

NEW TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Anca Colibaba¹, Irina Gheorghiu², Stefan Colibaba³, Ovidiu Ursa⁴

¹Gr. T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi / Fundatia EuroEd (ROMANIA)

²Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg (GERMANY)

³Universitatea Al. I. Cuza Iasi (ROMANIA)

⁴Universitatea de Medicina si Farmacie "Iuliu Hatieganu" / QUEST, Cluj-Napoca (ROMANIA)

Abstract

The article focuses on Not Only Fair Play project (Erasmus+ Programme – Sport - Collaborative Partnership, Project Number: 557089 EPP1-2014-IT-SPO-SCP) developed by 11 partners from 9 European countries (Italy, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Poland, Romania, Turkey, UK). The project's underlying principle is the collaboration across Europe between schools to promote social inclusion, equal opportunities and awareness of the importance of sport through increased participation in and equal access to physical activities. The specific project objectives are to raise awareness of the importance of sport in schools through a better integration of physical education into the school curricula, to enhance the role of sport as a means to promote social inclusion and to promote an ethical approach to sport. The article presents the project main objectives, activities and outcomes. The article gives insights into a wide range of educational experiences (ethical issues, student support, barriers, online teacher/student experiences, collaboration teachers/ parents) proposed by the project. The article also examines the project e-materials and tools created so far with a view to motivating students only interested in sport to improve their school performance, helping students balance their school career with their passion for sport, integrating sport and healthy lifestyle approaches into the students' educational pathways and using sport as a means to acquire transversal skills.

Keywords: sport, collaboration, online teacher/student experiences, ethics

1 EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Physical activity is the best recipe for staying physically and mentally healthy; it plays an important role in preventing the development of many chronic illnesses and in increasing life expectancy as physically active people tend to live longer than sedentary ones. However, the recent great inventions have brought about new changes in the amount and quality of physical activity carried out daily. Physical activity has been replaced by sedentary activities, especially with children and young people. The consequences are visible and noticeable in the increase in childhood overweight and obesity. According to available data, "between 40 and 60% of the EU population lead a sedentary lifestyle". [1]

Despite common efforts which have recognised the role of school education in promoting sport and physical activities among young people, the perception of sport is not always a positive one. This misleading perception results in students abandoning either sport or their studies under the pressure of their families, teachers and friends, who do not think that balance between sport and school is possible. It is therefore important for EU Member States to "draw up national plans in support of physical activity in order to help modify unhealthy life habits and promote awareness of the benefits of physical activity in relation to health". [1]

The Not Only Fair Play project aims to reject this dichotomy between sport and school and propose an appropriate approach to sport and physical activity through a more fruitful cooperation between schools and sports organisations [2]. This is meant to promote and diffuse a more ethical-based perception of the importance that sport and physical activity can and should have for young people.

2 THE PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project aims at:

- promoting curricular and extracurricular sport and physical activities throughout European schools as a necessary part of a healthy life style;
- advocating for sport and physical activities as prerequisite educational means to develop and stimulate students' self-confidence, socialisation opportunities and mutual understanding among different cultures. The project highlights the role that the universal language of sport can play in fostering social inclusion, equal opportunities and tolerance;
- advancing a different and ethical based approach to sport and physical activities, which induces a positive perception of sport as a means of self-development through stretching one's limits [2].

3 THE COLLECTION OF THE BEST PRACTICE FOR SPORT PROMOTION AT SCHOOL

The project provides teachers and school staff with online best practices to be used to promote sports [2]. It creates a network of schools and sports associations which collaborate to promote an ethical-based approach to sport and a more conscious attitude towards the importance of physical activities in students' life. Project partners have collected and reviewed success stories and best practices in the promotion of sport and physical activities at school and in their integration with the educational offer.

There are 50 success stories [2] from students, PE teachers or adults practising sports in Poland, Italy, Turkey, Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, Finland, France and the United Kingdom. The sports activities they are involved in are: archery, athletics, basketball, badminton, biking, cricket, cycling, dancing, fencing, floor ball, football, gymnastics, golf, handball, hockey, Martial Arts, rowing, rugby, running, sailing, swimming, table tennis, and volleyball. Their stories are organised along questions which focus on when / how the participants started doing sport, who support them, their opinions on the school infrastructure and school policy, how they manage sport and school and about their future plans.

3.1 Taking up sport

To begin with, most respondents replied to the first questions related to their beginnings in sports activities that they started sport in their childhood or in primary or early secondary school ("My passion for swimming was born when I was a child, when my father used to take me to the pool to play in the water"). Their special abilities were discovered, encouraged and supported by their parents, grandparents, relatives ("As a child both of my parents wanted me to do sports; my grandfather always followed me when I went to play matches and for workouts, and I cannot forget my two grandmothers who took me to training even when the field was just behind my house."), their coach ("The coach met me one day on the street in the center of the town and told me about the sport and the possibility to train. He sounded very excited about it, so he also made me excited."), friends and peers ("My sport activity was well-received by my friends and family, as well as the members of the club who encouraged me") and teachers ("My teachers help me to succeed in sport and in my studies as well"). However, the most essential support is considered to be from the family ("My family has always supported me. They are essential to my success." "I doubt I would be actively engaged in sports and training without my parents."). They did their best when they got support from all these factors: family, friends, teachers and colleagues. There were also voices who complained about not having enough support from families ("my parents were totally against me playing basketball and my teachers were also rather reluctant to it. They would rather have me spending my time doing maths or some other "intellectual" activities. I must say it was hard to do it without my family's support, but I was lucky enough that my coach insisted on talking to them.") or no support at all ("Those girls (I played with) became my best friends – spending lots of hours together, motivating one another, sharing moments of intense joy - after winning a game – as well as frustration when losing one. I guess this is what kept me going.")

