

THE ROLE OF SPORT IN EDUCATION

I. GENERAL ASPECTS

This report intends to mainly deal with school sport and "physical education" (PE). Physical education means a statutory area of the school curriculum, concerned with developing pupils' physical competences and confidence, and their ability to use these to perform in a range of activities. PE is concerned with learning the skills, developmentally appropriate conditional abilities and understanding required for participation in physical activities, knowledge of one's own body and its range of and capacity for movement and health conscious lifelong physical activities.

In contrast, "sport" has a much broader meaning and is a highly diversified social phenomenon, encompassing various forms of physical activity from high-level competition through school, club or community organised programmes to spontaneous and informal physical activity.

School is the ideal setting to promote physical activity and positive attitude towards regular physical activities. Children and adolescents from all social backgrounds are present on a regular basis for at least eleven years of their waking life. School, in general, has also a primary function as a place of learning. Early learning experiences are crucial to continuing involvement in physical activity and a child's experience of curricular and extracurricular opportunities in school is extremely important.

However, at present, it is often said that school is not delivering on its potentials when it comes to promoting physical activity. Hence, the central question is not whether physical education in school is useful or not, the question is: **what conditions are necessary for physical education to have beneficial outcomes?** This is the question this report is dealing with¹.

Health issues

The rising prevalence of obesity across Europe, particularly among young people, is alarming and is a major public health concern. The number of EU children affected by overweight and obesity is estimated to be rising by more than 400,000 a year, adding to the 14 million-plus of the EU population who are already overweight (including at least 3 million obese children)²; across the entire EU27, overweight affects almost 1 in 4 children. Spain, Portugal and Italy report overweight and obesity levels exceeding 30% among children aged 7-11. The rates of the increase in childhood overweight and obesity vary, with England and Poland showing the steepest increases. In overall terms, children are less fit compared to the generation of the 1970s and 1980s. It is not such much a higher calorie intake that causes overweight, but physical inactivity: children do not eat more - they move less.

¹see also: Current situation and prospects for physical education in the European Union, study commissioned by the European Parliament. Author: Ken Hardman, University of Worcester, Brussels 2007.

² COM(2005)637 final, Green paper "Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases"

There is a strong tendency for excess weight to continue to accumulate from childhood through to middle age. It is therefore important to achieve an optimum body weight throughout life. Apart from the human suffering it causes, the economic consequences of the increasing incidence of obesity are considerable. It is estimated that in the EU obesity accounts for up to 7% of health care costs, and this amount will further increase given the rising obesity trends.

Furthermore a number of 'adult' conditions, such as osteoporosis and coronary heart diseases have their origin in childhood, and could be aided in part by regular physical activity in the early years

There is also fairly consistent evidence that regular activity can have a positive effect upon the psychological well-being of children and young people, in particular with regards to children's self esteem, especially in disadvantaged groups such as those with learning difficulties or low self-esteem.

Social competences, moral education, integration and crime reduction

Sport with its underlying concepts of 'fairness' and 'freedom' provides a rich context for the advancement of socio-moral development. Sport and physical education can offer an effective context within which personal and social responsibility can be furthered. It has been pointed out that there is a relationship between the participation in sport and physical activities and social relationships and social integration.

In modern societies young people are less able to fall back on enduring social ties than in the past. This renders social networks - including the school and the class - increasingly important. Exclusion from the group, social isolation, leads to extreme stress; conversely, integration is good for self-esteem. Physical education and sport in general are viewed as an important means of counteraction disintegrating trends because sport provides the chance to belong, to experience the 'we' feeling, community spirit and solidarity. Through sport, one appropriates the norms, values and skills that may be very useful in another context. There is even strong evidence that sport has a part to play in preventing crime, both in rehabilitation and crime prevention.

However, this depends to a large extent on how sport and physical education is taught and organised: also separation and marginalisation can be effects of sport!

II. PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

There are a number of problems surrounding physical education in the EU:

- **General orientation of physical education:** existing curricula often do not provide personally meaningful and socially relevant experiences and are contrary to societal trends and tendencies in out-of-school activities: there is an orientation towards sports-dominated competitive performance-related activity programmes. If physical education is to become an instrument to effectively combat obesity and overweight of children curricular elements which appeal to all groups of pupils need to be promoted. With computer games gaining ground as a preferred hobby of children, there is growing need for the endorsement of an active, healthy lifestyle among children and

young people. For these young population groups, the traditional content of PE has little relevance to their lifestyle;

- Physical education is at risk of **increased marginalisation** within the school day; over the last years the time allocated to PE across the EU has been gradually eroded: since 2002 time allocation has been reduced from 121 to 109 minutes per week for primary school, and from 117 to 101 minutes for secondary school³ - research recommends that children and adolescents perform some form of physical activity for 60 minutes every day! There are signs that the officially announced amount of PE in school does not correspond to the reality on the ground, as implementation does not meet with legal obligations or expectations. A reality check is necessary!
- Linked to the above issue there is **under-funding** of sport facilities; inadequate funding for facilities, equipment and their maintenance and teaching materials is particularly widespread in central, eastern and southern Europe; pupils with disabilities suffer even more the consequences of this lack of financial support.
- A closer look at the curricula of PE teachers in order to support quality **teacher education**, training and support is necessary. There needs to be competent and confident teaching staff which is capable of designing PE classes that respond to health issues and that motivate all children to participate. Effective and successful PE requires well-trained specialist PE teachers.
- There is a gap between PE in school and out-of-school and post-school activities. The **link between school and out-of school activities** could be strengthened.
- **Inclusion**: ethnic minorities have especially low rates of participation in sport activities. The problem of participation is arising already during school time; Muslim girls are an especially sensitive group in this respect. A similar pattern of restricted access is evident among disabled young people. Young people with disability are far less likely to take part in extra-curricular or out-of-school sporting activities.
- There is still a lack of **empirical data** in many areas related to sport, physical education and their effects on health and social trends.

