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The Status of Physical Education in the Primary Education Curriculum: Exploring the primary physical education Teachers' view

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Abstract:

Over the years, physical education has undergone significant transformations in its value and place within the overall educational process. However, it has not escaped a sense of inferiority. Therefore, it was important to examine the perspectives of physical education teachers regarding its status in primary schools. The findings revealed that teachers view physical education as a fundamental and academic subject, on par with other subjects. This status is justified, they argue, because its cognitive importance is comparable to that of any other subject. Furthermore, it became clear that while physical education teachers have successfully integrated into the school's professional environment, their subject remains structurally weak.

Keywords: Physical education; status; teaching; physical education teacher; elementary school.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Physical education presents itself in school curricula as an important subject, aiming to contribute to the development of children's physical fitness and enhance their social, emotional, and cognitive skills. It has recently gained a place in Algerian primary schools after being a compulsory subject for years in higher education levels. During this period, we witnessed significant shifts in the value and status of physical education within the educational process as a whole and in the outcomes of schools at all levels and stages. Its scientific foundations, its connection to various biological, medical, and even psychological and social sciences, its inclusion in the discourse of holistic education, and its impact on physical, psychological, social, and health well-being have all contributed to a global reshaping of this subject. Physical education, in its contemporary and increasingly complex forms, has become a fully-fledged subject.

However, its development has been marked by scientific and political debates surrounding its educational and organizational aspects. Opinions on the importance of physical education have varied and have often been contentious. While evidence in many countries indicates that primary school physical education is experiencing increased political, professional, and academic attention (Jess & Carse, 2013), primarily due to the growing perception that primary school physical education experiences can address various agendas related to health and well-being, sports participation, and levels of physical activity (Petrie & Lisahunter, 2011), many still relegate it to the category of supplementary subjects with a secondary impact, and therefore dispensable. Consequently, the scientific efforts and various organizational measures undertaken thus far have not been sufficient to highlight its importance and define its goals and content in a way that is both pedagogically sound and reliable. This is necessary to guide attention and dispel the stereotypical image that often diminishes its value and status, reducing it to mere physical and technical exercises.

The foregoing leads us to conclude that many questions remain regarding the status of physical education in schools. The perception of physical education as a secondary subject in the curriculum persists, and it is also known that there is a hierarchy of academic subjects. It is suspected that physical education occupies a lower, rather than a higher, position than other academic subjects. This perception, which leads to the belief that physical education is, and still is, of secondary importance, warrants further investigation. Therefore, this research paper addresses

the status of physical education from the perspective of physical education teachers, posing the following questions:

Does physical education receive the appropriate appreciation within the school environment, according to the perceptions of physical education teachers?

- What are the perceptions of physical education teachers regarding the importance of physical education in the primary stage?

- What are the perceptions of physical education teachers regarding the conditions under which the subject is taught in the primary stage?

1. Literature Review

Education generally encompasses what is learned in the classroom, such as mathematics, languages, and sciences. Its purpose is to equip children, over specific periods, with knowledge, skills, and talents that make them better prepared to integrate into society and perform their roles effectively as members of that society. All subjects are assumed to have educational and developmental goals that contribute to this context, including physical education. Its effectiveness in this regard has been proven by research and studies demonstrating the impact of sports, in its various forms, on almost all aspects of human life, including its biological, psychological, and social components. The World Health Organization (WHO), along with research studies in the field of early childhood, provides recommendations for children's current and future health, emphasizing the importance of physical activity and the development of motor skills during their early years. WHO recommendations indicate that young children should engage in at least 180 minutes of physical activity and spend a maximum of 60 minutes daily in front of screens (WHO, 2019).

However, despite physical education being a subject within the educational system in every country, it is traditionally considered less important than other academic subjects. Howell (Sparkes, 1989) argued, "We also know that there is a hierarchy of subjects, but there is little comparative data on this. It is suspected that physical education is lower in the hierarchy of school subjects, not higher." This creates a quasi-classification that clearly places some forms of school knowledge at the top of the hierarchy. Academic subjects concerned with developing a child's intelligence are highly valued in schools, while some subjects, such as physical education, which deals with a child's body, are traditionally placed at the bottom of the knowledge hierarchy. In this environment, physical education has been relegated to a sort of second-rate subject for some (Griggs, 2007), taught at the end

of the school day or as a break from focused, classroom-based learning. Consequently, expectations for basic physical education remain low (Stidder & Griggs, 2012).

