

Physical education and sport in European schools from 1957 to today

Educazione fisica e sport a scuola nel contesto europeo dal 1957 ad oggi

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the principles of the 2000 Nice declaration, the European Parliament made 2004 European Year of Education Through Sport, confirming the close bond between the educational process, sport and young people. Nearly 20 years later, on 26 September 2023, the new paragraph of article 33 of the Italian Constitution which reads "The Republic recognises the educational, social and psychophysical wellbeing promotion value of sport in all its forms" established the indispensable nature of sport's educational contribution in terms of social inclusion and improved wellbeing for everyone, opening the way for its recognition as a right to be pursued and developed from school onwards. However, the school-sport relationship remains a difficult one and the gap between European Union countries on the educational, cultural and financial investment plan is still considerable. It is a heterogeneity which requires history of education thinking regarding the various school systems capable of revitalising educational traditions and highlighting physical education and sport meanings, knowledge and models capable of acting as drivers for shared school policies guided by the principles of Pierre de Coubertin's idea that "Sport is part of every man and woman's heritage and its absence can never be compensated for" and that all young people must have equal access to physical education and sport primarily within school.

Richiamandosi ai principi della dichiarazione di Nizza del 2000, il Parlamento Europeo ha dichiarato il 2004 Anno europeo dell'educazione attraverso lo sport ratificando lo stretto legame tra processo educativo, sport e giovani. A quasi vent'anni (26 settembre 2023) il nuovo comma dell'articolo 33 della Costituzione, «La Repubblica riconosce il valore educativo, sociale e di promozione del benessere psicofisico dell'attività sportiva in tutte le sue forme», sancisce l'indispensabile contributo dello sport nell'educazione, nell'inclusione sociale e nel miglioramento del benessere di ogni persona, aprendo al suo riconoscimento quale diritto da promuoversi e svilupparsi a partire dalla scuola. Tuttavia, il rapporto tra scuola e sport permane difficile, e significativo è ancora il divario tra i Paesi dell'Unione Europea sul piano pedagogico-culturale e di investimento economico. Un'eterogeneità che richiede una riflessione storico-pedagogica in ordine ai diversi sistemi scolastici capace di recuperare la tradizione pedagogica, di cogliere significati, conoscenze e modelli di educazione fisica e sport in grado di muovere verso politiche scolastico-educative comuni guidate dal principio, attualizzando l'idea Pierre de Coubertin «lo sport è parte del patrimonio di ogni uomo e di ogni donna e la sua assenza non potrà mai essere compensata», che tutti i giovani devono avere pari diritti di accesso all'educazione fisica e alla pratica dello sport primariamente dentro la scuola.

Keywords: school history | physical education | sport | history of education | history of physical education

Parole chiave: storia della scuola | educazione fisica | sport | storia dell'educazione | storia dell'educazione fisica

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Introduction

The Treaties of Rome signed on 25 March 1957 set up the European Economic Community (EEC), setting in motion a new era of cooperation and a long process of European economic, socio-political and cultural transformation. Thirty-five years later, the founding of the European Union (EU) via the Maastricht Treaty of 7 February 1992 marked a new stage in a process whose purpose was ever closer union between European peoples involving wider jurisdiction in various important sectors. However, the economic dimension is still the EU's distinguishing trait and the achievement of political and cultural unity capable of tackling the challenges of globalisation, interculturalism and peaceful coexistence would seem to be more problematic.

Developing a sense of belonging and harnessing the potential deriving from partnership between EU citizens and nations are all determinant for the future and are primarily a matter of education. The social, cultural and educational role of sport is important from this perspective, and impacts on various sectors of public health, volunteering, active citizenship promotion, social inclusion and the struggle against racism and violence, to cite just a few, all of which require educating for physical exercise and sport. Examining knowledge regarding physical and sport education development methods and processes in the various school systems of the EU is thus an especially interesting starting point in this context.

The place occupied by physical education in European school systems is indicative of the specific educational attention paid to corporeality, conjuring up the educational traditions underlying the school systems of the various countries. These are educational traditions which need to be channeled into a European educational approach capable of effectively bridging the gap between EU countries primarily in cultural terms, by a growing and shared recognition of sport's importance to children's educational process. First and foremost, this involves its integration into the school timetable and implicitly includes financial resources being set aside for school sport (Coccia, 2013).

