

THE STATE OF SCHOOL PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN BELGIUM

De Knop, P. *, Theeboom, M. *, Huts, K. *, De Martelaer, K. *, & Cloes, M. **
Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)*
Université de Liège (ULg)**

0. Introduction

Before discussing the situation of school physical education in Belgium, an introduction on the specific constitutional context of Belgium can be considered as a necessity. Until 1970, Belgium was a unitary state with a general governmental structure, situated on central (state), regional (province) and local (municipality) level. The educational system was organised on a national level and supervised by the national minister of education. In 1970, a constitutional reform made an end to this organisational structure. Belgium developed from a unitary to a federal state, with new authority levels including a Dutch, French and German speaking community (Verhoeven & Elchardus, 2000). These newly established authority levels got entrusted with several cultural responsibilities, such as sport and outdoor recreation (Van Mulders, 1992). In 1989, the responsibilities concerning education - and as a consequence, school physical education - were also redirected to the community level (Verhoeven & Elchardus, 2000). Since then, each community steered an autonomous educational course. The political conditions explaining the transfer of responsibilities to the communities were the constitutional guarantee of freedom as well as equality of education to the ideological and philosophical minorities on either side of the linguistic borders. In this chapter, the situation of physical education will be discussed for the three official communities (i.e., Dutch, French and German speaking community). The majority of the presented data refer to the situation of school physical education in Flanders, which represents 58% of all Belgian citizens.

1.0. Political situation of school physical education

In Belgium, the term gymnastics was mentioned for the first time in an official text in 1842. The law of 1842 acknowledged gymnastics as an optional school subject for all pupils in municipal primary schools. In reality, few schools actually provided gymnastic lessons at that time. Official data show that in 1860 and 1866, respectively 8 on 3872 and 21 on 4099 municipal elementary schools offered the optional gymnastics course. The main reasons for this limited offer were the lack of qualified gymnastics teachers and the resistance of ordinary subject teachers towards gymnastics at school (D'Hoker et al., 1994). In secondary education gymnastics became a legally required school subject in 1850, while the organic laws of 1st July 1879 and 20th September 1884 also recognised the subject as a compulsory school subject for pupils in primary school (De Martelaer, 2000). According to Baert (1981), the term gymnastics was legally replaced by the term physical education in 1971.

Today, school physical education in Flanders is protected by the decree¹ “Education II” (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1990) which legitimates school physical

¹ A decree is similar to a law but only in the particular community where it is endorsed.

education as a part of the Flemish “basic school curriculum²”. In the French and German speaking community similar decrees, that guarantee the place of physical education in the school curriculum got accepted (Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft, 2003, Ministère de l’Education, 1997). With this identification and the introduction of new school physical education standards, the Flemish Educational Government officially recognised the importance of physical education within the school curriculum and secured its place in the Flemish school curriculum of the future.

1.1. Current concerns for the school physical education subject

Although in many countries of the world school physical education is a legally required school subject for boys and girls for at least a part of their compulsory school attendance period, the actual implementation of school physical education does not always seem to meet with the statutory expectations (Hardman & Marshall, 1999; ICSSPE, 1999). Daems and Leysen (1995) and De Knop et al. (2004a, 2004b) underlined that this statement applies to Flanders as well, while Piéron (2000) came to a similar conclusion for the French speaking community. According to De Knop (1999), this lack of strong scientific evidence that contradicts the discrepancy between pronounced and actual realised school physical education objectives can at the moment be considered as a major problem.

In their study, Daems and Leysen (1995) revealed that a majority of the Flemish people was convinced that the pronounced school physical education goals were actually not being met. A more recent study of De Knop et al. (2004b), in which people from the social midfield³ were questioned, endorsed these findings. According to the respondents in these studies, the most important factors contributing to the Flemish “credibility gap” between statutory and actual delivery are: insufficient curricular time allocation to school physical education, inadequate and/or unavailable facilities for the practice of school physical education, financial constraints and/or the diversion of financial resources to other more theoretically oriented school subjects, a deficiency in the number of properly qualified and/or motivated personnel, a lack of official assessments and the low status of the school physical education subject (Daems & Leysen, 1995; De Knop et al., 2004a; De Knop et al., 2004b). Walloon physical education teachers questioned during in-service preparation sessions about their main problems selected similar items.

Although there may be large differences between school physical education in the different Belgian schools, based on the above-mentioned, it can be concluded that school physical education in Belgium is generally facing the same problems as in many other countries of the world (see Hardman and Marshall, 1999). As a consequence, De Knop and Piéron (2000) stated that the quality of school physical education in Belgium is not of a high level.

1.2. Pressure exerted on school physical education

² The “basic school curriculum” is a group of courses that every pupil, without any exception, should attend throughout his or her primary as well as secondary school career.

³ De Knop et al. (2002b) defined the social midfield, in analogy with a study of Siongers (2002), as a unity of organisations, institutions and movements that fulfil an intermediary function between the individuals on the one hand and society on the other hand (e.g. National Health Services, sport organisations, youth movements, etc.).