We recognize that the place of physical education in school curricula is controversial, and there is no intention to grant it greater prominence at the expense of other priority subjects within the educational system's assessment framework, despite all the evidence of its potential contribution to child development. We find ourselves facing an unjustifiable paradox: while awareness of the need to prioritize children's health and establish a healthy lifestyle based on physical activity is growing, physical education itself is struggling to secure its place as a priority subject within the educational system. Furthermore, Hardman (2008, p. 13) reported that the perceived legal and practical status of physical education and its teachers, compared to other subjects and their teachers, represents a persistent problem globally. Therefore, in the words of (Whitehead 2000, p. 12), "What needs to be formulated is an argument justifying the importance of acquiring physical skill in and of itself. This argument must take the courageous stance of reminding skeptics that we possess physical capabilities and potential, that they are fundamental to human existence and an integral part of human nature. Those in favor will need to argue that these qualities are not inferior, in the sense that the mind-body dichotomy has led to the body being deemed less important. Physical qualities are part of the individual as a whole, inseparable from the dispensable capacity; they are essential to the very essence of human existence. Humanity, as far as we know, is embodied in its nature." She adds that "if education is to nurture all aspects of human potential, then the physical aspect has an indisputable place in this endeavor."

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Study Methodology:

This study adopted a quantitative approach, primarily relying on the descriptive survey method as the most suitable for guiding the research process in this type of problem. As Qaddous (1995, p. 417) states, the descriptive method "describes everything that exists, as it focuses on identifying the conditions and relationships between facts, as well as identifying common practices and recognizing the beliefs and attitudes of groups and individuals."

2.2 Data Collection Tools:

The questionnaire was chosen as the data collection tool because it is "a useful tool among scientific research methods for obtaining facts, arriving at conclusions,

identifying conditions and circumstances, and studying attitudes, trends, and opinions. It assists and complements observation and is sometimes the only practical means of conducting a scientific study" (Dweidri, 2000, p. 329). The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale with average scores for each level, as follows:

Average range from 1.0 to 1.80 – Strongly disagree
Average range from 1.81 to 2.60 – Disagree
Average range from 2.61 to 3.40 – Neutral
Average range from 3.41 to 4.20 – Agree
Average range from 4.21 to 5.0 – Strongly agree

2.3 Study Population and Sample:

This study targeted physical education teachers in some primary schools in the provinces of Annaba, Guelma, and Mila. The sample consisted of 74 participants, including 63 male teachers and 11 female teachers

Table 1. Distribution of Sample Members

percentage	repetition	gendre	percentage	repetition
85%	63	male	85%	63
15%	11	female	15%	11
100%	74	total	100%	74

3. Presentation and Discussion of Results

3.1 Presentation of Results

Table 2. Results of a Questionnaire on the Status of Physical Education According to Subject Teachers

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Inter-pretation
Physical education does not provide students with opportunities to learn and develop lifelong skills	3%	4%	5%	39%	49%	1.73	Strongly Disagree
Physical education should not be ranked as high as arithmetic, reading, and writing in school curricula	3%	7%	15%	27%	49%	1.88	Disagree
Physical education is inferior compared to other subjects	1%	3%	4%	22%	70%	1.43	Strongly Disagree
Physical education is the easiest subject to drop in a busy week	5%	12%	12%	32%	38%	2.15	Disagree
If, for any reason, some subjects must be removed from the school program, physical education should be one of them	5%	1%	7%	9%	77%	1.49	Strongly Disagree
Physical education teachers in primary schools face many difficulties in delivering physical education lessons	46%	38%	8%	7%	1%	4.20	Agree
As a physical education teacher, you see yourself as inferior compared to other teachers in your school	1%	5%	8%	15%	70%	1.53	Strongly Disagree
The physical education teacher is devoted time in faculty meetings comparable to any other member of the staff	36%	36%	15%	5%	7%	3.91	Agree
There is coordination between you and the rest of the faculty regarding the	30%	28%	19%	19%	4%	3.61	Agree

monitoring and evaluation of students							
The time allocated for the session is not proportionate to the content of physical education	*16%*	*36%*	*12%*	*27%*	*8%*	*3.26*	*Agree*
Physical education is not scheduled correctly in the weekly distribution of subjects	*43%*	*34%*	*9%*	*12%*	*1%*	*4.05*	*Agree*
There is an interest in preparing physical education facilities in your school to facilitate the performance of your duties	*5%*	*9%*	*12%*	*41%*	*32%*	*2.15*	*Disagree*
There is a keenness to provide physical education equipment to facilitate the performance of your duties	*4%*	*18%*	*22%*	*26%*	*31%*	*2.38*	*Disagree*

An overwhelming majority of teachers (70% strongly disagree and 15% disagree, totaling 85%) do not see themselves as less important than others in their schools. This indicates high professional self-esteem and strong interpersonal relationships among faculty members.

