

School Physical Education in Slovakia at the beginning of the New Millennium - problems and perspectives

Under new economic and social conditions now, ten years after the change in the social system, reflections about the future of the educational system in Slovakia have become more intense. School physical education is included in that new order and builds the bases for its renewal. To improve the Physical Education System in schools and to bring it closer to the European Community systems, one must develop every action that has had positive outcomes in the last years, and, above all, correct the negative aspects that have hindered better results. In this paper, our main goal is call the readers' attention to the obstacles we have to cope with nowadays. At the onset of the new millennium, the latest issues in School Physical Education in Slovakia are, among others:

1. Development of the new concept of School Physical Education.

The perspective from which individuals and their roles in society were considered has undergone meaningful changes in the last ten years. In the past, authoritarian society used to insert individuals in a net of norms and duties that imposed technical results and perfection. That was a concept-oriented option (essentialism), which reserved no place for individuals and conveyed no meaning to them, but rather to its efficacy in the system collectivity.

Today, the existential anthropocentric options come first, and after them, society allows individuals to have freedom of choice, proposes and develops all humankind's potentialities, seeks to motivate and to please rather than to convince and to make impositions.

In modern programs, structure and freedom should be prepared to match each other. Respect for the individual does not necessarily imply that one should discard an educational system that enforces certain essential rules for life in society.

A new concept of School Physical Education is constructed upon those new fundamentals, upon the notions of democracy, humanism and freedom. We consider that the most important task in School Physical Education today is that all students receive a deep and long-lasting contribution to the physical activity that they have gladly chosen and which makes them feel pleasantly rewarded. They also receive the benefits on their health, physical fitness, resistance strength, and perfection of movements. That practice also becomes an unavoidable need for them and plays an essential part in their lifestyle, not only during the

school years, but in their adult age as well. Our teaching programs must develop that task, placing special emphasis on the following major aspects:

- a) Emotion-oriented teaching - Physical Education should make students feel more pleasure, joy, self-fulfillment and self-confidence; teaching should be more interesting, more attractive, endowed with a positive emotional factor.
- b) Intellect-oriented teaching - Physical Education should open to the students the possibility of acquiring new knowledge that could lead to a better understanding of the teaching and learning processes. By accepting Physical Education and feeling supported by it, students could actively participate in different voluntary physical activities outside school. By influencing feelings and reason, it should develop a positive and long-lasting relationship between the students and Physical Education.
- c) Creativity-guided teaching – creativity, diversity of methods, approaches, strategies, the process attractiveness should be an important part of each teacher's work, and the students' creativity development should be an essential part of education.
- d) Socialization of education – Physical Education should play a more active role in the development of interpersonal relationships, of relationships between students and teachers, between the students as a group, among all students, and between the students and society as a whole.
- e) Students' motivation and engaging process – should link students to physical activity, should enhance students' motivation and engagement in the teaching process – should definitely replace coercion and intimidation, and the environment should be more relaxed, constructed on a gentle relationship between teacher and student.

2 – Better proportion between the influence on the basic physical and motor qualities and the learning of motor skills and knowledge.

The appropriate motor development and performance are always important aims of School Physical Education. Scientific research about the motor performance demonstrates that the development of strength, speed, lightness and coordination of movements in Slovakian population has stagnated. Low resistance has also remained the same. That situation can only manage the amount of Physical Education enough in children and youngsters' physical activity during both the compulsory Physical Education courses and several forms of voluntary physical activity in and out of school.

We accept the previous condition that students must also receive elementary instruction in Physical Education. The development of basic motor and physical qualities and the learning of motor skills are two sides of the issue that should also be conveniently

balanced and connected to each other. The contents, the methods, the forms, the teaching means must have a more efficient influence on the physical, functional and motor development of students, on their awareness, their behavior and their practice. A more open content provides more possibilities of development to both sides. The latest teaching programs (1996 - to elementary schools, 1997, - to secondary schools) have already incorporated that demand. There was a 25 to 40% increase in the number of 45-minute courses that provided elective contents in a school year

The compulsory contents include sports games, gymnastics, track and field practices, swimming, skiing, tourism and theoretical knowledge.

The elective contents offer students and teachers the possibility of choice between different games, dances, and aerobic and other physical activities as long as the school environment and background are respected, and the students' interests and the teachers' specialization are observed.

3. Students evaluation and grades.

The objectives and tasks proposed to children also imply the existence of control system and evaluation, so that the level of accomplishment to those objectives and tasks can be assessed. We wish to emphasize the individual's assessment - the assessment of the development made by the student during a given period of time and the assessment regarding previous physical conditions. That procedure should allow every student to evaluate his/her own success, including children who have motor and physical handicaps. Other major assessment signs encircle students' interest for physical activities and manifestations, such as their effort, attendance, creativity, and knowledge about School Physical Education, learning of common and elective contents and motor performance as well.

