

Physical Education Curricula in Europe—The Dimensions of Goals and Contents

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Purpose: This study examines the progressive development of physical education (PE) curricula across 40 European countries, emphasizing conceptual ideas, curriculum goals, and content. **Methods:** Using a mixed-method approach, the study employed an expert-informed online survey developed through expert consultations to ensure validity and alignment with PE principles. Quantitative data were examined using descriptive distribution analyses with SPSS 29.0. Qualitative responses named national reports of country-level documentation were analyzed using inductive content analysis supported by ATLAS.ti for data organization. **Results:** The findings demonstrate a diverse interpretation of PE conceptualizations, which include health promotion, physical literacy, movement competence, and recreational goals. While most curricula emphasize psychomotor learning and inclusion, affective learning remains underrepresented. Variability in curricula goals and content underscores significant regional differences. **Conclusion:** Across Europe, PE curricula increasingly reflects a shared commitment to holistic and inclusive approaches. These approaches position PE as a vital component of contemporary education. Nevertheless, greater attention to both affective and cognitive learning dimensions remains essential to promote sustainable lifelong engagement in physical activity.

Keywords: curriculum comparison, mixed-methods research, curriculum analysis, educational policy

Modern societies are increasingly confronting multifaceted challenges across environmental, economic, health-related, and societal domains (Caratozzolo et al., 2023). Issues, such as climate change and resource depletion call into question established consumption patterns; the emergence of artificial intelligence and advanced technologies disrupt traditional perceptions of work; and ongoing globalization drives migration, urbanization, and heightened diversity, all of which influence national structures and economies. If children and young people continue to be taught the same content as previous generations, they risk being insufficiently prepared for a future (e.g., lack of practical skills, knowledge, and understanding to live a healthy and active life) characterized by rapid and dynamic change. Consequently, these global trends have prompted numerous countries to reconsider and reform their curricula to ensure that children are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for the future. Indeed, several Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2018) countries have implemented curriculum reforms in recent years. The 2018 European Recommendation on Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning promotes a skills-based education model that integrates cognitive abilities, attitudes, values, and emotions to meet individual and social needs. This shift requires curriculum reforms to align with OECD demands, emphasizing digital literacy, critical thinking, and teamwork, all of which are increasingly important in a changing labor market. As highlighted by D'Anna et al. (2025), physical education (PE) can play a significant role in supporting students' holistic development by strengthening their social, emotional, and cultural competencies amid rapid societal change. PE, like other subjects, helps students develop cognitive flexibility, enabling them to seek, analyze, and interconnect information for meaningful learning experiences. Similarly, within the context of PE, there is a discernible shift from traditional pedagogical approaches to more contemporary and innovative practices (Etkin, 2024).

While PE practices may evolve, the curricula concepts inherently embed political implications and values, reflecting the specific contexts within which they are developed (Tedesco et al., 2014). Traditional approaches to PE have typically encompassed several key frameworks, including the sport concept (e.g., pupils' ball control and tactical awareness), the physical concept (e.g., pupils' fitness), the movement concept (individuals' performance and equal involvement), and the health concept (e.g., health promotion and adoption of a physically active lifestyle; Vlček, 2019). While these frameworks have historically dominated PE curricula, recent developments have increasingly emphasized more holistic and engaging learning experiences for children (Pickup & Price, 2007). Various approaches to PE concepts (see e.g., Naul, 2003, 2011) have been widely disseminated across Europe (Laporte, 1999). However, traditional content-based curricula are gradually transitioning toward “competency-based

curricula” (Carlgren, 2021). These advancements are particularly evident in the evolution of physical literacy (PL) as a guiding concept (Edwards et al., 2017). In practice, however, the prevailing paradigm in many primary and secondary schools remains the multiactivity curriculum (Jess & Carse, 2020).

This multiactivity approach has been criticized for providing children with a limited PE experience, primarily focused on practicing isolated skills across various sports or activities. If the multiactivity approach becomes overly fragmented and detached from meaningful contexts, its capacity to prepare children for sustained participation in lifelong physical activity must be critically questioned. The effective development of PE competencies necessitates the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values into the educational process. As a result, there is a growing shift toward the establishment of an integrated framework, often referred to as a “knowledge-driven, competency-based curriculum,” to address this emerging need (OECD, 2019).