Developing lifelong skills: 49% of teachers strongly agreed, and 39% (88%) agreed that physical education provides students with opportunities to learn and develop lifelong skills. This reinforces the belief that physical education contributes not only to physical health but also to the acquisition of life skills applicable in various fields.

A large majority (49% strongly disagree and 27% disagree, totaling 76%) rejected the idea of excluding physical education from core subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic. This demonstrates a desire to recognize physical education as an essential and indispensable subject in the curriculum.

However, physical education is perceived as marginalized. 70% of teachers strongly disagree, and 22% disagree, with the idea that physical education is less important than other subjects. Similarly, 77% strongly disagree and 9% disagree (a total of 86%) with the idea that physical education should be the first subject to be eliminated if restrictions are imposed. This widespread rejection indicates a strong

belief in the value of physical education, but it contradicts the reality of the teaching conditions.

36% strongly agree and 36% agree (72%) with the idea of allocating the same time for faculty meetings as for other members. This demonstrates active participation in the life of the institution and an understanding of their role within the teaching team.

Coordination with colleagues: 30% strongly agree and 28% agree (58%) with the idea of coordinating with other faculty members to monitor and evaluate students. This indicates efforts toward interdisciplinary collaboration, a positive indicator of integration.

General teaching difficulties: 46% strongly agree, and 38% (84%) agree with the statement that they face numerous difficulties in delivering lessons. This high percentage is concerning and suggests the presence of structural obstacles. Time allotted: 36% agreed, and 16% strongly agreed (52%) that the time allotted for physical education is insufficient for the content of the lesson. This indicates a pressure on the curriculum and difficulty in covering all learning objectives.

43% strongly agreed, and 34% (77%) agreed that physical education is not properly scheduled within the weekly distribution of subjects. This scheduling problem is a key indicator of the low priority given to physical education by the school administration.

41% disagreed, and 32% strongly disagreed (73%) regarding the attention given to the design of physical education facilities. Similarly, 26% disagreed, and 31% strongly disagreed (57%) regarding the provision of necessary equipment. These figures highlight a glaring lack of material resources, making the teaching of physical education even more challenging.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Appreciation of Physical Education as an Essential and Indispensable Subject in the Curriculum

The research results show that teachers strongly reject the notion that physical education is inferior or less academic than other subjects. They possess a high degree of collective confidence in the subject's positive role in developing students' academic competencies. This result is compatible with results of the study (Beggar. N, Merzougui. S, Houiche. A , 2025) that Physical education and sports teachers in primary schools have a positive perspective toward the subject. This is also

reflected internationally, where games and sports are recognized as one of the most important elements of the physical education curriculum, representing "the main source of content and the primary contexts for teaching and learning" (López, Jordán, Penney, & Chandler, 2009, p. 47). (Kirk 2006) also makes a strong case for including sports in physical education in schools, as play, games, and sports are considered inherently beneficial, among the most important and potentially dangerous human activities, and therefore an essential part of the curriculum. In fact, this view held by teachers often contradicts the beliefs of various stakeholders in the education sector. For example, a study conducted by Stevens-Smith and Fisk (2006) examined administrators' perceptions of the importance of physical education for physical education teachers and its curriculum, and their belief that physical education is an essential or important subject. 36% of those surveyed indicated that they did not consider physical education an academic subject. They also ranked it last on a list of 11 subjects evaluated. Furthermore, the study found that school principals rated the classroom teacher as the most important teacher in the school. Conversely, this study found that school principals indicated that the physical education teacher was considered the second most important teacher in the school (Stevens-Smith, Fisk, Williams, & Barton, 2006).

This appreciation of the academic role is further reinforced by professors' insistence that physical education offers students opportunities to learn and develop lifelong skills. It's not just about physical health and future athletic participation, but also about acquiring life skills applicable in various fields. In other words, through its educational value, physical education is oriented towards contributing to the transfer of academic knowledge and life skills, not only within the context of physical education itself but also within the broader educational landscape. This is supported by numerous studies, such as those demonstrating improved concentration (Budde, Voelcker-Rehage, Pietrabyk-Kendziorra, Ribeiro, & Tidow, 2008), and by Kramer, Bherer, Colcombe, Dong, & Greenough, 2004, which confirm that physical activity has proven effective in enhancing learning and delaying cognitive decline in older adults. This eliminates the need for it to justify itself as an independent subject focused solely on movement. Whitehead (2013, p. 35) also argues that the subject "needs no further justification" because it "develops the learner's latent potential." Therefore, he concludes that the educational value of physical education should be celebrated in and of itself, rather than justifying its place in the curriculum through its contribution to broader educational outcomes. The professors surveyed expressed this sentiment in various ways, with the majority strongly rejecting the idea of excluding physical education from core subjects like

reading, writing, and arithmetic, or considering it a marginal subject that can be eliminated for any reason. This indicates a firm belief in the value of physical education.