Despite of the decree “Education II” (c.p., 1.1.), school physical education has, during the last few years, often been the target of criticism for not reaching one of its main educational goals, namely the preparation of youngsters to adopt a healthy and physically active life-style. The discrepancy between the important role attributed to school physical education with regard to the onset of a healthy and physically active life-style and the low activity level of Flemish children, as reported by Scheerder and colleagues (2000), is according to De Knop and colleagues (2004a) one of the reasons why the effectiveness and value of school physical education are still often being questioned. Several external organisations such as youth movements, sport organisations, sport federations, etc. constantly touch on the “hardware” (e.g., insufficient sport accommodation, lack of curricular time allocation and financial resources) and/or “software” (e.g., unqualified teachers and shortage of official assessments) problems of school physical education to contest the importance of the subject within today’s school curriculum. De Knop (1999) reports that according to these school physical education opponents, the functions of the subject could well be taken over by the large diversity of extracurricular sporting possibilities. Based on the analysis of official reports, Vincke (2001) concluded that also a quarter of the Belgian parents currently object to the importance of school physical education within the school curriculum.

In the French speaking community, threatening opinions on the role of school physical education within the school curriculum are more limited than in Flanders. Walloon⁴ school principals usually assign a unique role to school physical education with regard to the blossoming of socio-affective attitudes (Agnessen, 2003; Mees et al., 1998).

1.2. Compulsory school physical education in the timetable

At present, two physical education lessons (fifty minutes each) a week are compulsory for all Flemish pupils between 6 and 18 years (Arnouts & Spilthoorn, 1999; De Knop & Piéron, 2000; Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1990). According to the Flemish Educational Government, the two physical education lessons should preferably be organised on two separate occasions during the school week. A double lesson is allowed, yet only when it is sufficiently underpinned (e.g., insufficient accommodation, long travelling times). According to Maes (1997), Flemish pupils are on a yearly basis entitled to maximum 64 lesson hours of physical education.

Although most pupils in the French and German speaking communities also receive two physical education periods a week, the amount of weekly school physical education time may differ between one and five lesson hours. This variation is dependent on:

- the institution leading the school (official school, catholic school or city/provincial school);
- the grade level;
- the program orientation.

Table 1 presents an example of the diversity in weekly school physical education periods for the official schools in the French speaking community.

⁴ Wallonia corresponds to a particular territory whilst the official name is French speaking community of Belgium.

	General and technological humanities		Vocational and technical humanities	
1 st grade ¹	3 ²		4	
2 ^d grade	3		4	
	General	Technical transition	Technical qualification	Vocational
3 rd grade	3 or 2 ³	3 or 2 ⁴	2 ⁴	2
4 th grade	3 or 2	3 or 2	2	2
5 th grade	3 or 2	3 or 2	2	2
6 th grade	3 or 2	3 or 2	2	2
¹ : 12 year old pupils ² : up to 5 h/w in some classes organised for pupils with learning difficulties ³ : according to the involvement of the pupil in some options (for the last four years) ⁴ : some classes have 4 to 11 h/w in sports' optional programme (for the last four years)				

Table 1: Example of a school physical education timetable for the official schools in the French speaking community (hours/week).

With regard to weekly lesson times attributed to school physical education, the French and Dutch speaking community respectively ranked 5th and 14th on 25 participating countries (Fisher et al., 1997; Laporte, 1998).

1.3. School physical education lesson hours: a status quo

The decree “Education II” (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1990) which legitimated school physical education as a part of the Flemish “basic school curriculum”, also preserves physical education for possible cutbacks with regard to curricular time allocation. Despite of this, the respondents (e.g., pupils, subject teachers, school directors, parents committees and expert witnesses from the world of sports) in two recent studies of De Knop and colleagues (2004a, 2004b), consider insufficient curricular time allocation still to be the main reason for not reaching the preconceived physical education objectives. After all, two hours of physical education only represent 7% of the total amount of weekly lesson times that Flemish pupils do attend to (European Commission, 1998). The findings of De Knop et al. (2002a, 2002b) were endorsed by Vincke (2001). Based on an analysis of ten reports prepared by several scientific authorities, this author underlined that curricular time is an important determinant for the effectiveness of the physical education subject (Vincke, 2001). As a consequence, the Flemish Association for Physical Education has been striving for more physical education hours (one hour a day for primary schools and three hours a week for secondary schools) (BVLO⁵, 1988). The Flemish government itself has in its “Strategic Plan for Sporting Flanders” also officially referred to the need for more school physical education time (Vlaamse Regering, 1997). In 1990, a daily physical education project was launched in 14 elementary schools of the French speaking community (Delmelle, 1994). Despite positive results regarding its effectiveness (Piéron, et al., 1994), no generalisation of the project was planned.

All these findings stress that, despite different initiatives in the Dutch, as well as, the French speaking community, it is not likely that curricular time for physical education in Belgium will be increased in the near future. Moreover, it is not uncommon in practise that Flemish physical education teachers are asked to drop their classes in order to provide pupils with more preparation time for literacy and/or numerical examinations and/or for the organisation of other general activities, such as

⁵ BVLO: Flemish Association for Physical Education

school excursions, school parties, etc. (De Knop et al., 2004a). Informal comments of Walloon physical education teachers confirmed these latter findings. As a consequence, it can be concluded that although the two official physical education lessons are officially a certitude, in reality they are not always taught.