A universally accepted definition of curriculum is hard to find, rendering it a frequently debated and contested concept within academic discourse (OECD, 2020). While broadly encompassing the scope of students' learning experiences at school, the curriculum is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, necessitating a more refined definition. Acknowledging its intricacies, the Education 2030 definition of curriculum strives for inclusivity (encompassing formal and hidden elements); multilayered depth (addressing various curriculum aspects, mandatory and nonmandatory content); and dynamic, holistic, and multidirectional attributes, adopting an ecosystem approach over a linear, industrial (rigid structure, teacher-centered, standardized, and content-focused) model (OECD, 2020). In our working definition, the curriculum is described as a framework that guides the activities of teachers and students, while being shaped by curriculum designers. It not only establishes boundaries but also enables learning that would otherwise be challenging. While it facilitates certain educational opportunities, it also restricts what can be learned within schools and other institutions (Young, 2014). In a narrower definition, a curriculum means a teaching program. In a broader sense, curriculum means all of the learning that takes place at school or in other institutions, both planned and unscheduled (Lawton & Gordon, 1993).

Thus, the comparison of curricula could be done in various ways. For example, Goodlad et al. (1979) developed a conceptual framework for curriculum inquiry with five domains of curriculum, including ideological, formal, perceived, operational, and experimental domains. Another classification was introduced by Maňák et al. (2008), suggesting four dimensions, including the dimensions of goals, content, management, and methods. Considering the need to analyze and discuss the different declinations of the curriculum dimensions in 40 European countries, this study only focuses on

the goals and content dimensions. An analysis and interpretation of the other two domains, management and methods, will be undertaken in a further study by this author team.

While there have been several international comparisons related to PE curricula (e.g., [Hardman & Marshall, 2005](#); [Hardman et al., 2013](#); [Marshall & Hardman, 2000](#)), it has been several years since the latest comparison in Europe was conducted. Likewise, since the most recent report, new curriculum concepts and approaches have emerged in PE, such as PL and model-based practices attempting to transform the approaches to PE ([Casey & MacPhail, 2018](#); [Fernandez-Rio & Iglesias, 2024](#); [Kirk, 2013](#); [Whitehead, 2010](#)). At the same time, the global pandemic has posed significant changes to physical activity levels worldwide ([Gilic et al., 2020](#)) and may have influenced PE practices and content. As mentioned, teaching PE is often influenced by the traditions within individual countries, which vary considerably ([Forest et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, it may be influenced by the relatively low status of PE in certain countries ([Hardman & Marshall, 2005](#)). While the previous reports (e.g., [Hardman & Marshall, 2005](#), [Marshall & Hardman, 2000](#); [Hardman et al., 2013](#)) have given insights into the status of the PE, curriculum allocation, resources, and teacher preparations, there are remaining gaps in the understanding of PE curriculum in Europe.

This study is grounded in curriculum theory, drawing on Goodlad et al.'s (1979) conceptual framework of curriculum inquiry. Goodlad distinguished between five curriculum domains—ideological, formal, perceived, operational, and experiential—providing a structured lens for examining how curricula express goals, content, and implementation processes. Guided by this framework, the present study focused on two of these dimensions—curriculum goals and content—to analyze how PE is conceptualized across European countries. This theoretical orientation informed both the design of the survey instrument and the interpretation of national curricula data.

The primary aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive overview of the PE curriculum across Europe, covering 40 countries. More specifically, the study seeks to clarify the purpose of PE and to outline the key goals and content areas that shape PE in European educational systems.

Methods

Overview

This study employed a five-stage mixed-method research approach, the first stage of which involved a survey of experts from 40 European countries and a conceptualization of the study. In the second stage, we conducted meetings with the selected experts to present the study and organize it collaboratively. In the third stage, the experts from individual countries were invited to report on the goals and content of PE curricula in their country using mixed methods. In the fourth stage, we descriptively analyzed all of the closed questions. In the fifth stage, we analyzed the qualitative questions of the study. This study met the ethical requirements of the participating countries, in particular, Finland as the project host country, to review (where appropriate) national documents (publicly available data) and transform the compiled data into a collaborative expert study.

Validity and Quality Assurance Process in Survey Development

Three members of the study (K.S., J.C., and Pe.E.) designed an online survey (Webropol Survey v3.0) to assess the focus of

national curricula. Initially, two experts (Cd.A. and P.V.) with extensive experience in PE curriculum analysis were consulted to discuss the theoretical background and structure of the planned analyses. The core team (J.C. and K.S.) developed and refined the survey through an iterative process, ensuring that it contained the appropriate thematic questions on PE curricula framed with precise and clear language.

Six cycles of reflection and revision were undertaken during the development of the preliminary categories to structure data collection by the core team (J.C., K.S., Pe.E., C.D., and P.V.). Each cycle involved iterative review, discussion, and refinement of category definitions and boundaries by the core research team. After each cycle, adjustments were made based on collective reflection and alignment with the study's aims. Internal quality saturation was reached when no new conceptual categories emerged after successive cycles and existing classes demonstrated stability, coherence, and theoretical sufficiency to guide subsequent data collection. Three external PE experts were then consulted for additional feedback. These experts (H.G., I.P., and S.L.) took a neutral, external perspective and assessed the overall survey for thematic relevance, general comprehensibility (to avoid misinterpretations, reduce linguistic difficulties, and minimize expert biases), and enhanced question validity by providing feedback via email. The survey concluded with an open-ended question, allowing participants to elucidate their responses or provide general comments.

