

# The teaching of Physical Education and Sports in primary education: Teachers' practices, perceptions and challenges Theoretical framework and methodology

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## Abstract

This article examines the teaching of physical and sports education (PE) in the context of primary education, highlighting the practices, perceptions and challenges faced by teachers. The theoretical framework is based on contemporary educational concepts and learning models, which allows for an in-depth analysis of issues related to PE. The methodology adopted includes semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, providing a qualitative approach to collecting data on teachers' experiences. The findings reveal varied perceptions regarding the importance of PE in student development, while highlighting the logistical and institutional challenges that hinder its effective implementation. The article concludes with recommendations for improving teacher training and strengthening the place of PE in the school curriculum.

**Keywords:** Physical and sports education (PE); PE issues; Perceptions; Development

## 1. Introduction

In a global context marked by increased attention to health and well-being, Physical Education and Sports (PES) is of paramount importance. Growing concerns about public health issues, such as childhood obesity, sedentary lifestyles and mental health disorders in young people, highlight the essential role of physical activity from an early age. PE, as a school discipline, plays a key role in promoting healthy lifestyles, encouraging students to adopt regular physical activity and providing them with a solid foundation for balanced physical and mental development. In today's world, there are several considerations to consider when addressing PE teaching, including:

The impact of sedentary lifestyles and new technologies, in fact, the omnipresence of screens and new technologies in children's daily lives has led to a significant decrease in their level of physical activity. This situation makes the role of PE in the school environment even more crucial to compensate for sedentary lifestyles and encourage young people to integrate physical activity into their daily lives (CDC, 2020; Hesketh & Duggan, 2015; Katzmarzyk & Tremblay, 2014; Hinkley et al., 2013; Donnelly & Lambourne, 2011a)

The role of PE in the formation of active citizens, thus, PE is not limited to physical exercise; it also aims to instill values of cooperation, respect for others, perseverance and team spirit. In an increasingly individualistic world, PE offers a space where students learn to work together, manage competition in a healthy way, and develop socio-affectively (López, 2019; McKenzie & Lounsbury, 2014; Graham, 2013; Holt & Neely, 2011; Tinning, 2002).

International educational policies and programs, in fact, international organizations, such as UNESCO, recognize the fundamental place of PE in the education of young people. In 2015, UNESCO launched a charter on quality physical

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education, encouraging governments to include PE as an essential component of education. This initiative shows a global recognition of the importance of PE in preparing tomorrow's citizens (UNESCO, 2020, 2015; UNICEF, 2019; WHO, 2018; European Commission, 2017; MINEPS VI, 2017).

Challenges in implementing PE in schools However, despite this awareness, many countries, especially in low-resource settings, lack the means to implement quality PE teaching. This includes challenges related to infrastructure, teacher training, and time allocated to this discipline. PE didactics, as a field of research, aims to develop pedagogical strategies and teaching methods adapted to these constraints to maximize the impact of PE, even in resource-limited settings (Böhm & Oertel, 2020; McKenzie & Lounsbury, 2014; Brusseau & Hannon, 2013; Faucette & Graham, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2010; Kirk, 2006)

The importance for the overall development of children, Indeed, the didactics of PE is therefore part of a broader movement aimed at offering a balanced education to children. By integrating physical, cognitive and social dimensions, PE meets the needs of overall development, which is essential in a world where psychosocial skills are as important as academic skills (López, 2019; McKenzie & Lounsbury, 2014; Graham, 2013; Davis & Cooper, 2011; Holt & Neely, 2011; Donnelly & Lambourne, 2011b).

In conclusion, the study of PE didactics is part of a perspective of long-term well-being and comprehensive education of individuals. Its place is increasingly recognized in educational policies, and its importance is growing in the face of contemporary challenges of public health and social cohesion. In today's world, PE is a discipline that goes far beyond physical activity: it is a vector of health, values, and social integration.

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## 2. Problematic

Physical Education and Sport (PE) plays a fundamental role in the physical, cognitive and social development of students. However, in the context of primary education, several challenges hinder its effective implementation. These challenges include the lack of specific teacher training, inadequate infrastructure, the perception of PE as a secondary discipline and constraints related to the school curriculum. These issues raise questions about how PE is taught, perceived and integrated into primary school teaching practices. This brings us to our central question: To what extent do teaching practices, teacher perceptions and structural challenges influence PE teaching in the primary school context?

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## 3. Research questions

### 3.1. Through our central problem, we propose the following research questions:

- What are the approaches and methods used by teachers to deliver PE lessons in primary school?
- How do teachers perceive the importance and purposes of PE in the overall development of students?
- What structural, institutional or personal obstacles influence the quality and regularity of PE teaching?
- How do teachers' practices and perceptions influence student engagement and the achievement of PE educational objectives?
- What strategies or training can be put in place to improve PE teaching in primary schools?

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## 4. Objectives of the article

Referring to our research questions, we propose the following objectives:

- Identify and describe the pedagogical approaches used by teachers for PE in primary school.
- Explore teachers' representations of PE and its educational role.
- Identify institutional, material and personal barriers to effective PE practice.
- Provide recommendations to strengthen PE teaching practices, improve initial and continuing training, and promote the discipline in the education system.

By analyzing our problem, our research questions and the objectives developed, our article seeks to highlight the realities on the ground in the teaching of PE in primary school in order to inform educational decision-makers and to propose avenues for improvement. In this work, we will limit ourselves to presenting the broad outlines of our theoretical framework and present the essential elements of our working study.

