

Sport: Assessment Aspects at School

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Abstract

The importance of motor and sports education within the school context seems to be now a consolidated reality at European level, due to its importance in the individual's overall educational growth. The purpose of this contribution is to analyze the main dynamics that influence the school aspect of the student's assessment in this discipline, in order to identify the key determinants for his educational development.

Keywords: *Sports Education, Didactic Assessment, School System, Educational Development.*

Introduction

During childhood and youth, sports education practice at school offers an excellent opportunity to learn about and put into practice skills that can improve physical fitness and health throughout life. These activities, for example, may include running, swimming, cycling, as well as more structured games and sports. The early acquisition of basic skills is essential to help young people exercise and better understand the value of these activities during subsequent education stages, or at work or in their leisure time once become adults. Sports education, however, is not limited to physical skills and has only a recreational function. Participating in many physical activities allows learning about and fully understanding principles and concepts, such as game rules, fair play and respect, tactical and body awareness, and developing social awareness related to personal interaction and team commitment in many sports. Goals beyond the scope of motor and sports education, such as good health, healthy personal development and social inclusion, make it more important to include this subject in school curricula. The social value of sports education has also been reiterated in various documents of the European Commission. In its White Paper on Sport, the Commission pointed out that the time devoted to sport at school, during sports education classes or during extracurricular activities, can provide considerable benefits from the point of view of education and health. The EU Guidelines on the "Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity" called for specific attention to be paid to physical and mental health problems caused by decreased motor and sports activity among young people, and by the concomitant spread of sedentary lifestyles and obesity. According to the aforementioned guidelines, up to a 80% of school-age children practice physical and sports activity exclusively at school, while they should practice at least one hour (at moderate intensity) per day. Spending sufficient time on practicing sport and physical activity at school, within the formal curriculum or during extracurricular activities, can make a decisive contribution to promoting healthier lifestyles. The assessment aspect of this discipline in the school context appears to be of fundamental interest, in order to guarantee a high level of educational development for the students. In this regard, the main characteristics of the assessment dynamics in the whole European school context will be outlined.

Sports Education in School Systems: international state of the art

All European countries recognize the importance of sports education at school. The subject is part of all the main curricula and is mandatory in primary and lower secondary education throughout Europe. The states also emphasize the fact that practicing physical activity and sport is a healthy way of spending free time. About half of the education systems have adopted national strategies to promote sports education and physical activity, while two thirds of them have implemented large-scale initiatives. This clearly reflects the political will to develop and encourage these activities, by turning them into an educational, social well-being and health factor. The guidelines on sports education include the students' physical, personal and social development among the main goals of the subject. Health and a healthy lifestyle are often highlighted among the national goals and the learning outcomes of sports education, while health education, in some states, is a stand-alone discipline. In some countries, some sports education activities are mandatory; in others the schools are free to choose which activities to propose. Only in a few countries both compulsory activities and school autonomy can be observed. As for the recommendations on the minimum school hours for teaching sports education, there are considerable differences among countries. In general, teaching time varies only during compulsory education and amounts to around 50/80 hours per year. This amount has remained almost unchanged over the last 5 years, but when compared to the school hours assigned to other subjects it still appears to be relatively low. In general, it represents less than a 10% of the total teaching time or about a 10% of the hours assigned to mathematics. Almost all countries evaluate personal achievements and progress in sports education, although in the first years of school the assessment does not end with marks allocation. In primary and lower secondary education, both formative and summative assessment methods are used, but the latter is slightly more widespread. The marks allocation system used is generally the same used for other compulsory subjects. Malta, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England and Wales) and Iceland have created performance scales to assess the outcomes achieved in sports education at national level. In France, a new national assessment scale was tested for the first time during the 2012/13 school year: this type of standardized tool has a dual purpose as it supports the teachers' assessment activity, and establishes a reference framework based on which comparisons of the learning outcomes at national level can be performed. As for sports education teachers, the subject is taught by specialist or generalist teachers in primary level schools, and in many countries, the decision to use one professional figure or the other is up to the schools. At lower secondary level, however, there are generally sports education specialist teachers. As far as qualifications are concerned, at primary level, specialist teachers usually hold a Bachelor's degree, while at lower secondary level, the number of countries requiring a first level higher education diploma is almost equivalent to those requiring second level higher education diplomas (Master's degree). Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities in sports education are available not only for specialized teachers in the subject, but also for general and specialist teachers from other disciplines. This favors a trans-curricular approach to sports education and promotes the regular inclusion of physical activity in other disciplines.