1. A slow legislative process

On 24 September 1975, the European Sport for All Charter was adopted by the Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport¹. This first charter focused primarily on financial aspects and was updated in 1992 to pay greater attention to educational considerations, emphasising the right to take part in sport as fundamentally important to human development. Paragraph 1 of article 2 also reiterated that the word 'sport' "means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels" (Council of Europe, 1992). It was thus in the 1990s that the social and educational importance of sport was officially recognised in EU documents, on a par with professional training and education, as essential to psycho-physical wellbeing for all individuals.

Inspired by the principles of the 2000 Nice declaration, the European Parliament made 2004 European Year of Education Through Sport, with the twofold objective of promoting sport as an educational tool and enhancing the image of sport in society. Stressing the central role played by sport in the education of the young and the development of their personalities, the objectives set out in article 2 outlined a European educational approach which accords sport considerable educational potential at both individual and EU levels. The specific focus was on the values passed on via sport in terms of the promotion of the knowledge and know-how on which the development of physical capabilities is based, as well as the desire to make a personal effort and social skills (teamwork, solidarity, tolerance and fair play in a multicultural and inclusive environment). (Decision no. 291/2003/CE of the European Parliament and Council, 6 February 2003, Official European Union Gazette, 18.2.2003). It was a clear conception of the importance of physical ex-

1 The European Charter on Sport for All: Disabled Persons, focusing specifically on sport and the differently abled, followed in 1986. This was intended to foster improved wellbeing and fitness for the differently abled, supplying them with the opportunity to use their free time satisfactorily and developing opportunities for social interaction between them and with the able-bodied.

ercise and sport formalised by the 2007 White Paper on Sport which made sport one of the EU's official top priorities and set out a series of actions which the Commission intended to implement or promote which were together to form the Pierre de Coubertin action plan (*White paper on Sport*, COM (2007) 391).

A focus on the mental and physical health problems caused by a reduction in physical exercise amongst young people and a progressive increase in sedentary lifestyles and obesity led the EU Sport & Health Working Group to issue *EU Physical Activity Guidelines. Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity* (2008) whose purpose was to prompt member states to draw up plans designed to foster physical exercise, in accordance with the environmental and cultural habits and customs of each individual country, modify unhealthy lifestyles and raise awareness of the health benefits of physical exercise. These guidelines noted that 80% of the school-age population takes no physical exercise outside school despite the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommending at least one hour per day. Spending greater time on sport and physical exercise at school, within the formal curriculum or during extra-curricular activities, was thus seen in the guidelines as a vehicle for decisive change.

Its intentions in the *White Paper* and the *EU Guidelines* notwithstanding, the European Commission could not take direct action to implement physical and sport education in the absence of a legislative or legal basis. It should also be noted that an updated framework making the role accorded to education and physical exercise in the various member states and their health, education and sport policies explicit was also lacking.

The Treaty of Lisbon (December 2009), specifically article 165, set the legal basis for the EU's attempts to incentivise sport, supporting and supplementing member state sport policy initiatives. It was thus responsible for the development of specific policies on physical exercise and sport across Europe and for promoting cooperation in, and management of, these².

European level legislation accords an increasing importance to sport, on the basis of the close bond between sport and social rights (Schürmann, 2012). Member states policies in this regard must ensure that sport is: accessible to everybody, and to children and young people in particular, healthy and safe, fair and tolerant, building on lofty ethical values capable of fostering personal self-fulfillment at all levels, respectful of the environment, protective of human dignity and against all kinds of exploitation of those engaging in sport. The European Sports Charter has achieved three essential prerequisites: laying down stable parameters within which sports policies can develop; setting out a common framework and the basic principles on which national sports policies can provide the necessary balance between governmental and non-governmental action; and ensuring the complementarity of responsibilities between them (Council of Europe, 2021).

The various actions recommended by EU sports policy in assessing and potentially moving forward from the resolution of 23 November 2021 include improved child protection in sport and an increase in the hours timetabled for physical exercise at school.