## 5. Theoretical frame work

The didactics of Physical Education and Sports (EPS) aims to transmit knowledge and motor skills, as well as social and personal values, adapted to the specific needs of primary school students. This theoretical framework is based on three main pillars: learning theories, concepts of child development, and the foundations of pedagogical interaction in EPS.

### 5.1. Learning theories applied to EPS

Theoretical approaches to learning, such as constructivism and social constructivism, are essential for understanding how students acquire and integrate new skills in PE (Rink, 2010; Moston & Ashworth, 2008)

- **Piaget's Constructivism** : According to Piaget (1950), the learning process is rooted in individual experience and cognitive development. In PE, this means that the student must actively experiment to build motor knowledge and develop problem-solving skills in a physical and playful context. Teachers adapt physical activities to the different stages of student development to allow for progressive and adapted learning (Piaget, 1950).
- **Vygotsky's Socioculturalism** : Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), where learning occurs through interaction with others. In PE, this translates into group exercises and cooperative activities, allowing students to acquire new skills with the support of their peers or the teacher (Vygotsky, 1978).
- **Motor learning theory** : Schmidt and Lee (2011) explore the processes of motor skill acquisition, emphasizing the importance of repetition, feedback, and progressive adaptation of exercises to improve motor performance. In PE, teachers use these principles to structure physical activities, provide immediate feedback, and adapt the difficulty of tasks according to the abilities of each student (Schmidt & Lee, 2011).

### 5.2. Child development and the importance of physical activity

The theoretical framework of PE in primary school is also guided by work on the overall development of the child. Physical activity contributes not only to motor development, but also to social, emotional and cognitive development (Bailey et al. 2009; Malina & Bouchard, 2004).

- **Psychomotor and socio-affective development** : Gallahue and Donnelly (2003) emphasize that physical education contributes to a balanced development of the child by promoting essential psychomotor and socio-affective skills. In PE, teachers encourage self-regulation, self-confidence and social skills through varied games and sports activities (Gallahue & Donnelly, 2003).
- **Health and well-being** : The World Health Organization highlights the importance of physical activity for the health of young people. PE plays a preventive role against obesity and chronic diseases, helping to improve the physical and mental fitness of students. This theoretical framework justifies efforts to integrate PE into the school curriculum from primary school onwards (WHO, 2010).

### 5.3. Pedagogical interaction and teaching management in EPS

The teacher-student relationship in PE differs from other disciplines because it often relies on dynamic and direct interaction in a physical setting. The theoretical framework of pedagogical interaction in PE examines methods of group management, adaptation of instructions, and regulation of student motivation and engagement (Haerens et al., 2015; Kirk, 2010 ; et al., 2003).

- **Teacher-student interaction** : According to Brousseau (1986), the teacher plays a mediating role in learning by acting on the environment to lead students to develop their skills. In PE, this involves adjusting the level of difficulty of activities and encouraging students to surpass themselves, while respecting their individual limits (Brousseau, 1986).
- **Motivation and learning climate** : Deci and Ryan (2000) address self-determination theory, where intrinsic motivation is a key factor in student engagement in PE. Teachers encourage a climate of confidence and enjoyment in sports activities, strengthening student motivation and promoting more autonomous learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In conclusion of this theoretical framework, we note that the didactics of PE in primary education is based on a convergence of theories of learning, child development psychology, and pedagogical interaction. It aims to create a stimulating learning environment, where the child can not only develop his motor skills, but also acquire social values and sustainable physical well-being. By integrating these concepts into practice, PE teachers can offer students an enriching experience, adapted to their needs and contributing to their overall development.

## 6. Study methodology

The study uses a qualitative approach to capture the perceptions and practices of primary school teachers. Data are collected through semi-directed interviews, classroom observations, and a documentary analysis of teaching guides and school curricula.

- **Choice of research type: Qualitative study:** A qualitative study is particularly suited to exploring the perceptions, practices and challenges of primary school teachers, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of their experiences and the contexts in which they operate (Creswell, 2013).
- **Participant Selection: Purposive Sampling:** Participant selection is critical to ensuring that the sample is representative of diverse perspectives in the PE context. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of teachers from different contexts (urban/rural, public/private schools) (Patton, 2015).
- **Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews and observations:** Semi-structured interviews allow for the collection of in-depth narratives and the discovery of teachers' practices and perceptions. Classroom observation allows for verification of how pedagogical concepts are applied in real time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).
- **Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis:** Thematic analysis is an effective method for identifying and analyzing major themes in qualitative data, such as challenges encountered in PE, instructional strategies, and teacher perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- **Credibility and validation of results:** Triangulation and participant validation techniques can enhance the credibility of results. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources (interview, observation, document analysis) to verify results (Miles et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- **Presentation of results and discussion:** The presentation of results should include interview excerpts and observed examples to illustrate the main themes. The discussion should relate the results to previous theories and research on PE and teaching (Silverman, 2015).

In conclusion, our methodology provides a rigorous basis for exploring teachers' practices and perceptions in primary education. It highlights the importance of thoughtful design, relevant data collection techniques, and rigorous analysis to produce reliable results.

## 7. Conclusion

Physical Education and Sports (PES) in primary education constitutes an essential pillar for the overall development of students, integrating physical, social and cognitive dimensions. However, this discipline still faces significant challenges.

Ultimately, promoting PE in primary education requires a collective mobilization of educational stakeholders, policy makers and school communities. Such a dynamic will not only improve the quality of teaching of this discipline, but also contribute to the training of fulfilled, healthier students who are better prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

In view of this work, our next articles will deal with the different blocks of the theoretical framework in detail and at the same time, explore our working methodology.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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