3.2.2 High appreciation and Disappointing Reality: Practical Constraints and a Non-Functional Environment

The results reveal general difficulties faced by teachers in delivering physical education lessons. The time allocated per class is not commensurate with the content of physical education, and the facilities and equipment are insufficient to achieve the stated objectives. These difficulties, and the accompanying disregard for the subject matter, indicate a form of undervaluing it and make its implementation technically challenging. Teachers showed complete agreement that the time was insufficient and the scheduling was flawed. Tinning (2012) argues that there is no ideal pedagogical practice and that teaching physical education will depend on the reality of school facilities and classroom sizes. A growing awareness of the complex environment of pedagogical practices and knowledge construction within the daily realities of primary school physical education is emerging in the research literature. Furthermore, a recent international survey conducted worldwide on the status and position of physical education in schools pointed to issues relating to legal status and actual implementation, limited or diminishing time allocation to the curriculum, the status of the subject and attitudes of school principals, other teachers and parents, deficiencies in financial, material and human resources and teacher preparation, curriculum trends, as well as uncertainties about the future of the subject as key conditions facing physical education (Marshall & Hardman, 2000).

Insufficient time directly impacts the physical fitness requirements and various competencies targeted during physical education classes, which necessitate sustained and prolonged participation to acquire motor skills. This finding is compared with global data, where an average of 94 minutes per week of scheduled physical activity was recorded in primary schools. European schools had the highest average, at 109 minutes, while Central and Latin American schools had the lowest, at 73 minutes. Some of these countries, with their low reported time, have called for at least 120 minutes per week of physical activity (Hardman & Marshall, 2000). A recent study closely related to the aforementioned report concluded that "physical education is a compulsory subject in the vast majority of education systems

worldwide, and where it is not compulsory, it is usually taught as a general practice" (Hardman, 2008, p. 7). However, despite various official policy commitments to include physical education in schools from the earliest stages, Hardman found a "gap" between official policy regulations and actual practice. He attributed this primarily to: a) a lack of accountability for the implementation of physical education within schools; b) the general prioritization of other subjects over physical education; c) the general undervaluation of physical education and its importance; and d) a shortage of adequately qualified teachers and the attitudes of some prominent figures, such as school principals (Hardman, 2008, p. 8). Budgetary constraints and pressure to achieve academic goals have led schools to reduce physical education in an effort to improve academic performance. There is even a perception among key decision-makers that time spent on non-academic activities can negatively impact academic achievement (Lindner, 2002).

The results showed that physical education is not properly scheduled within the weekly distribution of subjects by teachers. This scheduling problem is a key indicator of the low priority given to physical education by school administration. Physical education is treated as a reserve subject, used to fill gaps in the timetable or to provide breaks for students. For example, physical education classes are held in the afternoon in most school timetables (Rainer, Cropley, Jarvis, & Griffiths, 2012). According, to (Sahnoune. O, Elmekki F, 2022) in their study physical sports activity remains almost non-existent as an educational subject within educational institutions, due to the lack of the necessary capabilities for this subject, and on the other hand, the intensity of the curriculum, where its share is often compensated with a basic subject (Mathematics, language...) or dispense with it completely. this means that learning in physical education is given less importance.

Teachers also expressed dissatisfaction with the attention given to the design of physical education facilities and the provision of necessary equipment. These figures highlight a glaring lack of material resources, which makes teaching physical education more difficult. Pickup (2012) indicates that primary physical education still suffers from a scarcity of facilities, which affects the quality of teaching and learning that can be achieved. In terms of facilities and equipment, physical education typically faces the challenge of a lack of facilities and poor maintenance of teaching spaces.