The core team outlined the study's objectives, procedures, and expected participation in two separate online meetings. To enhance the interpersonal validity of responses, country contacts were encouraged to apply the four-eye principle when discussing and evaluating their national PE curricula. All experts from the 40 participating countries provided informed consent to participate and collaborate constructively. Initially, experts were allocated 4 weeks to complete the survey, with subsequent extensions of 3 weeks and 1 week, respectively, culminating in a final deadline of January 26, 2024.

Participants

The EUROPLIT network, established in 2022 in collaboration with the International Physical Literacy Association, aims to monitor PE and PL across Europe and initially included 25 countries. In this second phase, significant efforts were made to recruit experts from smaller and Eastern European countries. This phase of the EUROPLIT study expanded to include 15 additional countries. Although experts from Bosnia–Herzegovina and Moldova were invited, they subsequently withdrew from participation. The entire survey ultimately engaged a total of 72 experts from 40 European countries, based on their experience in PE, health science, sport science, or coaching. The participants in the study had an average age of 45.7 years and an average of 20.9 years of teaching experience. The group had a close to even distribution of male and female participants (50.3% males and 49.7% females).

Data Collection Procedures

Closed-Ended Survey Questions

The questionnaire began by collecting demographic and institutional details of the country experts. The questionnaire included a total of 30 questions. Given the decentralized organization of PE in some countries, we inquired whether the respective country adhered to a national core curriculum or if multiple regional

curricula (e.g., organized by states) existed. After collecting background information, the experts successively addressed questions related to the four dimensions of curriculum (content, goals, management, and methods), of which the first two listed above are reported within this study (with the remaining dimensions reported in a second study). More specifically, the content dimension included general descriptions of PE curriculum contents (generic objectives or sport-specific) and a more specific identification of sport/movement specific areas/environments included in PE curricula across different school levels. Similarly, the goals dimension focused on the identification of conceptual ideas in PE curricula at various school levels (International Standard Classification of Education 1, 2, and 3). Respondents were asked, “Are the main conceptual ideas of the PE curriculum explicitly stated for each school level?” Responses were recorded using a binary (yes/no) scale. The conceptual ideas of the PE curricula were drawn from MacNamara et al. (2011), which investigated the psychomotor and psychobehavioral determinants emphasized in PE curricula. In addition, the growing emphasis on PL (e.g., Kirk, 2013) was incorporated into the list of conceptual ideas within the curriculum.

Open-Ended Survey Question

In addition to the closed-ended items, the questionnaire included one open-ended question asking national experts to describe the overarching purpose of PE in their national curriculum. Experts were asked to base their responses explicitly on their country’s official curriculum document and to provide a link to the original policy document where possible. Therefore, the responses represented document-based expert summaries of national curriculum texts. For the qualitative analysis, material was organized into 40 country-level textual summaries in the study named national reports, each representing the response from one country. The full qualitative dataset comprised 40 country-level responses, totaling 13,324 words (27 pages). Response length ranged from 14 to 3,721 words, with an average length of approximately 234 words.

Analysis

To ensure methodological coherence, inductive qualitative content analysis was used as the primary analytic method in this study. This approach was grounded in a nonquantitative understanding of qualitative analysis focused on the creation and interpretation of meaning-based categories rather than numerical representation of data (Hendl, 2008). The READ framework (Dalglish et al., 2020)

was applied to guide the document analysis process for/when working with qualitative components of county-level-based textual summaries. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis. These frameworks served different roles within the study and were not used as alternative analytic methods. The READ framework consists of four iterative stages: read, extract, analyze, and distill. Qualitative analysis in this study was understood as a systematic, nonnumerical organization of data aimed at identifying themes, patterns, and relationships rather than measuring frequencies (Hendl, 2008). The aim was not statistical generalization but to provide a convincing and structured account of how the purpose of PE is conceptualized across national contexts.