2.0. From a quantity to a quality oriented approach

During the last decade, the concept of quality has become popular in different sectors of society, both profit as well as non-profit (De Knop, 1998; De Knop & De Martelaer, 2000; De Knop et al., 2000). Consequently, the call for more qualitative criteria became also more pronounced within the field of education (Trompedeller, 2000). Also in Flanders, quality care has captured a central position within the educational policy of its government (Michielssens, 2002; Verhaeghe et al., 1998). A decade ago, the Flemish schools were solely financed based on their total number of pupils (quantity). Today, the number of pupils is no longer the only criterion for financial support by the Department of Education of the Flemish Community. It is acknowledged that also qualitative criteria have to be taken into consideration (De Droogh & Nelen, 2000; Laporte, 1993). As a consequence, different structural initiatives to monitor quality care within the educational system (i.e., control and promote quality), were introduced (Kelchtermans & Van de Poele, 1995). Three main pillars on which the external quality care policy of the Flemish government is based, can be distinguished, namely: (a) the decree on the final attainment levels of pupils, (b) the decree on the financing of continuing education courses of teachers and (c) the decree on the Schools Inspectorate and the Pedagogical Counselling Office (Doom, 2000; Michielssens, 2002).

2.1. Dominant ideals of school physical education in Flanders: the final attainment levels

In the early '90s the Department for Educational Development (DVO) of the Flemish Community was founded. One of the main assignments of this department was the introduction of so-called final attainment levels (De Droogh & Nelen, 2000; Van den Vreken, 1993). Final attainment levels are objective course-specific and/or course-exceeding standards that, according to the Educational Government, a majority of pupils should be able to achieve at the end of particular stages during the school career (e.g., kindergarten, primary school and 2nd, 4th and 6th year of secondary school) (Boutmans, 1994; De Droogh & Nelen, 2000; DVO, 1993b). The final attainment levels, which are identical for boys and girls, are also dependent on the type of educational level (e.g., technical, vocational or general education). The Flemish course specific final attainment levels of school physical education focus on the development of general as well as specific knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes which youngsters may need to function optimally in society and different domains of human movement. These final attainment levels can be divided into three domains (DVO, 1993a, 1993b):

- the development of motor competencies;
- the development of a safe and healthy life-style;
- the development of a positive self-concept and social functioning.

According to De Knop (1999), the introduction of these minimum goals gave cause to the development of a renewed, clear and better structured subject outline and

formulated an answer to the long asked question of which objectives school physical education was trying to achieve. It was also indicated that the final attainment levels initiated a first step in the direction of quality school physical education. Furthermore, research findings revealed that the current final attainment levels of school physical education seem to incorporate well the expectations of the current society with regard to this school subject. Especially goals focussing on the development of a safe and healthy life-style turned out to be highly appreciated (De Knop et al., 2004b).

2.2. Evaluation and counselling as tools for educational quality improvement

In Flanders every school is obliged to pursue the realisation of the final attainment levels. An unsatisfactory mark with regard to the realisation of these levels may result in financial decrease and/or image problems for the particular school (DVO, 1993a, 1993b). In Flanders the evaluations of the realisation of the final attainment levels are organised on an external and internal level, as both (a) the government (external) and (b) the schools (internal) are considered responsible for the school effectiveness (De Corte, 1986a, 1986b; De Corte et al., 1992).

(a) External evaluation of school effectiveness

The external maintenance and/or upgrading of the current educational quality are in the hands of the school inspection and the pedagogical counselling office (Louwet, 2002; Vandenberghe & Kelchtermans, 1997). The decree on the school inspection and the pedagogical counselling office initiated a new trend in the Flemish Educational Policy (Arnouts & Spilthoorn, 1999; Kelchtermans & Van de Poele, 1995). Unlike the previous school inspection, which was engaged in the evaluation of school subjects and subject teachers, the renewed school inspection screens a school as an entity (Arnouts & Spilthoorn, 1999; Van den Vreken, 1993). In other words, not the physical education teacher but the place of the school physical education subject within the total educational concept of the particular school is being evaluated (Arnouts & Spilthoorn, 1999).

During a school visit the inspection team screens the organisational, functional and internal quality management policy of the school (Verhaeghe et al., 1998). Both financial, infrastructural and human resources are scrutinised by means of available school documents (e.g., examinations, agenda's, notes, tests, year planning, etc.) and interviews with significant persons such as school directors, subject teachers, parents and pupils (Louwet, 2002). The screening pattern used by the Flemish inspection is based on the CIPO-model (Context, Input, Process and Output) (Arnouts & Spilthoorn, 1999; Louwet, 2002).

The Pedagogical Counselling Office on the other hand is authorised to guide and support the schools to improve the weaknesses reported by the school inspection (Michielssens, 2002; Verhaeghe et al., 1998). They have no evaluative power. Although both teachers and school directors stand positively towards the renewed school inspections, they stress that the screenings until now have had a limited influence on school and classroom level (Verhaeghe et al., 1998). Teachers and school directors furthermore state that the evaluations are often too administration oriented (Verhaeghe et al., 1998) and too seldom carried out (Langers, 2000, 2001). According to Langers, the educational inspection has only time to screen a school one time every ten years. Consequently, this author argued in favour of more external evaluations and stressed that the internal quality management carried out

by the schools themselves has become an important instrument for the Flemish educational quality.