Sports education is taught during everyday teaching time. Extracurricular activities integrate or extend the sphere of physical activities. They often focus on competitions and other events organized by schools and school clubs or in partnership with other bodies. An interesting change in the conception of sports competitions can be found in Greece and Finland, with their attempt to highlight the value of participation rather than that of competition. Both countries report that it is important to motivate the students, but that they must also be able to appreciate the simple pleasure and satisfaction resulting from sports practice. Furthermore, these events are designed to fight against violence and bullying. Many countries try to introduce more

physical activities into daily school routines, and to make students practice them throughout the day, during breaks and even on their way to school. Many European contexts are designing reforms concerning sports education; for example, Portugal and Finland intend to raise directly the profile of physical activities by expanding the minimum school hours allocated to the discipline, while Greece and Hungary aim at diversifying the range of physical activities organized at school. The national reforms are also proposed to improve the conditions for teaching the discipline, and to promote the training of teachers.

The determinants of the Student's Didactic Assessment at European level

In all European countries, students' participation, progress and development in sports education are monitored and assessed regularly throughout the school year. Assessment methods, however, vary depending on the country and level of education. The summative and formative methods are the most widely used. Therefore, the aim is to describe the assessment tools developed at central level specifically for sports education, to check whether the outcomes obtained by the students in the subject are included in the assessment sheets on their general progress at the end of each school year, and if the countries organize national tests in the discipline. Sports education is compulsory both at primary and lower secondary levels, in the educational systems of all major European countries. In most of them, the progress made by students in the subject is assessed like for any other discipline. Only in some countries, students are required to attend classes without being subject to a formal assessment. This happens in Malta and Norway in primary level schools, while in Ireland there is no formal assessment neither at primary nor secondary level.

Most European countries issue clear recommendations on the methods to be used for the assessment of sports education at school. However, in Belgium and Iceland, educational institutions are free to apply their own assessment methods.

The formative assessment is mainly qualitative and descriptive, i.e. it is expressed verbally or in writing form. It takes into account students' learning outcomes and performance over a given period of time, as well as their further margins for improvement. On the other hand, summative assessment is generally expressed in marks by means of numbers or letters, at the conclusion of certain tasks or tests during a given period of time. Marks are usually based on scales which range, for example, from 1 to 10 or from 'A' to 'E', in most cases used for all subjects in the curriculum.

Although half of the countries use both formative and summative assessment for the outcomes achieved in sports education at both levels examined, the summative assessment is slightly more widespread. Some countries, such as Bulgaria, Germany, France, Austria and Croatia, use exclusively this method in both primary and lower secondary education, while Denmark and the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) only use formative assessment for both levels. Formative assessment is used more often for primary and lower secondary levels. In many of the countries that use summative assessment for primary education, no marks are allocated in the first years of this level. This happens in Greece, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia. In these years, the formative assessment is generally used, subsequently combined with the summative one. As already noted, summative assessment tends to employ marks that can be used in all other disciplines of the curriculum. It is not uncommon for schools to develop specific assessment tools for sports education, in order to assess the learning outcomes achieved in the subject as more accurately as possible. These are typically made up of scales containing a list of sports activities, descriptions of learning outcomes, expected performance and the corresponding marks to be used in the assessment.

Some countries have created assessment scales at central level, in order to assess the outcomes achieved in sports education in a uniform way across the country, and to make national comparisons. Furthermore, in a limited number of countries, assessment scales are developed for particular activities of the sports education curriculum. This, for example, is the case of Slovenia and Iceland, where swimming is assessed differently from other sports practiced during sports education classes in compulsory education.