In the light of European regulations, the Italian parliament approved an amendment to article 33 of the constitution with a new paragraph which reads "The Republic recognises the educational, social and psycho-physical wellbeing-promotion value of sport in all its forms" (Published in Official Gazette no. 235 dating to 7/10/2023, Constitutional Law no. 1 of 26/09/2023).

2. School physical education hours: comparative data

In legislative terms it is undeniable that progress has been made as regards according to greater, and shared, recognition of the importance of physical and sport education, however school policies would not seem to have had a uniform impact in this respect.

It is precisely because school physical education is the most widespread source of physical exercise pro-

2 A specific budget was first set aside in the first Erasmus+ program (2014-2020) for specific sport-related projects and networks and the current EU education, training, youth, and sport action plan for the 2021-27 period allocated 1.9% of its total budget to sport.

motion amongst young people that it would seem to be necessary to increase the pressure on schools to implement physical exercise hours at every level (both as part of the school curriculum and external to it and in conjunction with local community partners) and stimulate the interest of all pupils to ensure exercise becomes a lifestyle habit (*EU Guidelines*, 2008).

Maximising the learning opportunities in the physical education context requires a number of preconditions. First and foremost, these relate to a considerable number of hours being timetabled for sport in the school curriculum, as well as suitable facilities and equipment, planned study programs with appropriate assessment procedures and, last but not least, qualified teachers capable of generating school-extra-scholastic networks in order to make full use of local resources with a view to encouraging good physical exercise habits at all levels and in all contexts.

A comparison of the curricular hours spent on physical education at school highlights the differences between the various European countries. As the 2013 Eurydice report, *Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe*, makes clear³, whilst recognition of the importance of school physical education is shared and unanimous and guaranteed, first and foremost, by its compulsory teaching in all primary and lower secondary schools, the hours devoted to it vary, as do the strategies employed to promote it.

Considering the compulsory education period⁴, the data shows that the recommended physical education hours vary little by school year in some countries, while in others the variation is considerable. In countries in which the variation is limited the number of hours devoted to the subject remain high for the whole compulsory schooling period.

France tops the European-nation list with a maximum of 108 hours of physical education per year for most of the compulsory education period (6-16) with the exception of the first year of college 144 hours and the final year of compulsory schooling at 72 hours. Luxembourg also recommends 108 hours of physical education but only for the first four years of compulsory schooling (4-16) and thus from compulsory nursery school onwards⁵ and for the first two years of primary school. The hours devoted to it then decrease to 72 and 68, except for ten-year-olds with 101 hours. The situation in Liechtenstein is less complex, with 88 hours recommended for virtually the whole of the compulsory-education period (6-15) with the exception of the first year of secondary school, with 117 hours, and the last, with 59.

Other countries – Germany⁶, Spain⁷, Malta⁸, Croatia⁹ and Hungary¹⁰ – recommend a lower number of hours per year, 85 or less, and this tends to decrease at the end of a period which varies from year 4 to year 6 of compulsory schooling. This is also true of Slovenia, although this country starts with a higher hour recommendation, with 98 per year for the first six years, 71 in subsequent years and 67 in the last year of compulsory schooling (6-15). Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Latvia and Romania, on the other hand, recommend 37 to 60 hours per year and this varies little by year. By contrast, other nations – Denmark¹¹,

3 The report constitutes a first attempt by the European Commission to set out the state of the art in physical education and sport at school in Europe, paying special attention to physical education programs quality and teacher qualifications and highlighting strengths and weaknesses in school physical education. The data supplied by the report are used here, unless otherwise indicated.

4 See European Commission /EACEA/Eurydice (2011). *The structure of the European education systems - 2011/12*. Eurydice – Facts and Figures. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union; ID. (2017). *Compulsory Education in Europe - 2017/18* Eurydice – Facts and Figures. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union; ID. (2022). *The structure of the European education systems 2022/2023: schematic diagrams*. Eurydice Facts and Figures. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

5 From the age of 3 a year of free “éducation précoce” is guaranteed but not mandatory.

6 In Germany hours range from 85 to 56 per year, with the highest number of hours at primary school (Grundschule 6-10) and the number varying by type of school up to the end of compulsory schooling (Gymnasium, Hauptschule, Realschule).