In the first stage (read), all national reports were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with how the purposes of PE were articulated across different national contexts. During the second stage (extract), relevant textual segments describing the aims, purposes, and objectives of PE were identified and compiled into a dataset for qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Mayring, 2014). Meaning units related to the purposes of PE were identified and assigned initial open codes. The coding process resulted in 32 initial codes, which were grouped into conceptually related subcategories (e.g., physical competence, health promotion, conceptual knowledge, social responsibility, and affective engagement) and synthesized into six overarching themes. In the third stage (analysis), these codes were then compared and grouped into subcategories based on conceptual similarity. The analytic process was primarily inductive, meaning that categories and themes emerged from the data rather than being predefined. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, the subcategories were subsequently organized into broader categories representing recurring conceptualizations of PE purposes across national curricula. An example of the coding process from raw excerpts to thematic categories is presented in Table 1. Finally, in the fourth stage (distill), the categories were synthesized into a set of overarching themes that captured common patterns in how the purpose of PE is framed across different countries. This process followed the principle of constant comparison (Švaříček & Šedová, 2007), whereby codes and emerging categories were continuously compared, refined, and reorganized to ensure conceptual coherence and analytical depth. The development of themes can thus be understood as a process of thematic coding and abstraction, where lower level codes were progressively integrated into higher order conceptual structures. The development of themes can thus be understood as a process of thematic coding and abstraction, where lower

Table 1 Example of the Qualitative Coding Process

Example excerpt from national curriculum description	Initial code	Subcategory	Main category
“pupils acquire comprehensive movement and sport-related competences”	Movement competence	Motor competence	Psychomotor learning and development
“develop physical fitness components such as endurance, speed, and flexibility”	Physical fitness	Fitness development	Psychomotor learning and development
“promote lifelong physical activity and healthy lifestyles”	Lifelong activity	Lifestyle	Health and lifestyle
“students gain knowledge of the importance of physical activity for health”	Health awareness	Health knowledge	Knowledge and understanding
“develop cooperation, solidarity, and respect for others”	Cooperation	Social relations	Social learning and development
“participate in games and sports activities”	Sports participation	Sport contexts	Contexts/arrangement
“students should experience joy and enthusiasm in sports activities”	Enjoyment	Positive experience	Affective

level codes were progressively integrated into higher order conceptual structures.

The coding process was conducted collaboratively by members of the research team (K.S. and J.C.). Throughout the analysis, coding decisions and category development were discussed iteratively in order to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency. ATLAS.ti (version 25.0.1) was used to support the organization and management of the qualitative dataset and to facilitate the coding process.

Following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), specific steps were undertaken to enhance the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings. For example, credibility was strengthened through collaborative coding and iterative discussions among the research team. Preliminary thematic summaries were returned to national experts as part of a member-checking process, allowing respondents to review the interpretations and provide feedback on the accuracy of the findings. Feedback from experts representing six countries resulted in minor revisions to the thematic summaries to more accurately reflect the purposes of PE described in their national curricula.

Throughout the research process, documentation of coding discussions and analytic decisions were maintained to enhance dependability. Interpretation was conducted at two levels: Primary interpretation occurred during the coding process and remained closely grounded in the data, while secondary interpretation took place during the writing phase, where findings were further contextualized and theoretically elaborated (Švaříček & Šedová, 2007). To support transferability, clear descriptions of the analytic procedures were provided, and thematic patterns were identified across multiple national contexts presented. Confirmability was strengthened through the use of analytic memos and by grounding interpretations directly in the textual material provided by national experts.

Results

Consistent with Goodlad et al.'s (1979) conceptual framework of curriculum inquiry, this study focuses on the formal curriculum, examining how the goals and content of PE are articulated in national curriculum documents. The results therefore present findings related to two dimensions of the formal curriculum: the conceptual goals that frame the subject and the curriculum content that structures learning in PE across countries.

Goals of PE

The analysis of the goals dimension of PE curricula focuses on two central aspects: the conceptual orientations embedded within the curriculum frameworks and the explicitly stated purposes that define the role and intent of PE as a school subject.

Conceptual Ideas in Curriculum

The analysis of conceptual ideas in PE curricula revealed that certain concepts, such as promoting a physically active lifestyle and health, are common across countries ($n = 40$). Similarly, empowering students ($n = 32$) and providing enjoyment or fun through PE (22) were identified as conceptual ideas by more than half of the participating countries. PL was recognized as a conceptual idea in the PE curricula of 19 countries. In addition, talent and sport excellence emerged as conceptual ideas in the curricula of nine European countries. Benefiting society was identified in 19

curricula across Europe. The conceptual ideas of PE curricula in lower secondary schools in each country are presented in Table 2.

Purpose of PE

Based on the responses to open-ended questions regarding the purpose of the subject, six main topics were identified. The most common psychomotor learning/development ($n = 37$) and promoting a healthy lifestyle ($n = 33$) were recognized as key objectives in the PE curricula. Likewise, different sport contexts were identified in the purpose of the curriculum ($n = 29$). Affective learning and development were less frequently mentioned, with approximately half of the countries ($n = 22$) including this concept in their PE curricula. Interestingly, fun or joy, identified as a conceptual idea in the curriculum, was not explicitly referenced as a part of the subject's purpose. While social learning tasks were incorporated into many curricula as general purpose, explicit references to relationships or social tasks were less common ($n = 11$). As a part of social learning, the concept of equal opportunities and inclusion was mentioned in 16 curricula. Cognitive learning was also identified as a curricular component, encompassing knowledge and understanding ($n = 22$) and, to a lesser extent, rules and safety ($n = 6$; see Figure 1).

