

## *Current Trends in Teaching of Physical and Sports Education in Slovak Schools*

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The Barcelona Conference on Education 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Physical and sports education in schools represents a purposeful educational activity that contributes to increasing the physical fitness and movement performance of students, helps young people to acquire basic theoretical and practical physical education and create a positive relationship to physical activity throughout their lives. Despite its invaluable importance it faces many problems in Slovakia, e.g. children's laziness and lack of interest in movement not only during lessons but also in free time, unsatisfactory spatial and material equipment for teaching, insufficient scope of physical and sports education lessons, insufficient support from parents and family, low financial evaluation of teachers, unequal status of the subject among other teaching subjects, increasing number of non-exercising pupils and other. The paper deals with key issues related to the teaching of physical and sports education in Slovakia. It points to the importance of physical education and building children's relationship to sports and physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle and a prerequisite for the ability to take care of one's health throughout life, and characterizes physical education and sports activities in schools in 30 European countries. It also presents the results of research into the opinions of Slovak primary and secondary school teachers of physical and sports education focused on their view of teaching and selected problems of physical and sports education in Slovakia. In the final part, recommendations are proposed for the identified most serious problems of physical and sports education and the improvement of the teaching of this subject in Slovak schools.

Keywords: Physical Education, Sport, Teaching, Health, School

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## **Introduction**

Physical and sports education in schools represents a purposeful educational activity that contributes not only to increasing the physical fitness and movement performance of students but also helps young people to acquire basic theoretical and practical physical education and to create a permanent positive relationship to physical activity throughout their lives.

The general goal of physical and sports education as a teaching subject is to enable students to develop fitness and coordination skills at an appropriate level, to acquire, improve and consolidate movement habits and skills, to increase their movement literacy, to increase general movement performance and fitness, and through the physical activity performed to act and take care of health, create a permanent relationship to physical activity, physical education and sports with regard to their interests, prerequisites and individual needs as part of a healthy lifestyle and the assumption of the ability to take care of one's own health throughout life (Bebcakova, 2009).

The specific goals of physical and sports education are aimed at acquiring movement, cognitive, communication, learning, interpersonal and attitudinal competencies.

Never in history has there been a greater need to devote yourself to physical education and sports than it is now. Since the standard of living is constantly increasing and people are buying various new technologies that make their life or mobility easier, the natural activities that force people to move have significantly decreased. Often sports and outdoor movement are replaced by computer games, the Internet and social networks. The result of long-term sitting of children in front of computers is poor movement, imbalance of muscle groups and a wide range of painful conditions in the future. Lack of movement is one of the biggest problems of the 21st century.

Scientific knowledge and research unequivocally confirm the positive contribution of regular physical activities not only to the health of children but also to adults. That is why it is important that children already in the lowest grades of primary schools have high-quality physical and sports education. From the time they enter the school system, children should be motivated to understand why it is important to move. They should gradually realize that the quality of their life increases thanks to movement. An important role in the whole process is played by parents who should set an example for their children. According to WHO estimates, up to 81% of children between the ages of 11 and 17 do not have at least 60 minutes of at least moderately intense exercise per day (Pasuth, 2021).

## **Physical Education and Sport in Schools in Europe**

Physical and sports education in schools contributes not only to improving the physical fitness and health of students but also forms knowledge and skills such as teamwork and fair play, cultivates consideration for other people, and teaches understanding of the "rules of the game" applicable in other subjects as well and other life situations. In order to map the situation in the field of physical education and sports activities in the schools of European Union countries, the Eurydice department, in cooperation with the General Directorate of the European Commission for Education and Culture, prepared a study in 2013 entitled Physical Education and Sport. Eurydice is an information network that is a means of the European Commission for collecting and disseminating information about the education systems in the European Union states, in order to facilitate European cooperation in the field of education, in

schools in Europe. 30 countries within the Eurydice network were involved in the above mentioned study. The aim was to map the situation and describe the role played by physical and sports education in schools in contemporary Europe. The report covers primary and lower secondary education and provides an overview of the following topics:

- National strategies and large-scale initiatives regarding physical education and physical activity.
- The position of physical education in national educational plans and in governing documents.
- Recommended annual time allowance for physical education, comparison with other subjects.
- Assessment of pupils in physical education.
- Qualification of physical education teachers.
- After-school physical activities.
- Planned reforms in physical education and sports activities.