7 In Spain it ranges from 53 in the first six years of compulsory schooling to 35 in the last year of schooling, at the age of 16.

8 Over its 11 years of compulsory schooling (5-16) Malta starts with 64 hours in the first three years and then reduces this significantly subsequently: 44 in year 7 and 22 in the last three years of compulsory schooling.

9 Croatia, a member of the EU since 1 July 2023, starts with 79 in the first three years of school and then recommends 53 per year until the end of compulsory schooling at the age of 14.

10 Hungary has the most extensive compulsory schooling system in Europe, covering 5 to 18 years of age, starting with 83 hours in the first four years of school and passing to 69 hours subsequently and then 60 in the last year.

11 After a first flexible year Denmark recommends a progressive increase up to 90 hours per year from year 5 to year 7 (10-12).

Greece¹², Cyprus¹³ and French-speaking Belgium¹⁴ – recommend a larger number of physical education hours after year 6.

Estonia¹⁵, Poland¹⁶, Slovakia¹⁷, Finland¹⁸, Iceland¹⁹, Norway²⁰ and Lithuania²¹ specify a total number of hours for each type of school which individual schools then decide how to split up between the various years. Sweden recommends a total of 500 hours of education for the whole compulsory schooling period lasting 10 years.

The situation in Austria is more complex, with hours of physical education in elementary schools (Volksschule) passing from 90 in the first two-year period to 60 in the second. This is also a feature of its two secondary school cycles (Hauptschule and AHS) within a range of 120-60 hours.

In other countries - Belgium (German-speaking community), Italy and Portugal - in primary schools, lasting 6²², 5²³ and 4²⁴ years respectively, the system is referred to as flexible. 61 hours are recommended for the German-speaking community in Belgium in year 7 and 8, increasing to 91 in the third, while Italy recommends 66 hours per year until the end of compulsory schooling at the age of 16. The system in Portugal is more complex, with 81 to 108 hours of physical education being recommended up to the end of compulsory schooling at age 18.

- 12 With 10 years of compulsory schooling (5-15) Greece recommends 53 hours up to year 6, 68 for the next two and then 45 in the last year.
- 13 The system in Cyprus is like Greece's, with the difference that 46 hours are recommended up to year 6 and then 69, 81 and 69 in the last three years respectively.
- 14 In the first six years of compulsory schooling in its French-speaking part the recommended number is 61, followed by 91 in the subsequent two years and 61 in the last year.
- 15 With a single schooling structure lasting 9 years (7-16) Estonia recommends 210 hours of physical education in both the first and second 3-year period, reducing this to 158 in the third and last.
- 16 In Poland 218, 338, 289 are the number of hours recommended for each 3-year cycle, to be divided up between years at the discretion of individual schools.
- 17 Slovakia recommends 224 hours for the first four years and 280 for the subsequent five years of its 9-year compulsory schooling, while it recommends 56 for the first year of upper secondary schooling which brings compulsory schooling to an end.
- 18 The 228 physical education hours of Finland's single compulsory school system are divided up in the first four years with a further 285 in the subsequent five years.
- 19 Iceland's ten years of compulsory schooling (6-16) includes 288 ore of physical education in the first four years and 216 for each of the subsequent three.
- 20 Norway's hours of recommended physical education are divided up in accordance with its school cycles: 478 for elementary school (6-12) and 228 for middle school (13-15).
- 21 In Lithuania, total hours for the first two-year periods (120 and 135) are followed by progressively reduced hours thereafter, from 72 to 54.
- 22 Here, as in the Flemish community, where the approach used is a flexible timetable for the whole nine years of compulsory schooling (in line with the twelve years of the Netherlands) it is schools which decide how to divide up the curriculum between the various subjects, on the basis of individual needs. The absence of a fixed timetable has not, however, precluded physical education hours recommendations, with guidelines advising structured physical exercise and sport at least twice a week.
- 23 In fact, however, this flexibility is currently being modified on the basis of law 234 of 30 December 2021, bringing in specialist teaching staff for compulsory physical exercise in primary schools (starting from the 2022/23 school year in year 5 and subsequently in year 4. As the subject was already present in the curriculum set out in the 2012 guidelines the presence of specialist teachers effectively makes the two hours per week per class mandatory without increasing school hours in full time classrooms (40 hours) while classes adopting normal school timetables (24, 27 and up to 30 hours) the two hours are extra. With note 2116 (9 September 2022) the Education Minister also specified that the physical exercise hours were to be considered to replace the physical education hours previously required by the primary school curriculum but taught by ordinary classroom teachers. Thus, in line with the 2013 Eurydice 2013 report, considering that there are just over 33 weeks in a school year, on the basis of law 234 referred to above the last two years of primary school are also subject to 66-hour recommendations.
- 24 Corresponding to the former, of the three education cycles ending at the age of 15 followed by four years of compulsory upper secondary education.

