

Running title: Physical education curricula in Europe - The dimensions of goals and contents

Short title: PE curricula in Europe: Goals and contents

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines progressive development of physical education (PE) curricula across 40 European countries, emphasising 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 were analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis supported by ATLAS.ti for data organisation.

Results: The findings demonstrate a diverse interpretation of PE conceptualisations, which include health promotion, physical literacy, movement competence and recreational goals. While most curricula emphasise 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: physical education, curriculum comparison, Europe

Introduction

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 globalisation drives migration, urbanisation, 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 skills, knowledge and understanding to live a healthy and active life) characterised by rapid and dynamic change. Consequently, these global trends have prompted numerous countries to reconsider and reform their curricula to ensure children are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for the future. Indeed, several OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries have implemented curriculum reforms in recent years (OECD, 2018). 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, placing emphasising digital literacy, critical thinking, and teamwork, all of which are increasingly important in a changing labour 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 competences amid rapid societal change. PE, like other subjects, helps students develop cognitive flexibility, enabling them to seek, analyse, 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 & 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 emphasised more holistic and engaging learning experiences for children. 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 towards "competency-based curricula" (Carlgren, 2021). These advancements are particularly evident in the evolution of physical literacy as a guiding concept (Edwards et al., 2017). In practice, however, the prevailing paradigm in many primary and secondary schools remains the multi-activity curriculum (Jess & Carse, 2020).

This multi-activity approach has been criticised for providing children with a limited PE experience, primarily focused on practising isolated skills across various sports or activities. If the multi-activity 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 towards 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 non-mandatory content), and dynamic, holistic, and multidirectional attributes, adopting an ecosystem approach over a linear, industrial (rigid structure, teacher-centred, 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 programme. In a broader sense, curriculum means all 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, Janík, and Švec (2008), suggesting four dimensions, including the dimensions of goals, content, management and methods. Considering the need to analyse 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., 2020; Hardman et al., 2013), 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 physical literacy, 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 we already 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, 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'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 analyse how PE is conceptualised 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 conceptualisation of the study. In the second stage, we conducted meetings with the selected experts to present the study and organise 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 analysed all the closed questions. In the fifth stage, we analysed 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 (KS, JC, PeE) designed an online survey (Webropol Survey v3.0, Helsinki, Finland) to assess the focus of national curricula. Initially, two experts (CdA, PV) with extensive experience in PE curriculum analysis were consulted to discuss the theoretical background and structure of the planned analyses. The core team (JC, KS) developed and refined the survey through an iterative process, ensuring 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 (JC, KS, PeE, CD, PV). 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 (HG, IP, SL) took a neutral, external perspective and assessed the overall survey for thematic relevance, general comprehensibility (to avoid misinterpretations, reduce linguistic difficulties, and minimise expert biases), and enhanced question validity by providing feedback via e-mail. 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-eyes 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 four weeks to complete the survey, with subsequent extensions of three weeks and one week, respectively, culminating in a final deadline of January 26th, 2024.

Participants

The EUROPLIT network, established in 2022 in collaboration with the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA), aims to monitor PE and physical literacy 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 the 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% male and 49.7% female)

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 decentralised organisation of PE in some countries, we inquired whether the respective country adhered to a national core curriculum or if multiple regional curricula (e.g., organised 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-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 (ISCED 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

psycho-behavioural determinants emphasised in PE curricula. Additionally, the growing emphasis on physical literacy (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 overreaching 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. The responses therefore represent document-based expert summaries of national curriculum texts. For the purposes of qualitative analysis, each country's response was treated as country-level textual report derived from national curriculum document. These reports are referred to in this study as *national reports*. For the qualitative analysis reported in this article, the material was organised into 40 country level textual summaries ("national reports"), each representing the response from one country. The full qualitative dataset comprised 40 country-level responses, totalling 13324 words (27 pages). Response length ranged from 14 to 3721 words, with 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 non-quantitative 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 working with curriculum-based national reports. 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, Analyse, and Distil. Qualitative analysis in this study was understood as a systematic, non-numerical organisation of data aimed at identifying themes, patterns, and relationships rather than measuring frequencies (Hendl, 2008). The aim was not statistical generalisation, but to provide a convincing and structured account of how the purpose of PE is conceptualised 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). The analytic process was primarily inductive, meaning that categories and themes emerged from the data rather than being predefined. 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 synthesised into six overarching themes. These codes were then compared and grouped into subcategories based on conceptual similarity. This process followed the principle of constant comparison (Švaříček & Šed'ová, 2007), whereby codes and emerging categories were continuously compared, refined, and reorganised to ensure conceptual coherence and analytical depth. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, the subcategories were subsequently organised into broader categories representing recurring conceptualisations of PE purposes across national curricula. An example of the coding process from raw excerpts to thematic categories is presented in Table X. Finally, in the fourth stage (Distil), the categories were synthesised into a set of overarching themes that captured common patterns in how the purpose of PE is framed across countries. 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 coding process was conducted collaboratively by members of the research team (KS, JC). 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 organisation and management of the qualitative dataset and to facilitate the coding process.

Table x here.

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). 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.

Dependability was supported through documentation of coding discussions and analytic decisions throughout the research process. Transferability was supported by providing transparent descriptions of the analytic procedures and by presenting thematic patterns identified across multiple national contexts. These procedures contributed to the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings. 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's (1979) conceptual framework of curriculum inquiry, this study focuses on the formal curriculum, examining how the goals and content of physical education 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 physical education across countries.

