).

## *Procedure*

This research initiative took place throughout two academic terms, from September 2019 to March 2020. Both the Chinese and Canadian research participants were enrolled in a University of Windsor PE class, occurring every Wednesday night from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. The Canadian games in this study were taken from this class's assignment, requiring students to present games of low organization (GLO). Many of these GLO's are taken from Canadian resources (OPHEA and CanFit Pro), as well as personal experience. These games were presented and recorded in early November 2019.

The Chinese participants were contacted in January 2020, and each was asked to send four traditionally Chinese PE activities. Additionally, they were asked to answer a short questionnaire and email it back completed with a signed consent form. All results for the Chinese participants were gathered by early February 2020.

The Canadian participants were initially contacted in early January 2020. They were asked to participate in a face-to-face interview where they answered a predetermined questionnaire and signed a consent form. All interviews were conducted and reported by mid-February 2020.

## *Ethical considerations*

The Research Ethics Board approved this study under the umbrella of the Ontario, Canada–Southwest China RLP. Participant contributions are respected and portrayed as initially recorded. Participant names and information remain confidential, and as informed, participants could leave the study at any time.

## *Limitations*

This study's lack of sample size is a limitation for generalizability. There were only five participants from Canada and China, and this sample size is not representative of the entire Canadian or Chinese teaching population. Therefore, we cannot generalize these results.

## **Research findings**

### *Introduction*

The following themes emerged from the data: resilience and risk-taking in games, willingness to implement the foreign practice, division of sports skills, and DPA in PE activity. The themes appeared consistent through the comparative games analysis, face-to-face interviews, and written questionnaires.

### *Emergent themes*

*Resilience and risk-taking.* The Chinese participants generally commented that the Canadian games placed more emphasis on safety. Chinese Subject 1 commented: "Firstly, when you design a game,

you need to consider the safety of the game. I think the [Canadian] physical teacher does very well in this way.” When the same subject was asked about how traditional Chinese games incorporate taking risks, they said that in Chinese games, “maybe there will be some safety problems in running, jumping or playing together.” These comments demonstrate the subject’s perceived difference in safety accommodations in Canadian and Chinese PE classes.

The lack of emphasis on safety might be a by-product of taking risks and building resilience in Chinese PE classes. Chinese Subject 2 commented on the cultivation of resilience in Chinese students:

In Chinese sports games, it is a long-term pursuit to cultivate students’ tenacious character. To achieve the purpose of education, there are generally the following methods: students’ self-regulation, students’ teamwork, mutual encouragement, teachers’ help, and encouragement. We will also design some games to cultivate students’ ability to overcome difficulties.

This Chinese participant reinforces the idea that resilience is valued in Chinese culture and teachers design activities specifically in mind for students to improve their character. This differs from some of the Canadian participants’ perspective of resilience and risk-taking in Canadian PE classes.

Canadian Subject 1 mentioned, “I think in some cases, gym teachers in Canada try to avoid risks. Because at the end of the day, they are liable and they’re in an authority position.” Canadian Subject 2 also reiterated the idea that resilience is passed over in Canadian PE classes when they mentioned “those students that struggle with PE classes are just being active. I don’t think it builds resiliency for them if anything affects their self-esteem more because they can’t do something.” Of the five Canadian participants, three mentioned safety and liability as a preventing factor in building resilience in their PE classes.

*Willingness to implement foreign practice.* Overall, the Chinese participants were more receptive to foreign games than the Canadians were. All five Chinese participants said that yes, they would implement the Canadian games they learned in class into their practice. Chinese Subject 2 elaborated, “of course, I will integrate these games into my teaching practice in the future, but not all of them. I will choose some that are more suitable for Chinese children to play.” This “suitability” may refer to this participant’s earlier acknowledgment that Chinese games place an “emphasis on the effect of physical exercise.” In contrast, the Canadian games “pay more attention to let students experience the fun.”

Chinese Subject 3 contributed to the discussion, answering, “Games is a way to make the class better, so the answer is yes.” This participant also mentioned that in traditional Chinese PE classes, “mostly, the teacher will design some unitive activities, like running, learning the gymnastics exercise” rather than sports. This participant’s willingness to implement a new philosophy of PE fits with previous research that found Chinese participants willing to learn and change their teaching practices based on their time working with the RLP (Huang, 2018).

The Canadian participants were less likely to implement Chinese games into their practice. Of the five participants, four said they likely wouldn't implement the Chinese dance into their teaching practice, and two said they wouldn't incorporate any of the games they learned. Canadian Subject 3 discussed why:

I probably wouldn't implement that into my teaching practice just because I would imagine a lot of the students that I've worked with wouldn't necessarily be willing to do that. They would kind of just tell you this looks stupid I don't really feel comfortable with it . . . They wouldn't really feel comfortable so they wouldn't do it, but I definitely do like the idea of having some sort of physical activity in the morning before class, so maybe I can incorporate that just in a different way.

Canadian Subject 4 added to this idea, "I think I would find it very hard to get the kids in the Canadian school as organized and lined up to do the same thing at the exact same time. I don't know if they would. I think it would be hard to organize them in that way." This quote shows the reluctance of the Canadian teacher to incorporate Chinese games because of the perceived students' unwillingness to participate. This supports Huang's assertion that Canadians are more willing to export their knowledge than implement foreign practice (Huang, 2018).