(b) Internal evaluation of school effectiveness

The decree on the school inspectorate and the pedagogical counselling office and the influence of austerity measures, have given Flemish schools more autonomy (Arnouts & Spilthoorn, 1999; Van den Vreken, 1993). On the local level, schools are required to initiate an internal quality care policy (Michielssens, 2002). They carry the responsibility to: (a) develop school curricula, (b) organise deliberations, (c) stimulate teachers to take refresher courses and (d) periodically evaluate their effectiveness by means of testing whether the perceived final attainment levels are sufficiently being met (De Martelaer, 2000; Van den Vreken, 1993). A quality care policy for school physical education is also situated within these structures and initiatives (Arnouts & Spilthoorn, 1999). As a consequence, there is an increased call for instruments that analyse the educational quality and reveal the strengths and weaknesses of a school (De Corte et al, 1992; Van Petegem, 1991). In this context, the research group SBMA⁶ of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, has started with the development of an instrument through which schools will be able to evaluate their quality of school physical education and situate quality problems.

2.0. Dominant ideals of school physical education: the French speaking community's point of view

Since the '90s, the educational sector has also changed considerably in the French speaking community. Here too, final attainment levels were introduced by decree on elementary and secondary school level (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997). Educational goals were clearly determined in order to promote the development of each pupil as an individual and to become responsible citizens in a contemporary society.

Three groups of competencies were assigned to school physical education in the French speaking community (Ministère de la Communauté Française, 1999, 2000a, 2000b):

- the development of physical fitness;
- the development of motor skills;
- the development of socio-motor co-ordination.

Intermediate and final attainment levels have been determined and in-service sessions were organised to guide teachers through the new framework and helping them to become acquainted with the new teaching conceptions. Objectives of teachers' preparation were also redefined by several decrees designing competencies that teachers should obtain (Ministère de la Communauté Française, 2001). It is noteworthy to indicate that the educational inspection of the French speaking community is not yet assessing the effectiveness of teachers and schools as systematically as in Flanders.

⁶ **SBMA**: Sport Policy and Management

2.0. Dominant ideals of school physical education: The German speaking community's point of view

Since the beginning of 2003, the German speaking community integrated a new view on education. The new vision is based on experiences of other European German speaking countries and was recently formulated into final attainment levels and groups of competencies (Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft, 2003). These new school physical education objectives for the German speaking community are similar to those of the Dutch en French speaking community and are at present only applied in the school years preceding the secondary school level (kindergarten and elementary level). An important problem of school physical education in the German speaking community is the absence of an educational inspection department. Although school principals are at present officially entrusted with the supervision of the school physical education courses, in practise it is the physical education teacher him/herself who has to do the follow-up of his/her work. As a consequence, some pupils do not learn the competencies that are described in the final attainment levels.

3.0. Major themes in the school physical education curriculum

Although the earlier described final attainment levels are prescriptive in nature, the offered school physical education content in all communities is in real practise far from uniform. To date, the physical education programmes of the individual schools show a wide variety and diversity. This is a result of the fact that the final attainment levels left room for an interpretation and elaboration, tuned to the ideological and philosophical visions of the educational networks⁷, the local or regional situation, the desires of the pupils, the facilities of the school, the expertise of the teachers, etc. In Figure 1, a simplified overview is given with regard to the different levels at which the actual implementation of the final attainment levels can be influenced.

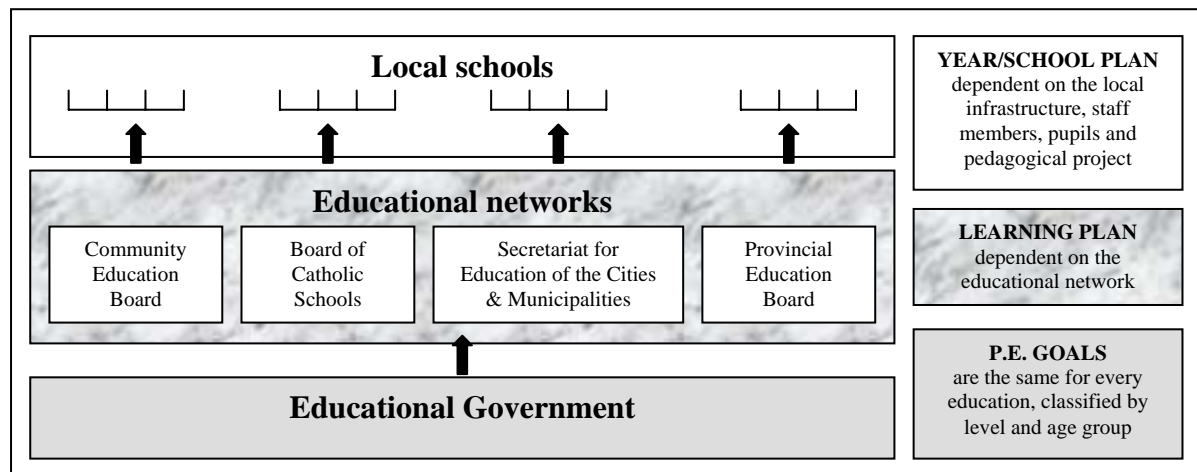


Figure 1: The three levels influencing the implementation of physical education goals.

⁷ An educational network is an organisational level that fulfils an intermediary function between a group of schools on the one hand and the community government on the other hand (De Knop & Piéron, 2000).