Our latest research efforts have led us to a form of assessment. We applied the 5-point grade system (1 - the best). Research demonstrated that that kind of system did not provide the children and their parents with enough objective and detailed information about the students' qualities and deficiencies. Nowadays we are considering the possibility of supplementing the grade system with the oral evaluation and we hope that will help make Physical Education more friendly to the students.

4. Acquisition and maintenance of students' interest in physical, sport and tourist activity.

Physical Education should always be included in the school's elementary courses, among the favorite subjects. The survey about the school subject popularity at the beginning

of secondary schools showed us that it was, in fact, the favorite subject among boys. On the other hand, the same students included Physical Education among the least important school subjects. The high number of students who were discharged from compulsory Physical Education classes confirms that students often lose interest in Physical Education and do not get along well with Physical Education in general, mainly in most advanced classes in secondary school.

The concepts applied in the latest years have led to theoretical interpretations about the relevance of school in the development of a positive, long-lasting and active relationship with physical, sport and tourist activities and with the concern children themselves attribute to their own physical development and movement. In spite of that fact, we are not always successful in putting those concepts into practice. An evidence of that issue is the increased number of students discharged from compulsory Physical Education classes, and mainly their low participation in different forms of voluntary activities, both in and out of school. In 1986, for instance, the number of children who participated in several forms of voluntary physical activities in school was around 35%. In the latest years, that figure came down to 10 - 15%. It must be highlighted that voluntary activities not provided with physical movement (the videos, the computers, the books etc.) have increased much, as a means to pass free time, when compared with the situation in the 80s and have kept the children away from physical activity. We believe that the change in that situation may be improved by means that have more action on students' feelings, emotions (games, competition, activities that include music) and also by more friendly and closer relationship between teachers and students.

5. The administration of School Physical Education, scientific research and the practical application of results.

There are two groups with different opinions about Physical Education and Sports administration - the one that claims for a directive central system, and the one that claims for an absolutely liberated system. Our experience with the central, administrative and bureaucratic system of compulsory Physical Education in the previous years - a system based on norms and commands - has demonstrated there are negative consequences, mainly on the development of Physical Education teachers' independence, activity, initiative and improvement. On the other hand, some current trends leading to decentralization and absolute liberation present risks of activities carried out without any concepts, without any system and disconnected from specific elements.

We believe that, according to the new concept of Physical Education administration, we must struggle to keep a balance between those two trends. We want to allow space large enough to the teachers' initiative and creative activity, but, we also want to have the best teachers' experience and knowledge and the results of the scientific research transmitted to other teachers. Unfortunately, in the latest years, scientific research has been struggling against lack of financing resources.

At the school level, more concern for the administration of Physical Education and School Sports must be presented to the Physical Education officers and school principals. The public opinion poll carried out with 670 Physical Education teachers at secondary school units in the latest years demonstrated that most of them had a relatively positive opinion about the Physical Education administration by the school authorities, especially when on the board of directors there was at least one professor qualified with School Physical Education specialization course. On the other hand, the teachers' most critical reaction was directed to the higher officers, mainly the authorities in the National Education Ministry. According to them, those officers did not show much interest in the difficulties they faced, their labor conditions and their social status. The opinion polls demonstrated that there was much to be criticized at all levels.

In the latest years, agencies were created to support Physical Education teachers, Physical Education administration and voluntary sports organized by schools. The Slovakian Association of School Sports and the Slovakian Scientific Association of Physical Education and Sports will certainly contribute to the resolution of some problems, since they have the means to reach their objectives.

6. Education of Physical Education Teachers

Physical Education teachers for Secondary School and Senior Elementary Schools Units are educated at the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Comenius in Bratislava, and at some Pedagogy School at several universities. The five-year long course awards two degrees. Since 1999/2000 there has also been the four-year long single-degree course, which is four years long. School Physical Education new concepts encourage and motivate the professionals in college courses, since they must be applied to new teachers' qualification. The interest in Physical Education increases every year, but at the end of their studies, only 25 - 35% of the Physical Education graduates start their

professional career. Low salaries and inadequate social conditions make them seek other professions. That is one of the reasons why there is still no unemployment among Physical Education teachers.

7. Legislative, material and personal conditions for the teaching of Physical Education, teachers' social situation and the pay for their work.

Legislative, material and personal conditions for the teaching of Physical Education must be created so that different tasks in School Physical Education can be attained.

The most relevant among those conditions is considered to be at least three compulsory Physical Education classes a week at every educational level and kind of schools. That requirement was already part of the teaching programs in 1990, but the real situation is quite different. The state of schools and the actual economic situation do not offer possibilities to teach those three compulsory classes at every school. The number of classes falls down to two and sometimes just one of them is feasible. We consider that is an insufficient number, since it does not provide all the needs of school Physical Education. Besides, as we have already stated, there has been a drop in the number of participating students in several of the voluntary physical activities organized by the schools.