3.2.3 The Deprivation Trap and Professional Resilience

The results show teachers exhibiting resilience in the face of the marginalization of their subject matter, stemming from limited time, inadequate equipment, and unsuitable facilities. This is the deprivation trap: when facilities are poor, teachers lower their expectations and standards. However, in this study, teachers maintain high standards and a positive outlook on the subject, despite a challenging environment. Physical education teachers demonstrate high professional self-esteem even while acknowledging significant structural challenges related to the aforementioned difficulties. Despite their low status, they exhibit professional resilience. They resist marginalization and maintain a positive view of their subject. These circumstances might lead to leaving the profession, but they also have the option to stay and face the challenges, as demonstrated by a study examining the intentions of Finnish physical education teachers to leave the profession and the reasons behind their decision (Mäkelä, Hirvensalo, & Whipp, 2014). It was found that 39% of physical education teachers expressed a desire to leave the teaching profession. Despite the various challenges they face, the majority intend to remain in the profession. This suggests a psychological resilience that entails both accepting the challenge and adapting to the available circumstances. However, these pressures can take a different turn. For example, a study by Organista, Mazur, and Tim (2024) showed that physical education teachers faced difficulties related to the marginalization of their work and the job insecurity that affects all teachers in Poland, specifically poor working arrangements. Physical education teachers expressed feelings of loss and alienation due to uncertainty, and sometimes anger. While resilience is generally positive, it can also lead to systemic neglect; if teachers "adapt" to poor conditions, institutions lose the incentive to improve them.

Starc & Strel (2012) assert that the quality and effectiveness of physical education depend on five factors: time allocated, facilities and equipment availability, curriculum content, and the number of students per teacher. Among these factors, they identified the physical education curriculum and its effective implementation as the two most crucial elements for achieving physical education outcomes, both of which require teacher competence. This means that achieving the curriculum's objectives with the required quality can be accomplished through the positive attitude of teachers and their adaptation to available resources and circumstances. Physical education classes, along with training in sports clubs and during leisure time, represent the primary opportunities for children to systematically practice and learn these skills. Consequently, physical education teachers play a vital role in promoting the development and mastery of these skills. Given the critical

importance of performing basic motor skills, it is essential that specialists employ methods that maximize learning effectiveness (Abswoude, Mombarg, de Groot, Spruijtenburg, & Steenbergen, 2021). In addition, modern concepts of physical education indicate that it functions more as a learning environment than as recreation. Therefore, some researchers have emphasized the need for physical education teachers to work with innovation regarding the physical education curriculum by designing open-ended tasks that can produce a wide range of educational outcomes (Ennis, 2015).

4. CONCLUSION

Teachers view physical education as a core academic subject, on par with core subjects like mathematics, reading, and writing. This status is justified because, as a subject, it is as important in terms of cognitive value as any other subject. In this, they align with modern physical education frameworks, which reject the outdated stigma of physical education as mere play and a way to fill students' leisure time after hard work in other subjects. Teachers seem to view physical education not as simple recreation, but as a means of developing a range of life skills, just like other subjects. There is a rejection of the hierarchical structure where subjects are considered important and feed off other, less important subjects, such as physical education.

Contrary to common narratives about the isolation of physical education teachers, these participants feel that they are an integral part of the school's teaching staff. They feel that their voices are heard in meetings and that there is effective coordination regarding student assessment. They possess a high level of professional self-confidence, indicating that they do not feel inferior to their colleagues. They also did not develop any sense of inferiority towards their colleagues, although some of them reject the idea that physical education is less important than other academic subjects.

The study indicates that although physical education teachers have successfully integrated into the school's professional environment, their subject matter remains structurally fragile. It reveals critical shortcomings regarding the availability of working conditions conducive to serving the lofty goals entrusted to physical education. While teachers believe in the value of the subject, the education system fails to support it. However, these major obstacles are not a lack of will or respect, but rather structural and material deprivation stemming from conditions outside the school walls.

The in-depth analysis suggests that physical education teachers are not passive victims of marginalization, but rather committed agents who leverage their social integration (their perceived importance) to safeguard the core of their educational mission. Nevertheless, the persistent gap between their convictions and their working conditions poses a risk of long-term burnout if personal recognition is not translated into structural support. Professional confidence cannot compensate for structural neglect, and without intervention to change the situation, physical education teachers will continue to struggle less effectively within the education system. This study also confirms the academic consensus that the struggle for physical education is not about proving its educational value, but rather about creating suitable working conditions in terms of scheduling, resources, and equipment.

In the pursuit of educational goals, it seems, from an organizational and public policy perspective, that achieving a balance between acquiring knowledge and skills and distributing them across subjects and time periods, while also considering the need for recreation, maintaining health, and the pressures of modern education that emphasize holistic development, remains elusive. Unfortunately, the choice made has been detrimental to physical education and has diminished its importance as an academic subject. A growing awareness of its benefits may contribute to a shift in perception, recognizing it as a pivotal component of students' education and learning in schools. While physical education may have been delayed in the national curriculum for primary school students, initial steps have been taken to readjust educational priorities for this age group and elevate its status.

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