III. RAPPORTEUR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

What measures can help to meet these challenges? There are several levels at which action should be taken:

1. Reforming school physical education

Underfunding should be addressed. The way sport and physical education facilities are financed needs to be better analysed. There could be made more use of the possibilities of sharing resources through improved coordination on a local level between schools, local administration and the sport world.

Coping with the task of improving the health situation of children within school implies a **curricular alliance for “active living”** of several disciplines, into which physical

³ see "Current situation and prospects for physical education in the European Union"

activity and sport should be integrated. In Finland this is done through health education that, at lower school level, covers the meaning of physical activity, self-care in daily life, including hygiene and nutrition, environmental and safety. At the upper level, self-care is extended to include mental health, sexual behaviour, attitudes towards drinking and prevention of common illnesses. In general, the standing of physical education in school curricula should be improved.

However, it is most unlikely that school education alone can resolve the problem of sedentariness⁴. There needs to be **multi-sectoral intervention strategy** between the various settings (home, school, sport or social club, community). To this end it is necessary to set up communal networks of education authorities, sports providers and other social institutions, including health care bodies and representatives of the food industry, with their efforts supported by all types of local media.

The **role of competition in physical education** needs to be reconsidered to a certain extent because the orientation towards performance in children is far from unproblematic. Research suggests that a premature accent on performance and the competitive aspects of sport is not beneficial to child development⁵. Furthermore, such an emphasis may prevent children from obtaining pleasure from sport at a young age. A less competitive approach would also more easily appeal to groups which otherwise would not be interested in physical activity, such as overweight and obese children.

2. Improving teacher education and training

Qualified teachers are a prerequisite to fight the disinterest of young people in PE at all levels of public education. Good teachers can more easily act as sports leaders and play an important role in motivating young people. A well-trained teacher is also more easily capable of integrating disabled children into the class.

The improvement of the recognition of qualifications should not be confined to school teachers but should involve all sport-related professions (e.g. sport coaches and sports managers) in order to assure better physical education for children in school and out-of-school.

3. Political initiatives at EU level

The European Year of Education through Sport in 2004 highlighted the possibilities that sport and physical education can offer as regards integration and public health. However, due to a missing **legal base in the treaties**, the European Commission is not in a position to give stronger support to existing activities in this area. In this respect a new treaty which includes a reference to sport would truly improve the situation.

Seeing the health and societal trends that are common to all EU member States the idea of formulating a **minimum European curriculum for physical education** should be explored. The Commission could discuss with the Member States criteria and standards for a physical education curriculum model, including a minimum time allocation that should contribute to an overall aim of 1 hour of daily physical activity for children. The

⁴ see also "Study on young people's lifestyles and sedentariness and the role of sport in the context of education and as a means of restoring the balance", Wolf-Dietrich Brettschneider, Roland Naul, Paderborn 2004

⁵ "Education through sport. An overview of Good Practices in Europe", Jan Janssen et al, S'Hertogenbosch 2004.

Council informal Working Groups together with the Commission should continue preparing physical activity guidelines.

The same goes for **physical education teachers' curricula**: the Bologna Declaration is leading to a progressive formal harmonisation of BA and MA certificates at Europe's universities and colleges. All academic courses leading to a degree in sport science or a teaching qualification in school physical education should include, for example, a module dealing with the causes and effects of a sedentary lifestyle and inclusion concepts so that students are given appropriate technical information and are properly qualified for their profession. The curriculum of the European Master programme in physical education should also take these elements into account.

The rapporteur supports the **European Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health**. This platform, initiated by the Commission in 2005, brings together relevant players active at European level that are willing to enter into binding and verifiable commitments aimed at halting and reversing current overweight and obesity trends. The objective of the Platform is to catalyse voluntary action across the EU by business, civil society and the public sector. Members of the Platform include the key EU-level representatives of the food, retail, catering, and advertising industries, consumer organisations and health NGOs. So far, education experts have been left out. This should be changed.

More **quality data** is needed in order to fully understand the situation of physical education in Europe, and its effects on the health and social development of children. The Commission should launch further studies in this area. Since there is no legal base to have a regular budget for sport related activities of the EU the European Parliament could reflect about a pilot scheme which allows for financing of such studies.

It is to be welcomed that the **new multi-annual programmes in the area of education and civil society** are "sport-compatible" and offer funding opportunities for activities in the area of sport. This is a valuable contribution to integration and cultural exchanges through sport.

The rapporteur supports the **Public Health Action Programme** of the EU but thinks that it is necessary to give more funding opportunities for projects that focus on the link between public health and education.

International initiatives of the EU

In general terms, the inclusion of third countries (beyond those which form already part) into the Bologna and Copenhagen process could also help in the area of PE teacher and sportspeople training and education. By allowing other countries to adopt the principles and standards set through these processes, recognition of qualifications would be facilitated.