The local schools are required to write down their school curriculum and year plan and implement these in lesson plans. More and more the individual teachers work in co-operation with their colleagues in a physical education section, depending on the size of the school. The main concern of the course specific final attainment levels for physical education is learning children how to deal with the different aspects of the current movement culture (games, sports, dance- and fitness culture). This implicates that school physical education has: (1) to teach children competencies related to movement in order to function in our society and (2) to help children become ‘critical consumers’ of the movement culture. According to the Flemish final attainment levels, the competencies that children learn during the school physical education lessons should also be transferable to other situations. Therefore, learning to be physically active in different contexts (recreational, competitive, fitness training, etc.) is necessary. In recent years the emphasis shifted from motor- and/or physical fitness testing towards the development of a positive attitude towards physical activity.

In Flanders, the Department for Educational Development (DVO), recently decided to define ‘movement domains’ instead of sport activities. The movement domains prescribed in the final attainment levels for school physical education are: games, dance, swimming, gymnastics, self-defence and activities in nature. For young children (primary education) these domains are not strictly separated. They start with movements from which several varieties can be explored. In primary education a distinction is made between competencies concerning (a) independence in child-oriented movement situations (notion of the body, of danger, etc.), (b) rough motor skills (basic movements, play and games, rhythmic and expressive movement and moving in different environments, such as open air and water), (c) fine motor skills and (d) problem based learning. The movement activities of primary school are deepened at secondary school level offering more specialisation with a higher level of control and knowledge of the official rules (Figure 2). In the first grade of secondary education (12-14 yrs.) the movement domains are defined in a continuous line with primary education. The biggest difference with the second (14-16 yrs.) and third grade (16-18 yrs.) of secondary school is that pupils have to be able to apply the learned skills alone and with others, in different contexts or situations (transfer), with enough insight, efficiency and creativity. The final goal is having fun in regular physical activities based on competent participation in diverse movement domains (DVO, 1993a, 1993b).

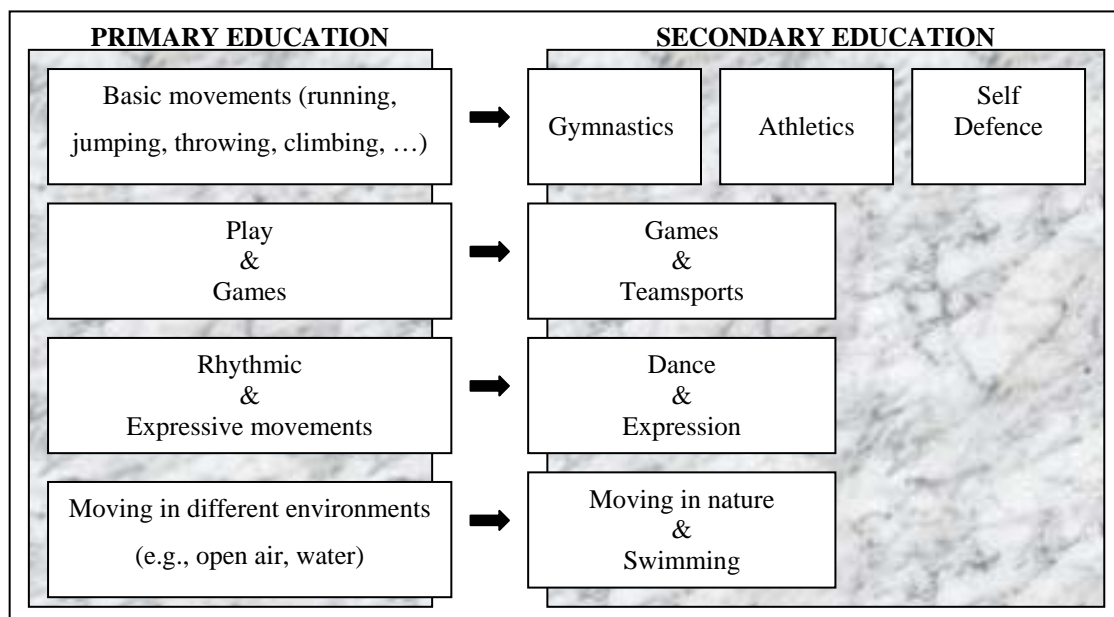


Figure 2: The different movement activities in primary and secondary education.

In the French speaking community, subject matter to be taught must be selected according to the following principles (Ministère de la Communauté Française, 2000b):

- they must allow the pupils to reach the competencies;
- they must respect the balance between individual and collective activities, between performances and personal oriented activities and between traditional and new activities;
- they must belong to a group of 33 defined activities;
- they must be taught with respect of the internal logic of the activity.

Other rules that are in use depend on the grade level, the school curriculum and the schools' project.

The physical education teachers of the German speaking community also have to follow principles described in a specific physical education document. A new version of this document was edited along with the newly established final attainment levels.

4.0. Status and problems of school physical education: a cyclic interrelation

Contrary to the growing recognition for the social meaning of sport in general, school physical education is worldwide confronted with image and justification problems (De Knop, 1999; Hardman & Marshall, 1999). Verbessem (1998) stated that school physical education in Flanders is too often seen as a game, a non-intellectual, non-educational, non-academic and/or non-productive activity that compensates for the rigours of sitting still during theoretical lessons. This viewpoint was endorsed by research of De Knop et al. (2004a, 2004b). Their data revealed that a majority of pupils, school directors, parents committees and other subject teachers undervalued the role of school physical education within the curriculum.

While the status of school physical education in the French speaking community seems to be less critical than in Flanders, informal talks with educational service representatives from the German speaking community revealed the same status concerns for school physical education as in Flanders.