As for the way sport improves relationships, all respondents agreed that sport improves relationships with the others; it creates new opportunities to contact new people and make new friends: "Friendships are made because you communicate in a different way – through the "language" of sport". "Yes, sport is above all a sort of sociability because we meet a lot of people and make many new acquaintances. Most people I know, I know them from football. You are not isolated, you open up to the others, you meet new people, you learn to get along with the others." "I think that sport is essential to be able to relate to others, especially when it comes to very young children. I think that sport practice could help me to better relate with the others (a hearing impaired person).

3.2 School sport infrastructure and school policy

Considering school sport infrastructure and school policy on sports in the project countries the answers range from excellent to inadequate or even non-existent. "I think that my country provides really good opportunities for practicing sports for both young and older people. There are all kinds of sports activities addressing everybody from babies to grandparents in Finland and you can try different sports. At school the teachers of physical education motivate you to move and to practice sport." "I believe that sport infrastructure in my school is too old and not very spacious to accommodate all the students." "I don't think that in Italy there is enough space for all sports, football prevails. For this reason, I think not so many parents are willing to enroll their children in a sports club." What is notable is that even if respondents complain about lack of facilities they always acknowledge their teachers' dedication as a substitute. "Our PE teachers are also professional and we all love them. They are talented and good examples for us."

The general attitude towards sports is encouraging but few people would recommend it as a profession to follow; most consider it good as a hobby and there are also voices who are against it. There are teachers and parents who think that sport stands in the way of young people's studies. "I think that young people are encouraged to practice sports in Finland but sometimes in a wrong way. Physical education at school should be done in a relaxing and enjoyable way for everybody; there should be more optional sports at school. Preferably that kind of activities which are varied, new and interesting. Being able to try and find something new inspires young people."

3.3 Balancing sport and school

Most of the respondents practise sport from 3 to 9 times per week, that is from 2 to 6 hours per day. This means from 12 to 30 hours per week. The school programme adds 30 more hours to this schedule and students also need from 1 to 3 extra hours to prepare home assignments. This is hard work, a lot of stress, almost no free time, and fatigue.

The key – as the questionnaire reflects- is good planning, organisation, time management, determination, family, teachers, peers, colleagues' encouragement and an adequate strategy. Some students find it easy to balance it: "I'm a model student, I participate with great interest in every type of activity or project at school. I easily balance the time devoted to my school and sport obligations." There are also students who do not balance it adequately. "It's not easy at all to balance sport and school, especially when we play at competitive levels. The main problem is managing time: sport occupies a long time and, the time which remains, is usually devoted to studying. A strong resolution is necessary." To be able to balance sport and school it is important to know how to organize yourself. "I attend high school in the morning, in the afternoon I practice sport and I study until late at night (about midnight). However, I believe that it is your passion which drives you to live this kind of life, fatigue is less important."

School policy is also important. "My classmates and teachers were of great help, for example when they inform me about school activities, or when the school principal allows me to have time to go to weekly training sections. Even the teachers helped me a lot with my tasks, homework and queries." "This is the reason why I decided to enroll in Jeanne d'Arc high school. It seemed to offer a more attractive conciliation between sport and studies."

Positive attitude is essential: "I need a positive attitude in class in order to better study. We already have too little time with practice, so we can't waste time."

One strategy is to reevaluate priorities and develop a reasonable daily schedule. "I just arrange everything so that I have time for both: sport and school. All you need is to make a schedule, check what there is to study for school; if you have tests and when your trainings are. You'll see if you can combine them. If not, then you will have to decide what is more important -to learn and to have excellent grades or to learn and to have acceptable grades and to go to training." Some of the students seem to calculate their steps very carefully and sensibly, showing a lot of maturity when thinking about their future. "I still play sports and go to school at the same time, because with sports you never know: you can be a champion, but the next day you're down and out, so you'd better be ready for a second choice, which can be different from football."