Most of the participants are members of school sports clubs affiliated to School Sports Slovakian Association, whose main occupation is to organize sports competitions among elementary and secondary school students. The number of school sports clubs always increases; in 1991, for instance, the Association had 1030 sports clubs, and that number is higher than 2000 nowadays. Nevertheless, less attention is given to students' regular preparation, mainly to the children who have motor and physical handicaps. Specialized courses for those children, too, fail to comply with compulsory Physical Education principles. Spatial and material conditions in the schools are also considered inappropriate for the teaching of Physical Education. The most recent research papers have demonstrated that the situation is always poor. For instance, for the teaching of sports games, only 70% of secondary schools are adequately equipped, for track and field sports only 50% of them are adequately equipped and for swimming that figure comes down to 6%. The grants allocated to public education by the State have become increasingly meager and are not enough to build new school sports facilities, stadiums, fields or to buy new equipment. The funds are barely enough to reconstruct destroyed buildings and to provide the necessary repairs.

The major influencing factor on Physical Education teaching quality is the level of educators' personal assurance. There are also a few negative trends in that sphere, mainly

among elementary schools. That is period when children are most sensitive to the quality of teaching, and when bases are settled for their positive and long-lasting interest in physical activities and Physical Education as school subjects. In the first grade of elementary schools, all subjects, including Physical Education are taught by only one teacher. During the school year of 1997/98, 33% of those teachers did not have the necessary qualification, and 91% of them were women. The number of female teachers in the first grade increases yearly. Besides that fact, 22,5% of them have already retired or are old enough to retire within a short time, and the other 28% are older than 40. Many of the problems that teachers in secondary schools and colleges have to face result right from the very low level of Physical Education practice in the elementary schools.

Physical Education teaching in senior elementary school is not any better. During the 1997/98 school year, Physical Education was taught by teachers among whom only 61% had the specialized college qualification. Secondary schools were in a better situation: 85,7% of the teachers in the educational schools and 89,7% of them in vocational schools held qualification titles. The situation was better still in Physical Education specialization schools, where 90,6% of the teachers had the required proficiency. The number of women in public schools keeps the same increasing trend in junior and senior elementary schools. The rate of senior teachers is also very high. More than 7000 officially retired teachers should be effectively replaced in the next five years plus thousands of teachers who will be old enough to retire by then. The Education Ministry decision to reduce 5% of the number of teachers in all the schools and courses in the year 2000 might aggravate the situation. That action could jeopardize the teaching quality of many subjects, among which, Physical Education.

We also registered that the number of Physical Education teachers with the necessary qualification degrees has decreased in some of the schools in the latest years. For instance, during the school year of 1984/85 97,10% of the teachers had the necessary qualification degrees in the vocational schools, and that figure has decreased to 89,7% today. The teachers' poor social situation forces them to pursue their professional accomplishment in other social spheres where they can get better salaries.

Social status and the salaries received by Physical Education teachers, specifically, and by all the other teachers, in general, do not correspond to the relevance of their work. An evidence of that fact is that the number of college-qualified professionals engaged in education exceeds the number of college-educated employees at the rate of 76%. In spite of that, the average salary in the national education sphere is as high as 90% of the national average salary. Our survey included 670 Physical Education teachers, and 75% of them considered their salary insufficient. That insufficient salary often forced them, mainly male teachers, to choose another professional career. Otherwise, they would have to teach extra

classes to increase their income. A consequence of those extra classes, sometimes from 5 to 8 classes (common practice in elementary and secondary schools, the number of classes will increase to 22 classes a week in the year 2000), committed teachers with a great deal of extra office work. Having to cope with an overload of work, teachers often did their job very superficially, had health problems and neglected their specific intellectual improvement. We believe that Physical Education teachers will only be able to start new tasks successfully when their authority and status are respected. Reaching that status will also depend on them, and on the opportunity their work will be appropriately rewarded. Otherwise, there is a great probability they will quit their profession and there are more and more chances the secondary school students will eventually lose interest in that profession.

Conclusion

Aggravating spatial and material condition, the increasing number of women professionals, the unfavorable age status of the faculty members, the decreasing qualification in the Physical Education teaching, the dropout rate of teachers who decide to embrace other professions, the decreasing number of compulsory Physical Education classes really taught, the growing number of students who are discharged from mandatory Physical Education classes, plus the low attraction the voluntary physical activities organized by decadent schools exert on the students, the stagnation status of children and youngsters' motor performance, the sinking value of grants invested in scientific research, the restrictions against school Physical Education - are only some of the problems that hinder our efforts and must be solved in the future. Physical Education in Slovakia reflects the problems of society as a whole. The solution to that situation lies in economic prosperity and in the increase of national cultural level so that Physical Education and Education can occupy their valuable position in social hierarchy. College school administration, school management and teachers' social and education activities must work together to reach those goals.

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