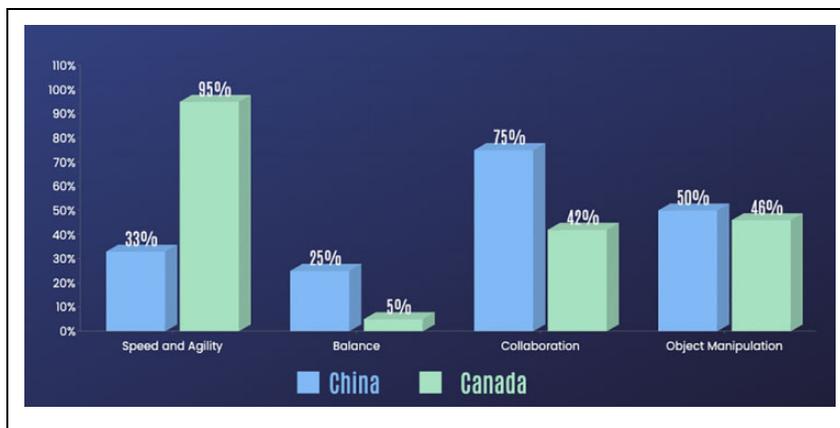
*Division of sport-related skills.* Overall, the Canadian PE games incorporated games focused primarily on agility and speed, while the Chinese PE games placed more of an emphasis on balance and collaboration. None of the 12 Chinese games submitted involved balls for equipment. Instead, they involved forms of equipment that are not typically used in sport settings, examples stated by the participants included handkerchiefs, bean bags, rings, and rope. The percentage of skills-related games is displayed in Figure 1.

This figure demonstrates the difference in the types of physical skills that PE classes in Canada and China promote. The statistics show significant differentiation in the percentage of games involving speed and agility, with Canadian games incorporating that skill in 95% of their submitted games, compared to 30% in Chinese games. The Chinese games incorporated more balance and collaboration than the Canadian games, and object manipulation was remarkably similar.

### **Canadian DPA**

In early October 2019, the Chinese participants demonstrated the Chinese government's mandated morning calisthenics (daily dance) program to the Canadian participants. The dance is comparable to the Canadian DPA because it is a physical activity performed every day on school premises. Canadian Subject 5 articulated the differences between DPA between the two countries:

I think that many times my teacher would let us outside and run around for a little bit, or he would have us do jumping jacks or running in the spot. I don't know much I remember was very just kind of our dance and music; it was just kind of not as structured. And from what I can see from the daily Chinese dance. It was much more structured. Everyone had to participate. Practice coordination.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of PE games that utilize various fundamental skills.

Canadian Subject 2 also mentioned the lack of structure and participation in Canadian DPA:

I also think daily physical activity is a little bit overlooked in the Canadian education system. Some teachers just aren't qualified and don't end up doing it or don't do it for the full time that they're expected to do it. It seemed like the Chinese dance is done pretty strictly and regularly.

The theme of DPA being overlooked in Canadian education was brought up in all five Canadian interviews. The Canadian teachers seemed to respect the Chinese dance and value it; however, their attitude to implement it into their practice was apprehensive.

### **Conclusion**

Findings suggest that DPA is overlooked in Canadian classrooms, and more research should be conducted to ascertain the degree to which DPA is implemented in Chinese classrooms. Further data support Huang's assertion that Chinese teachers are more likely to implement foreign practice than Canadian teachers, in this case, due to the Canadian teacher candidates' perceived unwillingness of the students to participate. More research should be conducted to examine the behavior of Canadian students versus Chinese students in a PE setting and teacher control of the classroom. This study's findings supported Li et al.'s (2017) argument that Chinese students are more resilient than their Western counterparts, in contrast to a Canadian context hindered by liability concerns. Finally, the types of skills explored in traditional PE games are disparate of Canada and China. Future research can explore more in-depth about types of games and activities in typical PE classes through this variation of skills lens.

### **Contributorship**

Sydney Hector was the primary author of this research. She was a paid Research Assistant and Teacher Candidate with the Canadian Faculty of Education. A SSHRC partnership grant funded the study. Geri Salinitri was the supervisor for the research and taught Sydney how to conduct qualitative research along

with the interview process and data analysis. In addition, Geri reviewed and edited the paper and added any necessary components to complete the article.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Questionnaire for Canadian participants.

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1. Please describe the games you learned from the Chinese students.
  2. How are these games different from traditionally Canadian games?
  3. What did you learn from these games?
  4. Will you implement them into your teaching practice?
  5. How or how not do Canadian games incorporate taking risks?
  6. How or how not do traditionally Canadian games build resilience?
  7. In your experience, what is the difference between DPA in Canada and the daily Chinese dance you practiced in class?
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Note. DPA = daily physical activity.

**Table A2.** Questionnaire for Chinese participants.

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1. How are the Canadian games you learned in a class different from traditionally Chinese games?
  2. What did you learn from these games?
  3. Will you implement them into your teaching practice?
  4. How (or how not) do traditionally Chinese games incorporate taking risks?
  5. How (or how not) do traditionally Chinese games build resilience?
  6. What did you learn in general from the Canadian physical education class?
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