3.4 Benefits of doing sport

There are a lot of benefits participants cite when speaking about the sport they practise:

- becoming more mature: "Sport has helped me because through it I've learnt to balance my school commitments and manage emotional stress. To those who don't practice a sport I would recommend taking up a sport and training at least once or twice a week because it helps you grow and mature. You need determination." -staying healthy and relaxed: "I believe that physical education is very important for one's health, relaxation, as well as sharpening certain skills.
- acquiring skills related to self-development: time management, self-discipline "In my case, badminton relies on precision and tactics, which also benefit me outside of the badminton court. Furthermore, the mere training regime which requires discipline from the student can also be incorporated in everyday life. The sport helped me immensely. I realized the importance of sustained physical exercise and how to work in order to constantly improve, how to better manage my time in order not to skip classes and training; I learned a few things about myself and how to react to various situations; I made new friends. The impact is mostly on my personal development. The immediate impact is not visible, but it certainly was not negative."
- helping with concentration and staying focused: "I think sport and studies are inseparable. I need sport to stay focused in class. The keyword to find a balance between sport and studies is organisation. You have to deal with a precise timetable, to find hours for studying and hours to practice. My parents also help me a lot and tell me what my priorities are." "Sport has made me more concentrated and organised so I manage to find time for both volleyball and schoolwork."
- teaching students responsibility: "Some people think that it harms learning, but it doesn't, because if you're responsible, you will be able to manage your time for both activities."
- increasing self-esteem "Sport at school gives me more self-esteem and improves my grades."

3.4.1 *How sport affects school performance*

Most respondents appreciate that sport does not affect learning and their grades. "Sport does not affect my grades in a negative way, on the contrary it helps me because real athletes are disciplined, know how to cope with all the difficulties and never give up. For me studying comes first, but sport is also very important. I balance school and sport giving everything from myself in both areas. I believe that everything is possible with hard work." There are also students whose opinions differ but they do not seem to regret doing sport. "It is possible for my grades to have been better without sport, but I think that sport showed me the advantage of discipline, consistency and persistence to achieve my goals. So without sports probably my discipline would be worse, and this would also cause my grades to suffer, since the two things are connected.

3.4.2 *Using best practices with students*

Most of the success stories present a case which was successfully solved. Case studies are a form of problem-based learning, where you present a situation with a problem that requires a solution. Case studies are a great way to improve learning and training because they get the learner involved [3]. They provide learners with an opportunity to solve a problem by applying what they know. Case studies can be a very effective classroom technique as students learn better from examples than from logical development of a theory. Most case assignments require students to answer open-ended questions whereas case studies usually generate animated class discussion. Case studies engage students in discussion of specific situations. Case teaching is learner-centered, characterized by intense interaction between teacher and student, as well as among students in a group. Case teaching empowers the student by placing them at the center of their educational process. Students count [3]. They are accountable for what they are learning. Case teaching starts from the assumption that learning is taking place when students discover or construct knowledge benefiting from their teacher's guidance. Case learning enhances communication and critical thinking skills as students apply knowledge, evaluate options and negotiate suggestions in order to solve the problem [4]. Students learn to listen to each other, to respect their peers' opinions, to contest other people's ideas by using well-constructed arguments, and to work in a group to solve a problem. In this process students are taught to appreciate other people's contributions while improving their own ability to think creatively and communicate effectively [4].

A good classroom atmosphere will help generate and encourage students' participation and contribution to discussion. The teacher should establish with students a framework for analysis and

encourage them to follow it systematically. What is the main topic?/ What is the problem to be analysed?/ What is the context of the problem?/ What key facts should be considered?/ What alternatives does the decision-maker face?/What are your recommendations — and why? [5]. The teacher should first introduce the case and provide some guidelines for how to approach it. They should give students ample time to read and think about the case and a set of questions for students to consider (e.g., What is the problem the main character is facing? What is the possible course of action? What are the potential obstacles? [5]) Teachers can get students into groups and ask them to explore the case by identifying relevant facts, developing logical conclusions, and presenting their solution and reasoning to their peers and the teacher. A class discussion can follow based on the conclusions of each group, having the whole class vote for the best solution. A vote requires students to put forward their ideas openly, engaging them in discussion with their peers and making them more likely to argue to support their side.

Beyond discussion and small group work, there are a number of techniques that can be used to enhance the case study method. An innovative approach to case analysis might be to have students role-play the part of the people involved in the case. This not only actively engages students, but forces them to take on perspectives that require them to argue for specific actions from a character's point of view, given their interests and knowledge [5]. Thus they really understand the perspectives of the case characters. The online success stories can help students visualize the situation that they need to analyse. Students will take the initiative to become fully involved, so that topics are no longer treated as abstract ideas, be part of the students' real world situations.

Requesting students to develop case studies based on personal interests and experience is another way of using this technique. Writing their own case studies will motivate students to carry out independent research outside of the classroom environment.

The class discussion can also be continued on a class blog, or on Twitter. This will enable the students to reflect on their positions and the teacher to track their discussions over time [2].

4 CONCLUSIONS

The EU Physical Activity Guidelines identifies a key aspect for the promotion of sport and physical activities among young people in the relation between the education sector and physical activity. For this purpose "School-based physical education is the most widely available source to promote physical activities among young people. Therefore, every effort should be made to encourage schools to provide physical activities on a daily basis for all grades, inside or outside the curriculum and in cooperation with partners from the local community, and to promote interest in life-time physical activities in all pupils". [1]

The online success stories collected provide teachers with interesting case studies to use with their students. They set models to follow and will definitely increase student motivation and interest in the subject [6].

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