Content of PE

Among 40 countries, 14 reported having general content in their PE curricula with a strong emphasis on movement competence. Similarly, 20 countries indicated that their curricula include general contents, though some specific sports are explicitly mentioned. By contrast, five countries stated that their PE curricula are primarily based on specific sport content. Among the sport-specific content, the most frequently identified activities included ball games ($n = 29$), gymnastics ($n = 27$), dance ($n = 30$), and outdoor sports ($n = 29$). In addition, fitness ($n = 25$), track and field ($n = 26$), and water sports ($n = 25$) were also commonly included in national curricula. In general, only 11 countries identified traditional sports as part of the content in their curricula. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of contents in PE curricula across these countries.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore and identify similarities and differences between national PE curricula across Europe. While international comparisons on PE curricula have already been undertaken in the past (e.g., Hardman & Marshall, 2005; Hardman & Marshall, 2000; Hardman et al., 2013), evolving societal contexts, educational reforms, and emerging trends necessitate a renewed and deeper analysis of current PE curricula. This study focused on the dimensions of goals and content, providing an overview of these aspects based on expert perspectives. Findings from another study show that promoting a healthy lifestyle is one of the focus areas in European PE curricula. In addition, the inclusion of the concept of PL is becoming increasingly prominent, reflecting its growing importance in shaping modern PE curricula (Carl et al., 2026). While the overarching formulations in the curricula emphasize promoting a physically active lifestyle, many curricula still maintain a strong focus on sport-specific content. This coexistence of lifestyle-oriented aims and sport-specific emphases suggests that European PE curricula reflect both traditional and contemporary priorities.

Table 2 Conceptual Ideas of European Countries PE Curricula

	PA	HEALTH	EMP	SOC	FUN	PL	TALENT
Austria	X	X	X				
Belgium	X	X	X				
Bulgaria	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Croatia	X	X	X		X		X
Cyprus	X	X	X				
Czech R.	X	X	X		X	X	
Denmark	X	X					
England	X	X	X				
Estonia	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Finland	X	X	X		X		
France	X	X	X		X	X	
Germany	X	X	X				
Greece	X	X	X	X		X	
Greenland	X	X				X	
Hungary	X	X		X		X	
Iceland	X	X	X		X	X	
Ireland	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Italy	X	X	X		X	X	X
Kazakhstan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Latvia	X	X	X	X		X	
Lithuania	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Luxembourg	X	X	X		X	X	
Montenegro	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Netherlands	X	X	X		X		
North Makedonia	X	X					X
North Ireland	X	X	X	X	X		X
Norway	X	X	X				
Poland	X	X	X	X	X		
Portugal	X	X	X	X		X	
Romania	X						X
Scotland	X	X	X	X	X		
Serbia	X	X		X		X	
Slovakia	X	X		X		X	
Slovenia	X	X	X		X	X	
Spain	X	X	X	X	X		
Sweden	X	X	X				
Switzerland	X	X	X		X		X
Türkiye	X	X		X			X
Ukraine	X	X	X	X	X		X
Wales	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Note. PA = physical activity for life; HEALTH = health and welfare; EMP = empowerment/enableness; SOC = benefiting the society; FUN = fun/distraction; PL = physical literacy; TALENT = talent and sport excellence; PE = physical education.

Conceptual Ideas

Physical activity for life was identified as a conceptual idea in all examined PE curricula. In PE curricula, physical activity for life has been seen as one of the ethos of PE (Boyle et al., 2008). Similarly, the rise of PL as a central concept of PE curricula (Claudia, 2022) further emphasizes the importance of promoting lifelong physical activity habits as a fundamental component of the subject.

Health or “healthism” has been embedded in PE curricula for decades (e.g., Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989), although underlying ideologies have evolved. In earlier decades, within the context of industrial capitalism, the ideal of a physically healthy body equated to a healthy worker, underscoring the importance of health in PE (Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989). However, the focus may have shifted over time. Contemporary PE curricula justify health-oriented approaches as solutions to modern health challenges, such as poor fitness, low levels of motor skill (Macdonald et al., 2018),