Based on the results of the survey, the following main facts were identified (Eurydice, 2013):

- All European countries recognize the importance of physical education in schools. This subject is part of all educational programs and is compulsory in primary and lower secondary education. They consider exercise and sports activities to be a beneficial way of spending free time.
- Approximately half of the countries have developed a national strategy to support the development of physical education and physical activities. The governing documents emphasize the contribution of physical education in terms of physical, personal and social development of pupils. Some countries have introduced a separate subject of Health Education. Also, in some countries certain activities in physical education are compulsory, in other countries schools can choose the activities they will teach.
- Regarding the recommended minimum time allowance for physical education, there are relatively large differences between individual countries (Figure 1). The time allocation during compulsory education is on average 50–80 hours per year. Compared to other subjects, however, it is relatively low, as its share usually amounts to less than 10% of the total teaching time, and compared to mathematics, it is roughly half. A similar situation exists within the framework of daily compulsory secondary education, where the share of time allowance for physical education is approximately half compared to mathematics.

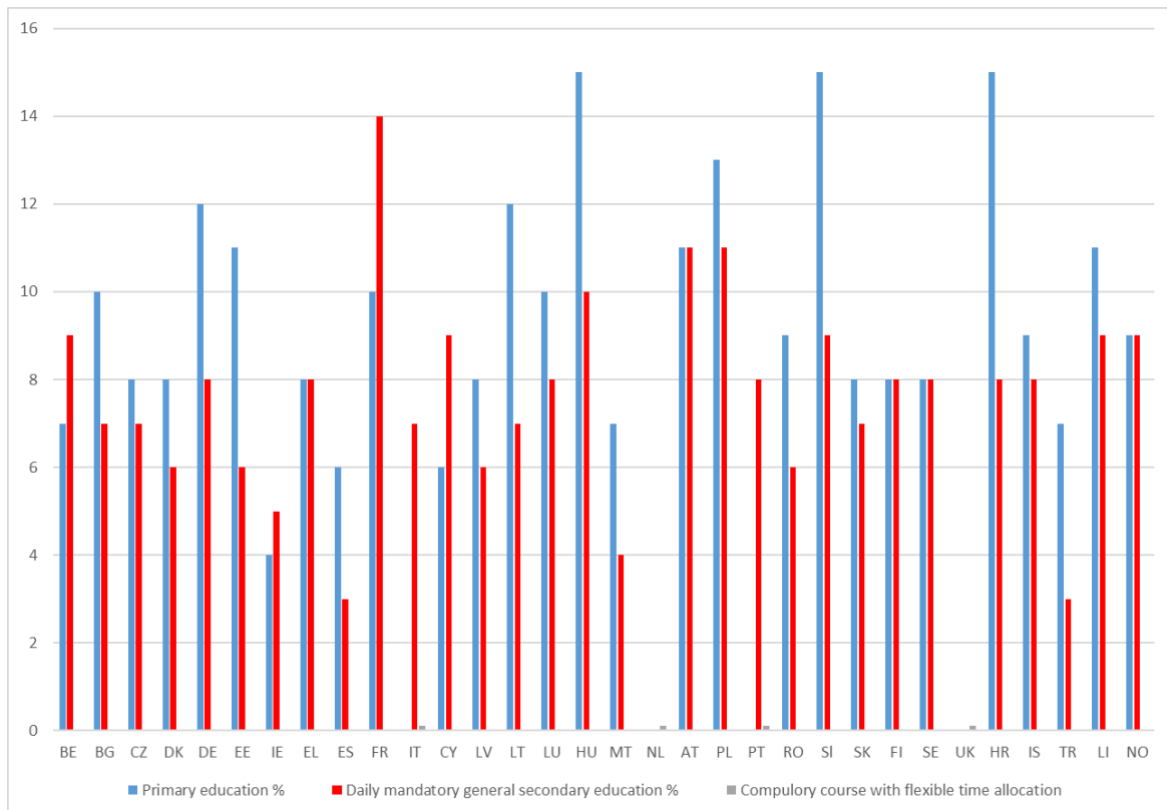


Figure 1: Minimum Time Allowance for Physical Education as a Compulsory Subject Expressed as Share of Total Teaching Time in Primary and Full-Time Compulsory General Secondary Education (Eurydice, 2013)