One can assume that the low status of school physical education in Flanders is closely linked with the different internal and external influences that this school subject is facing at the moment. Figure 3 illustrates that the connection between status and developments can be conceived as a cyclic interrelation. On the one hand, the persistent deterioration of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of school physical education, such as the restricted curricular time allocation, the inadequate sport accommodation, the lack of official assessments, etc. all seem to reinforce the currently low status of school physical education in Flanders. On the other hand, the low status of school physical education forms a weak basis for further negotiations with regard to an augmentation of the lesson times and/or the financial and material requirements of this school subject. All these data underline that school physical education in Belgium is seen as a practical school subject, serving means of socialisation and/or compensating for the rigours of the more theoretically oriented school subjects. As a consequence, it can be concluded that school physical education in Belgium finds itself in a perilous position.

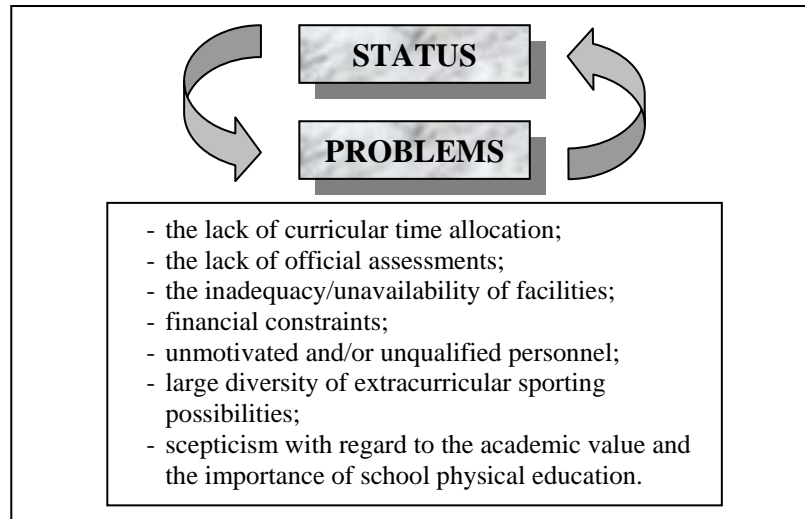


Figure 3: The cyclic interrelation between school physical education status and school physical education problems.

4.1. School physical education: a minor school subject

The low status of school physical education also emerges when compared with other school subjects. Walloon school physical education teachers for example complain that their subject matter does not receive enough credit (Agnessen, 2003; Mees et al., 1998). In Flanders, a study of Daems and Leysen (1995) revealed that 63.4% of a representative group of Flemish inhabitants did quote school physical education as an important school subject. With this score, school physical education ranked 6th on twelve school subjects. Foreign languages (87.6%), native languages (85.9%), mathematics (79.8%), computer sciences (76.6%) and education in the sense of public responsibility (65.4%) were considered to be the most important school subjects. These data indicate that, despite of the decretal legitimization (Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1990) and the development of course specific final attainment levels in this community, school physical education is in reality still not excepted on par with other seemingly superior, academic school subjects that are solely concerned with the development of a child's intellect. De Knop and colleagues (2004a) report that Flemish pupils often look upon school physical education as a pause, a time to let of steam, an occupational therapy and/or purely "a bit of fun" between the "normal" theoretical courses. The latter authors furthermore emphasise that, according to the pupils, relaxation is the most important objective of school physical education and that the course has no value with regard to preparations for the future (De Knop et al., 2004a).

The discrepancy between school physical education and other more theoretically oriented school subjects also reveals itself in the distribution of the financial resources by the schools. According to De Knop et al. (2004a) theoretical courses, e.g., chemistry and mathematics, are more likely to receive more as well as easier financial support than the school physical education course. Based on interviews with 21 expert witnesses (e.g., political authorities, administrators, managers, journalists, etc.), Cloes (2001) concluded that school physical education in Belgium does not receive enough interest and as a consequence risks to be sacrificed because of the financial autonomy of schools.

At the same time, the status of the physical education teacher is often far from positive. Lanotte et al. (1999) acknowledged for example that Walloon subject teachers

often complain that a physical education teacher has a lower working load. Although working load and salary are the same for all Belgian subject teachers, De Knop et al. (2004a, 2004b) report similar findings, with regard to opinions on the working load of Flemish physical education teachers.

4.2. The relative importance of the school physical education mark

Despite of the fact that school physical education is often entitled as a “secondary” or minor school subject, the subject has officially the same weighing as other more theoretically oriented school subjects in the Flemish grading system. In reality though, the physical education mark is not on equal footing with the traditional academic school subjects. The pupils in a study of De Knop and colleagues (2004a) experienced that school physical education had less importance during appraisals and that no kind of study was necessary to pass the school physical education tests (De Knop et al., 2004a). Behets (2001) stated that there are many arguments why not to have a school physical education mark. One of the most important is the fact that many aspects, learned during school physical education lessons, are difficult to convert into an objective mark. The physical education evaluations in Flanders are implemented continuously (process evaluation) and selectively (product evaluation) during the school year. The school physical education score should, according to the course specific guidelines and curricula, incorporate the motor performances, the cognitive and social competencies, individual prerequisites and progresses, learning efforts and the achievement motivation of the pupils.