	Psychomotor learning and development					Health and lifestyle			Knowledge and understanding								Social learning and development								Contexts / arrangements			Affective		
	ABI	FIT	MOC	MOS	PHY	BEH	HEA	LIFE	AWA	BODY	CUL	KNO	RES	RUL	SAFE	EQU	FAIR	INC	REL	RESP	ROL	SOC	ENV	GAM	SPO	ATT	EXP	WEL		
Aust																														
Belg																														
Bulg																														
Cro																														
Cyp																														
Czech																														
Den																														
Eng																														
Est																														
Fin																														
Fran																														
Ger																														
Greece																														
Green																														
Hun																														
Ice																														
Ire																														
Ita																														
Kazakhstan																														
Latvia																														
Lith																														
Lux																														
Mont																														
Ned																														
N-Ir																														
N-Ma																														
Nor																														
Pol																														
Por																														
Rom																														
Scot																														
Ser																														
Slova																														
Slove																														
Spa																														
Swe																														
Switz																														
Tur																														
Ukr																														
Wal																														

Figure 1 — Purposes of physical education in different countries. AB = ability; FIT = fitness; MOC = motor competence; MOS = motor skills; PHY = physical capacity; BEH = behavior; HEA = health; LIFE = lifestyle; AWA = awareness; Body = body; CUL = cultural; KNO = knowledge; RES = responsibility; RUL = rules; SAF = safety; FAIR = fair play; INC = inclusion; REL = relationships; RESP = respect; ROL = roles; SOC = social learning; ENV = environment; Gam = games; SPO = sports; ATT = attitude; EXP = experience; WEL = well-being.

and challenges with mental health issues (Roccliffe et al., 2024). While health-related PE represents a valuable component, an overemphasis on health-oriented approaches risks reinforcing the stratifications of neoliberalism, potentially perpetuating existing social inequities, according to Amundsen et al. (2025).

While physical activity for life and health was a dominating concept in PE curricula, the concept of empowerment was not that common in the examined curricula across countries. However, the PL approach, when not limited to being merely theoretical, may and should actively promote empowerment as a part of the curriculum, even if it is not explicitly stated. It is important to consider that a strong focus on competitive sport can undermine empowerment ideals (Thomson & Robertson, 2014). Another

conceptual idea found in some PE curricula is talent development. While talent development was explicitly identified in only a few curricula, it remains present in the hidden curriculum, particularly in those with a strong emphasis on competitive sport (e.g., Croston, 2013). Globally, talent development continues to be a key aspect of PE ideologies in some countries (Fry & McNeill, 2011; Xiang & Chao, 2022).

A common critique among scholars (e.g., Kirk, 2010; Tinning, 2012) is that PE has largely preserved its structure since approximately the mid-20th century, transcending national boundaries and encompassing countries with formal affiliations to economically developed nations. Despite minor shifts, PE has remained fundamentally unchanged, transitioning primarily from PE as

	Ball games	Combat sports	Commuting sports	Dance	Fitness	Games	Gymnastics	Ice sports	Outdoor sports	Track & Field	Traditional Sports	Water Sports	Well-being	Winter Sports	Other
Aust															
Bulg															
Cro															
Cyp															
Czech															
Den															
Eng															
Est															
Fin															
Fran															
Ger															
Green															
Hun															
Ice															
Ire															
Ita															
Kazakhstan															
Latvia															
Mont															
Ned															
N-Ir															
N-Ma															
Nor															
Pol															
Por															
Rom															
Scot															
Ser															
Slova															
Slove															
Swe															
Switz															
Tur															
Ukr															

Figure 2 — Sports explicitly included in national PE curricula. PE = physical education; AB = ability; FIT = fitness; MOC = motor competence; MOS = motor skills; PHY = physical capacity; BEH = behavior; HEA = health; LIFE = lifestyle; AWA = awareness; Body = body; CUL = cultural; KNO = knowledge; RES = responsibility; RUL = rules; SAF = safety; FAIR = fair play; INC = inclusion; REL = relationships; RESP = respect; ROL = roles; SOC = social learning; ENV = environment; Gam = games; SPO = sports; ATT = attitude; EXP = experience; WEL = well-being.

gymnastics to PE as sport techniques (Kirk, 2013). However, model-based approaches and pedagogical models could change this historical continuity (Fernandez-Rio & Iglesias, 2024; Lounsbury & McKenzie, 2015).

Purpose of the Subject

The open-ended question regarding the purpose of PE revealed that this, in different countries, is closely tied to health and lifestyle, psychomotor learning, cognitive learning, and social learning (see Figure 1). This is in line with the national experts’ idea of the main purpose of the subject as they highlighted being physically active and learning physical, social, and emotional skills, but with less mentions about cognitive learning (Dyson et al., 2021; Ní Chróinín et al., 2020; Solmon, 2015, Sun, 2016; Wright et al., 2021).

While there are growing discussions about equality and inclusion in PE (e.g., Pérez-Gutiérrez et al., 2023), this was less frequently highlighted in the examined PE curricula and was only

identified in 16 curricula descriptions of the purpose of the subject. Inclusiveness should be kept in mind when redesigning PE curriculum (OECD, 2019), as PE is becoming a subject and learning area in which students’ well-being is at its core (OECD, 2019) with a wider and long-term perspective. However, equality may often be mentioned in the general sections of the curriculum; and hence, it should be considered also in PE.