- Assessment of pupils in physical education takes place in different ways in individual countries. Almost all countries assess individual progress and achievement in physical education, although in the first four grades this assessment does not take the form of a formal classification. Both formative and summative assessment are used in primary and lower secondary education, with summative assessment being slightly more common. The grading system is usually the same as in other compulsory subjects.
- As for physical education teachers, at the primary level the subject is taught by non-specialized teachers or specialized teachers. In some countries, schools can decide for themselves whether to entrust this teaching to a non-specialist or a specialist teacher. This decision mainly depends on the availability and distribution of teachers' duties at individual schools. At lower secondary level, specialized teachers are the norm. European countries offer opportunities for further education in the field of physical education not only for specialized physical education teachers but also for universalists and specialists in other subjects. This supports an interdisciplinary approach to physical education and the inclusion of regular exercise activities in other subjects.
- Physical education is taught within the regular timetable. After-school activities supplement or expand the range of physical activities. They are often focused on competitions or other events organized by schools and school clubs or in partnership with other entities. Several countries are trying to include more physical activities in the regular school practice and to engage in them during the day, during breaks or even on the way to school. Schools in Slovakia can establish physical education clubs.

Pupils receive educational vouchers from the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic, which they can use to finance the physical activities of these groups.

- Roughly a third of the surveyed countries planned reforms related to physical education during the survey period. Some countries focused on the introduction of new national strategies to support physical education and sports, and reforms of educational programs regarding e.g. time allowance, subject content, assessment of pupils' progress. Furthermore, the reforms directly affected the education of physical education teachers and the improvement of sports equipment and infrastructure.

### **Physical and Sports Education in Slovakia**

Similar to other European countries, school physical and sports education in Slovakia has undergone intensive development and many changes in recent years. According to research, 70% of school-aged children and youth in Slovakia spend more than 4 hours of free time per day sitting at the computer, watching TV and playing with mobile phones. Only every third pupil engages in regular movement activity. Children and youth are dominated by a sedentary lifestyle, which brings with it an increase in obesity, overweight, poor posture and other health disorders. According to research, approximately 18% of children are overweight and approximately 7% are obese, while the situation is constantly worsening (Antala, 2014).

The best prevention against health disorders is sufficient physical activity. According to the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO), children and adolescents aged 5-17 should perform physical activity of moderate to vigorous intensity for an average of 60 minutes a day during the week and limit the time spent sitting (UVZ SR, 2024).

Physical and sports education is the only school subject that develops motor skills, and students here acquire physical education and the necessary knowledge to take care of their health. Economic calculations show that investing 1 euro in physical education of children and youth in schools will save 3 euros in the future needed to treat health disorders and civilization diseases resulting from their physical inactivity (Stupak, 2017).

Stagnation, or the decline in the physical performance of the school population in Slovakia, detected in the 1990s, is constantly deepening. It affects more boys than girls. The decline in the 1990s was most pronounced among students of the 2nd grade of primary schools, especially after the reduction in the number of hours of compulsory physical education in 1996 from 3 to 2 hours per week (Antala, 2014). However, from September 2023, elementary school students in the Slovak Republic will again have a mandatory minimum of three hours of physical education per week, and secondary school students two hours. This follows from the amendment to Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education (School Act), which was approved by the Parliament of the Slovak Republic in June 2023.

When comparing the movement performance of children and youth in the past and today, it can be concluded that the current school population is in most indicators of movement performance at a lower level than their peers 25 years ago. The same is true of athletically talented youth which is reflected in the fact that more and more applicants with a lower level of motor performance and literacy are applying to study physical education and sports at universities than in the past (Antala, 2014).

From the point of view of the popularity of the subject among primary and secondary school students in Slovakia, physical and sports education is a very popular or favourite subject for most primary and secondary school boys, while it is more popular in primary schools than in secondary schools. Only a minimal part of the boys considers it unpopular or do not like it at all. Among girls, the popularity of the subject is at a lower level than among boys. This is particularly evident in secondary schools (Antala, 2012).