3. From data to proposals

The number of hours devoted to physical education is a clear indicator of the level of interest in the subject and the importance accorded it in children's education. Weekly physical education hours and the age at which these begin is, in fact, crucial not only to children's overall physical exercise baggage by the end of compulsory schooling, but also to their internalisation of good exercise habits. Thus, for example, even taking primary education alone, Italian children have a "school exercise-sport deficit" as compared to their peers in France and Luxembourg. Even if we hypothesise that Italian schoolchildren take two hours of physical education classes per week in their five hours of primary school²⁵ and thus a total of around 330 hours over five years, this is still significantly lower than their French peers, who have 540 hours within the same time frame, and Luxembourg's schoolchildren, with 677. Furthermore, Luxembourg's physical education timetable begins two years earlier than its French counterpart.

From a European integrationist perspective these are differences which require school policy level action designed to bring EU principles to fruition and avert unwarranted discrimination. The highest possible number of hours of physical education for the longest possible period should be the right of every European citizen. School system diversity and differing individual governmental action should not cause us to lose sight of the contents of EU guidelines, which should be used as individual national improvement goals. In this respect the previously cited constitutional amendment to article 33 and law 234 of 30 December 2021, a step in the direction of cultural re-evaluation of school physical exercise and sport, should not be forgotten (Grion, 2022).

Increasing awareness of the social and educational value of lifelong physical exercise and sport must be a participatory goal across school life and beyond (Isidori, 2017; Isidori, Maulini, Migliorati, 2017). It is, therefore, not a matter of simply increasing specialist teacher-subject teaching hours but of extending children's movement time frames across the school community. The project launched in France on the occasion of the 2024 Olympics may be a useful frame of reference. Recognising that daily physical exercise contributes to wellbeing and health, fundamentally important learning cornerstones, the French Education Minister launched a project designed to guarantee all primary age children (at nursery and elementary schools) at least 30 minutes of physical exercise per day, in addition to physical and sporting education (PES), to be taken on days when this latter is not timetabled, in conjunction with Paris 2024 and the sport movement. These thirty minutes of daily physical exercise – 30' APQ – are to be organised on the basis of individual school requirements, use a variety of spaces – classrooms, playgrounds, school buildings and the area around the school – and be divided up and combined in different school time frames, including breaks, without using up children's free time, with the idea being increasing children's physical exercise. All components of the school community (teachers, educators, families, town councils, associations, sports clubs, etc.) can take part in drawing up projects to form part of the school approach as a whole. It is a system which is designed to ensure implementation flexibility and take advantage of local opportunities and, to this end, it provides insights, tools and practical examples to support primary school teachers (kindergarten and elementary) in the implementation of the generalization of the "30 minutes of daily physical activity at school" system. An app has also been created.

In conclusion, in the light of the innovative French approach promoting large-scale physical education and sport, it is important to highlight the importance of implementing everyday exercise strategies fostering habits which must be taught across the school context, from the earliest years of life. There are specific educational traditions in each individual country capable of stimulating shared innovation and progress in line with a clear European perspective. The Italy which has already responded to EU guidelines can thus identify educational traditions (Landoni, 2011; Freccero, 2012; Morandi, 2016; Elia, 2020) capable of stimulating significant recognition of physical education with an example being law 4442 of 7 July 1878 introduced by Minister Francesco De Sanctis, which introduced physical exercise to all schools, specifying 30 minutes per day at elementary school and introducing a specific training course for teachers.

25 As is effectively the case in most schools, despite the flexible nature of the recommendations.

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