Based on OECD reports, a PE curriculum should be anticipated to establish connections with other cross-curricular themes (e.g., technology and well-being; OECD, 2019). Findings from this study point to responsibility, respect, and culture being linked to wider learning outcomes in education rather than to the central main purpose of PE, but still these were quite rarely mentioned. According to Calderón et al. (2020), one of the key trends in education is technology, which can improve PE in schools. More specifically, technology may promote learner-centered approaches, increase active engagement through innovative approaches, and better account for students’ heterogeneous experiences (e.g., Calderón

et al., 2020). However, using technology was not mentioned in the purpose of the examined curriculum. Technology in PE has been seen as a substitute for teachers but not as transforming teaching and learning practices (Sargent & Calderón, 2021). Here, the OECD report (2019) stresses that technology can promote a learner-centered approach, improve engagement via gamification, and differentiate learning experiences and feedback based on personalized data. Another rising topic in the cross-cultural themes is sustainability. It could fit quite well into the realm of outdoor education. However, sustainability is still quite rarely mentioned in the curriculum level (Lundvall et al., 2024), and only a few countries identified “environment” as the purpose of the subject. Through the lens of Goodlad’s (1979) framework, these findings illustrate how the formal curriculum expresses the intended purposes of PE within national education systems. These intended purposes can be seen as a result of socially constructed meaning-making implicitly embedded in collaborative exercises such as policy making.

Content of PE

One of the most salient findings of this study is the continued dominance of multiactivity, sport-based, and fitness-oriented content in national PE curricula. This mirrors what Metzler and Colquitt (2021) and others have termed the traditional “multi-activity curriculum” model in school-based PE, where students rotate through short units of different sports and fitness activities, emphasizing technical skill and performance. This finding situates the analyzed curricula within a long-standing global trend also observed in United States, European, and Australasian school systems (Casey & Goodyear, 2015; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010; Haerens et al., 2011; Lund & Tannehill, 2014).

The most common contents across the curricula (e.g. ball games, track and field, water sports, dance, and gymnastics) reflect the global sport culture, and most of these are also competed in the Olympic Games. In addition, it is in line with the most practiced sports in the world on different continents (Hulteen et al., 2017). This kind of “PE as sports” pronounces emphasis on sports, which often overshadows alternative domains of knowledge and varieties of movement practices (Kirk, 2006). This might also contribute to the challenge of justifying PE’s place in the curriculum (Kirk, 2010). School-based research has repeatedly shown that this sport- and technique-centered model continues to dominate teaching practice, despite policy calls for broader and more educative forms of PE. Observational studies have indicated that teachers often reproduce this structure because it is culturally familiar, resource efficient, and institutionally legitimized as “real PE” (Casey & Goodyear, 2015; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010; Haerens et al., 2011). Moreover, teachers’ professional identities are frequently rooted in sport participation, reinforcing the traditional focus on performance and competition (Kirk, 2010). PE teachers and PE teacher education educators do lack systematic career development opportunities (Tannehill et al., 2021). Consequently, although curricula in many countries now include aims related to well-being, inclusion, and lifelong physical activity, these are often overshadowed by the enduring logic of the multiactivity, sport-based model (Lund & Tannehill, 2014; Metzler & Colquitt, 2021). At the same time, recent curricular reforms indicated attempts to broaden this traditional focus, suggesting a gradual shift toward more health and well-being-oriented perspectives and more holistic views via, for instance, PL (Carl et al., 2025). Moreover, in some countries, “sport” has been replaced with “movement.” It was

advocated for replacing sport-specific content with fitness activities that are specifically designed and tailored to enhance health and well-being (Chen, 2022).

While there seems to be a tendency to change the focus of PE more toward physical activity for life (like the ideology of PL), global competitive sports are still quite common, a central part of the subject. Only two curricula identified that their focus is more general; for example, fundamental movement skills and sports are not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum. These findings reinforce previous observations that, despite decades of reform rhetoric, PE remains largely sport centered and performance driven. For instance, several European curricula continue to follow skill-based, competence-oriented delivery (Kirk, 2010), echoing what Larsson and Quennerstedt (2016) describe as the “worldwide multi-activity curriculum in PE.” Likewise, it is also good to keep in mind that the intended curriculum is not the same as the enacted curriculum. Intended curriculum is always interpreted, translated, and enacted by educators; and hence, the ideals of intended curriculum might be far away from what is effectively lived in the school environment (Gobby, 2017). Hence, each PE teacher may bring to PE contents something that is not a part of the intended curriculum and may foster the idea of “worldwide multi-activity curriculum in PE.”