Goals of Physical Education

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. Physical literacy was recognised as a conceptual idea in the PE curricula of 19 countries. Additionally, 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 Physical Education

Based on the responses to open-ended questions regarding the purpose of the subject, six main topics were identified. The most commonly psychomotor learning/ development ($n =$

37) and promoting a healthy lifestyle (n = 33) were recognised 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 & understanding (n = 22), and, to a lesser extent, rules and safety (n = 6) (see Table 3).

Content of Physical Education

Among 40 countries, 14 reported having general content in their PE curricula with a strong emphasis on fundamental movement skills. Similarly, 20 countries indicated that their curricula include general contents, though some specific sports are explicitly mentioned. In 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). Additionally, 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. Table 4. 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 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. In another article (Author 2025), management and methods are measured. Findings from this study show that promoting a healthy lifestyle is one of the focus areas in European PE curricula. Additionally, the inclusion of the concept of physical literacy is becoming increasingly prominent, reflecting its growing importance in shaping modern PE curricula. While the overarching formulations in the curricula emphasise 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.

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 physical literacy as a central concept of PE curricula (Claudia, 2022) further emphasises 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 & Colquahoun, 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) 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 dominating concepts in PE curricula, concepts of empowerment were not that common in the examined curricula across countries. However, the physical literacy 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 (Thomason & 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-twentieth 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 physical education-as-gymnastics to physical education-as-sport techniques (Kirk, 2013). However, model-based approaches and pedagogical models could change this historical continuity (Fernandez-Rio & Iglesias, 2024; Lounsbery & 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 Table 3). This is in line with the experts' idea of the main purpose of the subject, as they highlighted that being physically active, 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' wellbeing is at its core (OECD, 2019) with a wider and long-term perspective. However, equality may 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, well-being) (OECD, 2019). Findings from this study point to that responsibility, respect, and culture were 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. (2021), one of the key trends in education is technology, which can improve PE in schools. More specifically, technology may promote learner-centred approaches, increase active engagement through innovative approaches, and better account for students' heterogeneous experiences (e.g., Calderón et al., 2021). 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-centred approach, improve engagement via gamification and differentiate learning experiences and feedback based on personalised 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. From the perspective of Goodlad’s (1979) framework, these findings illustrate how the formal curriculum expresses the intended purposes of physical education within national education systems.

Content of Physical Education

One of the most salient findings of this study is the continued dominance of multi-activity, sport-based, and fitness-oriented content in national PE curricula. This mirrors what Metzler & 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, emphasising technical skill and performance. This finding situates the analysed curricula within a long-standing global trend also observed in U.S., 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, gymnastics) reflect the global sport culture and most of these are also competed in the Olympic games. Additionally, it is in line with the most practised sports in the world on different continents (Hulteen et al., 2017). This kind of “physical education 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-centred model continues to dominate teaching practice,

despite policy calls for broader and more educative forms of PE. Observational studies indicated that teachers often reproduce this structure because it is culturally familiar, resource-efficient, and institutionally legitimised 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). 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 multi-activity, 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 towards more health- and well-being-oriented perspectives and more holistic views via, for instance, physical literacy (Carl et al., 2025; 2026). Moreover – in some countries – replacing “sport” 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 towards physical activity for life (like the ideology of physical literacy), global competitive sports are still quite common, a central part of the subject. Only two curricula identified that their focus is more general, e.g. in 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-centred 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, skateboarding) as a part of the curriculum. As different kind of commuting modes have become increasing relevant to children’s and young peoples’ daily lives (e.g., via e-scooters, 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 active and healthy lifestyle (Bretones et al., 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 because 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 personalised 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 emphasising the anticipated outcomes related to individual, social, and affective aspects of student development (Lopez-Pastor, 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 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 et al., 2022). While fitness tests are criticised, at the same time, there is a growing interest in physical literacy (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). Additionally, to fully implement PL in school PE, more education is needed with pre-service teachers (Stoddart & Selanders, 2022). Overall, despite increasing references to health, well-being, and physical literacy (Carl et al., 2023), our findings suggest that many European PE curricula articulate ambitions that resonate with holistic perspectives, including health, wellbeing, inclusion, and broader competencies for active citizenship. At the same time, the continued dominance of traditional multi-activity, 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 towards 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 analysing 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. 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 “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 an active lifestyle. To reach these aims, the examined European PE curricula seem to be still quite sport-specific and “PE as sport-techniques” or multi-activity 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 physical literacy, 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 needs as well as broader societal, inclusion and individual forms of delivering PE should be highlighted and considered in future PE curricula reforms.

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735

736 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

737

738 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		
N. Makedonia	X	X					X
N. 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	

739 * PA = Physical activity for life, HEALTH = Health & Welfare, EMP = Empowerment/
740 Enablement, SOC = Benefiting the society, FUN = Fun/Distracton, PL = Physical literacy,
741 TALENT = Talent & sport excellence.

Table 3. Purposes of physical education in different countries

	Psychomotor learning and development					Health and lifestyle			Knowledge and understanding							Social learning and development							Contexts / arrangements			Affective		
	ABI	FFIT	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																												
Greec																												
Green																												
Hun																												
Ice																												
Ire																												
Ita																												
Kazak hstan																												
Latvia																												
Lith																												
Lux																												
Mont																												
Ned																												
N-Ir																												

	ABI	FIT	MOC	MOS	PHY	BEH	HEA	LIFE	AWA	BOD	CUL	KNO	RES	RUL	SAFE	EQU	FAIR	INC	REL	RESP	ROL	SOC	ENV	GAM	SPO	ATT	EXP	WEL
N-Ma																												
Nor																												
Pol																												
Por																												
Rom																												
Scot																												
Ser																												
Slova																												
Slove																												
Spa																												
Swe																												
Switz																												
Tur																												
Ukr																												
Wal																												

* 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

Table 4. Sports explicitly included in national PE curricula.

	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															