### **Opinions of Slovak Primary and Secondary School Teachers of Physical and Sports Education Focused on the Problems of Teaching**

Despite many benefits, not only in terms of physical effects on the body but also in obtaining mental-physical balance, the position of the subject of physical and sports education in Slovakia is not very flattering.

In 2020, a research was conducted in the Slovak Republic, the aim of which was to obtain new knowledge regarding the opinions of physical and sports education teachers of primary and secondary schools on selected problems of teaching this subject. Among the most significant research findings are the following negative results (Balga, 2020):

- Physical and sports education is considered a less important subject in Slovakia, especially from the point of view of the parents of pupils, but also from the point of view of some fellow teachers.
- The majority of physical education and sports teachers are not satisfied with the workload or salary evaluation (a lot of administrative duties, bureaucracy, a lot of non-teaching obligations).
- A high number of students not exercising in Physical Education and Sports classes for various reasons (laziness of students, health reasons, forgetting exercise clothes, lack of interest in exercise, repetition of problematic student behaviour).
- Unfavourable level of spatial and material conditions (inadequate premises for teaching, poor technical condition of sports grounds, neglected maintenance, poor equipment, etc.).

The mentioned problems, as well as many others, have persisted for a long time. According to Bebcakova (2009), the insufficient financial evaluation of teachers and the material conditions of teaching physical education largely cause its decreasing level and status as a physical education teacher. Another problem is staffing, which is worst in the 1st grade of primary schools. There is up to 63.5% migration of university graduates with approval in physical education (Simonek, 2002). However, the latest surveys indicate that up to 85% of physical education students do not want to practice this profession after graduation (Lakoova, 2006). It is also possible to observe the constantly decreasing readiness of applicants to study physical education at universities. At universities, on the one hand, the demands on the theoretical preparation of students are increasing, but on the other hand, the time to acquire didactic skills is decreasing. A serious training reform such as school pedagogical practice receives only about 50% of the original lesson subsidy, which increases the discrepancy between theoretical training and school practice (Bielej, 2003).

### **Conclusions**

The tools defined in the Sport Concept of the Slovak Republic for the years 2022-2026 can serve as starting points for solving the current situation, which support the creation of a

positive relationship of children to physical and sports education and support the movement of residents of all age categories. These include (MSVVM SR, 2022):

- Development of human resources - training and development of teachers of physical and sports education, coaches and instructors, sports service providers, volunteers and other workers in sports.
- Development of sports infrastructure - it is necessary to ensure conditions for the implementation of safe and motivating physical activities, systematic development of sports infrastructure, especially school sports fields, regional sports infrastructure, active zones and sports infrastructure for all.
- Promotion of an active lifestyle and innovations in sports - carry out systematic promotion of sports, media campaigns, support innovative and technological projects in sports, analyse sports data.
- Interdepartmental and inter-sectoral approach - cooperation between ministries and other public administration bodies.
- Operation and development of a new sports information system, which will contain all relevant information in digitized form.

Additional possibilities are provided by the application of the Active School concept. It is a concept of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports, which represents a comprehensive approach to exercise activities at schools, which are implemented by the school before, during or after the end of classes. Individual parts of an active school include, for example, the following activities:

- Active transportation to/from school, which includes all forms of transportation to and from school - on foot, by bicycle, on skates, skateboards, or scooters.
- Active school clubs - allow children to spend more time in the fresh air and create space for relaxation and socialization of children.
- Active classes - students use the corridors, the gymnasium, the schoolyard to spend their breaks actively.
- Sports clubs - they can attract a wide range of children to exercise and sports.
- Sports courses - the most traditional forms are swimming and skiing courses but there are also other forms of courses and training such as e.g. cycling, climbing course, in-line skating, etc.
- Testing - the school participates in the Olympic fitness badge project.
- School sports competitions - the offer of competitions takes into account the possibility of participation of the largest number of pupils and does not discriminate against anyone.
- Catering – school canteens, buffets, vending machines offer pupils high-quality and healthy food.

## **Acknowledgements**

This paper was prepared with the support of the project APVV-20-0481 – Sustainability Strategy of a sport organization in the conditions of the Slovak Republic.

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