While PE curricula contents included a lot of common competitive sports, there were not that many curricula that would have identified commuting sports (e.g. scooting and skateboarding) as a part of the curriculum. As different kinds of commuting modes have become increasingly relevant to children’s and young peoples’ daily lives (e.g., via e-scooters and shared bike systems), these have not found their space in national curricula even though they can have a crucial role as a daily routine for physical activity and promoting an active and healthy lifestyle (Bretones & Marquet, 2023). This should be highlighted as not only are these promoting sustainable development goals, which in several countries are part of the overall curriculum but also these may motivate students with little interest in competitive sports to be more physically active (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017). While there are reports of the rise of personalized and lifestyle sports and at the same time declining popularity in team sports (Macdonald et al., 2018), this is not yet reflected at the PE curriculum level.

While fitness has become a central content in PE curricula, it may also have a historical role as assessment in PE has predominantly concentrated on quantifiable measures such as sports and physical achievements through tests, rather than emphasizing the anticipated outcomes related to individual, social, and affective aspects of student development (Lopez-Pastor et al., 2013). In addition, fitness tests are often implemented in isolation from the broader PE curriculum (O’Keeffe, 2020; Simonton et al., 2019). Literature shows that groups of students do not know what the purpose of the subject is and what they are expected to learn during the lessons (Borghouts et al., 2017; Modell & Gerdin, 2022). While fitness tests are criticized, at the same time, there is a growing interest in PL and its possibilities for assessment (e.g., Barnett et al., 2023). This has created numerous assessment methods for PL and has led to a perplexing situation for those aiming to comprehend, instruct, and evaluate PL (Robinson & Randall, 2017). In addition, to fully implement PL in school PE, more education is needed with preservice teachers (Stoddart & Selanders, 2022). Overall, despite increasing references to health, well-being, and PL (Carl et al., 2023), our findings suggest that many European PE curricula articulate ambitions that resonate with holistic perspectives, including health, well-being, inclusion, and broader competencies for

active citizenship. At the same time, the continued dominance of traditional multiactivity, sport- and fitness-based content indicates that these ambitions are layered onto, rather than replacing, long-standing curricular structures. This coexistence implies that a shift toward more holistic and inclusive PE cannot be achieved through minor adjustments to existing practice. Beyond revising curriculum texts, sustainable change will require long-term investment in teacher education, collaborative curriculum design, and school conditions that support teachers in experimenting with alternative content and pedagogical models.

Strengths and Limitations

When analyzing qualitative data, researcher reflexivity is essential for ensuring transparency and interpretive integrity (Berger, 2015). The research team's positionality inevitably influences interpretation; therefore, we critically reflected on our disciplinary backgrounds and prior experiences throughout the analysis. The authors represent diverse expertise in PE, health science, sport science, and coaching, which provided both insider and outsider perspectives on the data. Limitations regarding language should be considered. The work of translating original documents may have led to a simplification of some national terms and disregard for cultural aspects regarding the interpretation of these terms. For instance, in some languages, there might be synonyms for "sport" that are not that competitive and are more recreational activities. However, each country representative had an opportunity to extensively check the coding of their curriculum to reduce this kind of bias. While this study exclusively examined the intended curriculum, it is important to acknowledge that it does not capture the complexities of the lived curriculum as enacted and experienced within the school environment. Another limitation concerns the nature of the qualitative material. The analysis was based on expert-produced summaries of curriculum documents rather than on full-document coding conducted centrally across all national curricula. This approach enabled broad international coverage and was strengthened through expert verification, and some issues of national policy language may have been condensed in the summarization process. Future studies should concentrate on the differences between enacted curriculum and lived curriculum.

Conclusion

This article aimed to examine the current situation of PE curricula in Europe with two different dimensions from the curriculum: dimension of goals and dimension of content. Within the dimension of goals, we examined two central aspects: "the conceptual orientations embedded within the curriculum frameworks and the explicitly stated purposes that define the role and intent of PE". Based on these, it can be said that the European PE curricula are strongly linked to promoting physically active lifestyle. To reach these aims, the examined European PE curricula seem to be still quite sport-specific and "PE as sport-techniques" or multiactivity PE curriculum can still be seen as one of the dominant ways to implement PE. While there is a clear indication that broader concepts of bodily learning, movement competence, and PL, as well as fitness-oriented content, are getting more space, the enacted curriculum continues the story of PE as sport techniques. As there are still curricula that are aiming for talent development and identification, it is clear that "PE as sport techniques" is dominant in some countries. If there is a strong common understanding for this kind of approach, it is hard to judge, but it is reasonable to question whether this kind of

curriculum can benefit all students, even from a health perspective. The relevance of PE to daily lives should be one of the key points of PE curricula. To meet individual as well as broader societal needs, inclusion and individual forms of delivering PE should be highlighted and considered in future PE curricula reforms.

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