In most countries, students receive a final assessment report at the end of each year, which includes the outcomes achieved in sports education along with those achieved in other subjects. However, in Lithuania, the annual reports refer to sports education only at primary level, while in Estonia and Cyprus only at lower secondary level. Moreover, in some countries, the final assessment of sports education is not reported in the annual sheets, but on certificates issued to students at the end of lower secondary education. For example, this is the case of France, Finland and Iceland. National sports education tests are rarely held in Europe. In Slovenia, however, sports education was chosen as the subject for a national exam held in lower secondary level schools in 2009.

Peculiarities of the Assessment Approach in different European contexts

Here below some specific features that discriminate the approach of different European countries in the student's assessment phase structure, in relation to the discipline of sports education in the school context:

- In Ireland, although there is no legal obligation to carry out assessments in physical education, lower secondary level schools are required to inform parents about their child's progress and participation in physical education classes. Furthermore, teachers must employ assessment practices in their teaching activity.
- In Cyprus, in lower secondary education schools, the formative assessment is based on the following criteria: progress made over a given period of time (50%); active and positive participation in physical education classes (30%); attitudes of students towards physical education and physical exercise practiced for health and sports reasons (20%).
- In Spain, the students' learning process in physical education is assessed regularly. Lower secondary education takes into account aspects like: adoption of healthy habits, ability to put into practice what has been learned, level of expectations towards oneself, ability to overcome difficulties, development of physical skills, teamwork, collective development, participation in sports activities, involvement, commitment, creativity, theoretical and practical knowledge, and essential skills.
- In Slovenia, in primary and lower secondary education schools, teachers monitor the students' physical, motor and functional development, as well as their mastery of different sports skills throughout the school year and at all stages of the learning process. Participation in extracurricular activities and personal sports performance in physical education are assessed during classes, and in school competitions (or other types of competitions). In addition, schools assess swimming at least twice: first during the second or third year, and then in the sixth year. Students are assessed on the basis of a scale that specifies the swimming skills levels, and ranges from 0 to 8.
- In Greece, in lower secondary education, physical education teachers assess students during courses or by making them undergo short physical skills tests. The time taken for the tests must be as short as possible in order not to take time reserved for the teaching activity. The scale used to assess personal performance in each subject ranges from 1 to 20. The annual mark in physical education results from the average of the marks obtained in the three semesters.

- France has a national reference framework for the skills to be acquired in physical education at primary level, but has no corresponding assessment scales for physical activities. Therefore, every school develops its own assessment criteria based on the sports activities practiced within the institution.
- In Malta, educational objectives and learning outcomes are established for every physical activity, such as athletics, dance, fitness and gymnastics. Every objective is divided into 10 skill levels, described and used to assess students in the subject.
- In Sweden, the skills to be acquired in physical education, within the term of two particular education phases (the end of the sixth and ninth years) are established. Moreover, the skill levels to be reached are set and the related marks (from "A" to "E") are indicated for each of the phases taken into consideration.
- In the United Kingdom (England and Wales), the guidelines on the curriculum contain descriptions of the levels (from 1 to 8) and provide a basis for summary judgments on students' performance, normally issued at the end of each key stage (at the end of the second and sixth years). Descriptions make it possible to formulate judgments based on learning objectives, and indicate the type and range of benefits that the students of a particular level must be able to produce in a certain period of time.
- In Iceland, swimming is assessed very accurately throughout compulsory education (years 1-10) through skill tests held at the end of each school year, i.e. when students should have acquired certain skills.

Conclusions

The importance of sports education in the school context is no longer questioned to date, although the time dedicated to it is still unsatisfactory to guarantee the development of the educational benefits that this discipline is potentially able to provide. The presence of this teaching activity is now a fixed point of the educational offer of the main school contexts at European level, and a crucial point in the analysis of the effectiveness of the various didactic proposals is certainly the way in which a student is assessed. This contribution highlighted the main aspects that characterize the assessment phase in the various European educational systems, pointing out some peculiarities that make them different from each other. In this way, this work is proposed as a basis for future research hints aimed at investigating, from an empirical point of view, the different levels of effectiveness in terms of didactic and pedagogical value of the different sports education assessment schemes in the European educational system.

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