Cloes (2003) pointed out that most of the French speaking physical education teachers that he interviewed did not use any systematic assessment strategy. They furthermore paid more attention to the pupils’ involvement and learning attitude than to performance. Official texts from the ministry of the French community underline that the most important aspect to assess is the improvement of a pupils’ initial level (Ministère de la Communauté française, 2000a). According to the ministry, no normative evaluation can be proposed because of the great disparity between social and teaching conditions within the different schools.

5.0. Various didactical models and approaches

For many years the model for didactical analyses of Van Gelder (1973) played a dominant role in Flemish elementary and secondary school physical education. This model focussed on the essential components of didactical proceedings, such as the educational objectives, the initial level of the pupils, the subject material, the didactical process, the educational tools and finally the educational outcome. Today, there is no generally accepted and/or prevalent didactical model for school physical education in Flanders, as each educational network is in favour of other didactical models and/or approaches (e.g., the classic model for didactical analyses of Van Gelder (1973), the didactical model of De Corte et al. (1976); the educational model of Valcke (2000), the process-product model of Behets (2001)). Despite of this variance, the focus of all practised didactical models is on the development of an effective physical education environment that results in positive learning outcomes (e.g., pupils that know how to deal with the different aspects of the current movement culture).

5.1. Debate on co-education

In the past, the school physical education lessons, -curriculum and -contents were organised separately for boys (e.g., soccer) and girls (e.g., dance) (Laporte, 1995). Today, the Flemish Educational Government supports the idea of co-education and introduced a single curriculum and similar school physical education contents for boys and girls. This evolution, towards co-education has been heavily debated in Flanders (Laporte, 1995). In 1999, research of Theeboom and colleagues revealed that a majority of Flemish physical education teachers (man as well as women) had negative opinions with regard to co-education during school physical education classes. They stated that they were insufficiently prepared to teach co-educational lessons. Teachers that were prepared and/or were better informed about co-education, were more convinced about the benefits of this system.

Currently, the choice whether to offer single sex or mixed sex (co-educational) classes is in Flanders dependent on the opinion of the educational network and the individual school management. Schools of the Community Education Board for example, make their decision based upon 5 factors (Gemeenschapsonderwijs, 2003):

- the general wellbeing of the pupils;
- the wellbeing of the physical education teacher (e.g., feelings of the physical education teacher towards teaching pupils of the other sex)
- the nature and size of the class;
- the available infrastructure;
- the advice of the (local) school physical education section.

Today, although co-education is officially adopted, many Flemish schools still are in favour of separate school physical education classes, thereby referring to the physical, motor and psychological (e.g., interests) differences between boys and girls (VSKO, 1997).

In the French speaking community, co-education at secondary school level is far from being accepted by the authorities. Nevertheless, some school principals implement mixed school physical education lessons in order to decrease their number of employed teachers.

5.2. Extra-curricular physical activities

In Flanders a series of extra-curricular physical activity possibilities are offered to complement the regular and compulsory school physical education classes. Dependent on the organiser and the location of the initiative, two major categories of extra-curricular activities can be distinguished.

First, there are the school linked physical activity possibilities in- or outside the school accommodation. In order to introduce more physical activity and movement opportunities, many Flemish schools offer additional activity time on repeated occasions during the school year. Examples of such initiatives are physical activities during or at the end of the school day (e.g., sport during school breaks, sport on Wednesday and/or Saturday afternoons, etc.). Some schools additionally organise single physical activity events during the school year, such as skiing vacations and/or sports days. Benoit and Laporte (1984) report that the organisation of a yearly sports day in every Flemish school has been a priority of the Flemish educational Government since 1978. The main objective behind this sports day is to initiate pupils in a wide variety of sports and incite them to be more physically active (Benoit & Laporte, 1984).

Beside the possibilities offered by the individual schools, there are also extra-curricular physical activities that are organised by external organisations (e.g., inter school competitions, etc.). These activities can be competitive as well as recreational in nature and the fact that they take place outside of the school setting, make them serve an important link with sport clubs and community. One of the most important organisations within this category is the Flemish School Sport Federation (SVS). From 1994, this federation has been active in all the Flemish educational networks (De Martelaer, 2000). Research of De Knop and colleagues (1998) showed that, despite of its preconceived objectives, the activities of the Flemish School Sport Federation are, at present too competitively oriented and as a consequence only reaching and accessible for a minority (mostly the physically stronger children) of the pupils.

In the French speaking community extra-curricular physical activities are organised on a voluntary basis. Consequently, the introduction of additional physical activity is in practise dependent on the school curriculum and the motivation of the individual physical education teachers. According to Ledent and Vandenberg (2003), most of the offered extra-curricular activities (e.g., championships during school breaks or Wednesday afternoons) were designed to promote the participation of pupils who are not yet involved in a sport club.

6.0. Arguments to legitimate physical education

School offers fundamentals for life, for our future adults, which are not only intellectual thinking beings but beings in a human body. Therefor a holistic view on education is important, stressing the necessity of physical education as a school subject together with an integrated approach of physical aspects in education.

As school physical education is intended to influence the individual's choices concerning a safe and healthy lifestyle, the accent should be on a broad approach of 'physical activities' instead of only sports. According to Borms and colleagues (2001) the problem is that current projects in Belgian schools are still emphasising too much on the promotion of sports. Therefore a recent project in Flanders, called "The policy centre" wants to evaluate physical activity interventions (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 2002).

6.1. Development of an active lifestyle

The increased emphasis on health and well being of children and (future) adults is little by little noticeable in the health promotion campaigns, but also in the approach to educate children in schools about health. Insufficient time during physical education lessons is considered as a barrier to reach fitness goals during curriculum time. Therefore, physical educators are concerned about the development of active lifestyles, given a concrete form in: (a) knowledge of the basic principles of a healthy lifestyle, (b) fitness skills and (c) positive attitudes towards being active.

Intervention strategies to promote a healthy lifestyle can be implemented at three levels: macro, meso and micro level. For the physical education teacher it is important to be aware that at meso level the setting school is the most suitable place to reach all children. To realise a good program to promote lifestyle physical activity, support by the school management and other subject teachers is necessary. Not only the content of the physical education curriculum has to be well considered for transfer in daily life situations, also the accommodation in and around the school, the possibilities and the stimulus to be physically active cannot be ignored in this.

Recently the intervention at individual level is illustrated by means of the “transtheoretical model of behaviour change” (ea. Sallis & Owen, 1999; De Bourdeaudhuij & Rzewnicki, 2001). It is the task of the physical education teacher to help design individual plans for increasing physical activity in children’s daily lives. This supposes a lot of administrative work and energy in the case of numerous classes and/or large groups. Therefore recently, CD-Roms are developed in order to support the teachers with their job (e.g., “Gymnast” of Barneveld & Seghers, 2002). At the individual level, communication with parents is necessary. Family involvement is an obvious choice, because parents control children’s access to facilities and programs, and families can support each other (Sallis & Owen, 1999). As health education is an important course-exceeding goal for the schools, initiatives can be started up by the physical education teacher to understand and influence the individual determinants of the children and carried by the whole school community in order to deal with the environmental variables.

6.2. Importance of Social Learning

Social learning and fair play education are associated with the other set of goals. These are both considered as course exceeding and course-specific for school physical education. Teaching pupils ways to work effectively in groups (competitively or co-operatively) and how to deal with conflicts and tensions in sport offers a breeding ground for social competencies (Van Assche et al., 1999). Due to the specificity of the social setting of physical education lessons, as opposed to a traditional classroom setting (often sitting), the surplus value of school physical education is often mentioned. The problem is however that no transfer of fair play or other social learning is supported by scientific data.

7.0. Future of School Physical Education

One of the most important challenges for school physical education of the future probably consists in making a bridge between in and out of school physical activity. According to De Martelaer (2000), the ABC of the school physical education subject can be summarised in three words:

- **Access:** the actual movement culture is open for children and youth;
- **Bouncing:** healthy, lively and active is the starting point to plan a program;
- **Connectivity:** connection, link with leisure time (organisations).

The physical education teacher will be the key figure in the collaboration between school, local authority and clubs. In 2000, the Flemish government for example financed a pilot project, called 'the flexible assignment of the physical education teacher'. In this pilot project, the physical education teacher was part-time seconded from teaching and received a part-time assignment for local extracurricular sports activities. Recommendations of the evaluation by De Martelaer et al. (2002) indicate that the collaboration within the school-local, authority-sports club triangle could also be stimulated by:

- youth sport contracts which are local projects introduced by the municipalities and resulting in extra subsidies (Theeboom et al., 2002);
- sport accommodation shared by sports clubs, municipalities and schools.

7.1. Concrete measures

Other future tasks of Flemish school physical education are the improvement of its educational quality and subjects' status. To be able to do this, the school physical education subject will have to:

- make work of an internal quality care system (De Knop, 2004a);
- invest in scientific research in order to prove that the pronounced school physical education goals are actually being met;
- work out more concrete examples to fill in the connection between the course-exceeding and course-specific final attainment levels;
- introduce homework to stimulate regular practise of physical activities and offer a framework for parents to become well-informed on the matter of a physical active life style (Vereecke, 1995).

Furthermore, physical education teachers should have a clearer picture of their school subject and communicate the important role and its objectives.

8.0. Conclusion

While on a governmental level attempts (e.g., a decretal legitimization for school physical education, the development of course specific final attainment levels, the confirmation of two compulsory school physical education hours a week and the same weight for the school physical education score within the grading system) are made to upgrade the school physical education subject, in actual practise school physical education often still finds itself in a perilous position. Although there may be large differences between school physical education orientation within the different Belgian schools, it can be concluded that on average school physical education in Belgium is facing the same problems (e.g., recognition, status, accommodation, time allocation, etc.) as in many other countries of the world (cf. Hardman and Marshall, 1999). As a consequence, De Knop and Piéron (2000) stated that the quality of school physical education in Belgium is not yet of a high level.

The introduction of final attainment levels in all three communities (Dutch, French and German speaking) gave cause to the development of a renewed, clear and better structured subject outline than in previous years and, as a consequence, was a first step in the direction of quality school physical education. These final attainment levels offer a surplus value, but their effective and efficient implementation and realisation is still bound by a lot of conditions.

As a consequence, the Educational Governments (Dutch, French and German speaking), educational networks and individual schools still need to do a lot of work to create an environment which makes an effective and more efficient realisation of the pronounced curricular goals possible.

Within this process, besides a raise of the quantitative (the “hardware”) requirements, school physical education will in the first place be forced to improve its quality, or as De Knop (1998) formulated it: “From quality to quantity”! At this level, the integration of a course specific quality care system could result in a more dynamic and more competitive school subject.

9.0. References

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