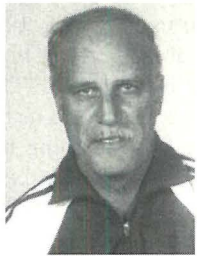


# PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN MALTESE STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

a reality, or wishful thinking?

*Alfred G. Cachia*

**“Physical Education and Sport should not be the prerogative of the Head of School”**



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Ask any child, on his return from a day at his primary school, how s/he has spent the day and the most obvious answer would be - sitting down doing Religion, Maths, English, Maltese, Art. Perhaps on the odd day when the visiting Physical Education teacher was on duty at that particular school, or as a result of the class teacher's benevolence in rewarding the pupils for extraordinary good behaviour during lessons, they would have actually gone down to the school yard for half an hour of exercise - be it a properly conducted lesson or just a game in which the children participate so eagerly.

This opening paragraph to my article might earn me, as has happened before, the title of the prophet of doom. Unfortunately my thirty nine years of experience in schools, both as a teacher and later as administrator, urge me not to hold back from depicting the sorry state of affairs which prevails in the Physical Education area where our schools are concerned. Many buildings have not changed from my early teaching years, and unfortunately neither has the mentality of so many educators vis-à-vis sport within the curriculum.

One should here hasten to give a word of praise to the Unit, which although understaffed, under-equipped, underestimated, tries, against all odds to reach all the island, hopefully pledging itself to provide a healthier lifestyle children frequenting these schools. A handful of people, led by a very enthusiastic and committed Education Officer, have to deliver lessons, organise staff seminars, provide equipment, organise and officiate at tournaments in various disciplines for all schools, and eventually hope to be treated as true professionals in their field, and not feel second class teachers, looked down upon or even frowned at, and in some cases people to be tolerated. And yet these are the people entrusted to bring some spark into the life of children whose existence is chained to desk, chair, book and pen.

When discussions are held among school administrators and some of the Education Division authorities the subject of Physical

Education is given a lesser grading than other subjects within the curriculum. And this is where the root of all prejudice against Physical Education lies. Although, to its credit, the Faculty of Education, at the University of Malta has opened its doors to individuals who want to specialise in Physical Education, (a section which is attracting quite a few aspiring University students) the doors of our Primary Schools have remained quite closed to those who graduate in the sphere, and as such some find a way to Secondary Schools whilst others are snapped up by Private schools while the rest become regular Primary Schools teachers. The fruit of specialisation is forsaken.

On the positive side one must consider the fact that a number of Heads of schools do encourage Physical Education and Sports in their schools going as far as to take on lessons or coaching themselves. Now, much as this is laudable, it underlines the serious shortcomings in our Primary Schools.

Physical Education and Sport should not be the prerogative of the Head of School. English, Maths, Maltese and Religion are not. As such Physical Education should also form an integral part of the National Curriculum. Ah!!! but Physical Education is on the National Curriculum - will be the immediate retort. On paper, yes, but in practice? Will a teacher miss out on Maths for a whole week? Will English lessons be missed because some child has misbehaved in class? Will somebody not be allowed to do Maltese as a form of punishment? But Physical Education will undergo all these threats and no call of protest will be forthcoming - except perhaps from the child or children in question. Some Heads of Schools and some teachers work miracles when they still manage to include Physical Exercise and Sport in an already, overloaded time-table. Unfortunately others just pray for them.

## Healthy Lifestyles

Why should more importance be given to Physical Exercise on a daily basis for children of Primary Schools? I shall quote from the book "Exercise and Children's Health" by Thomas W. Rowland

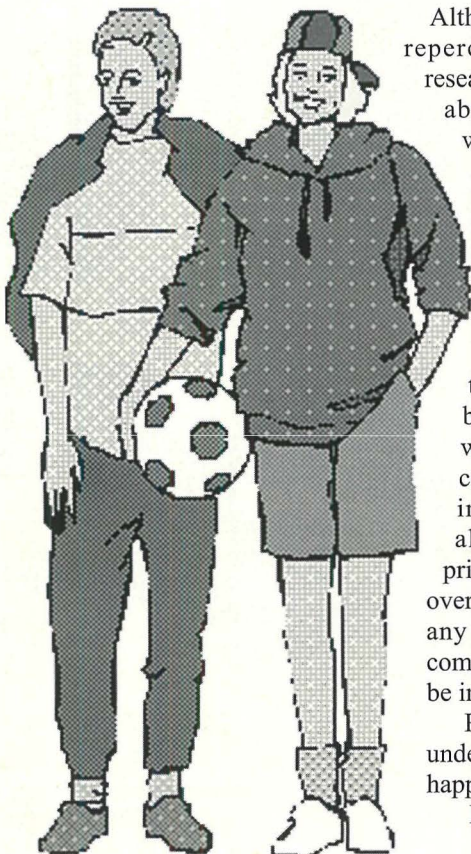
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# Physical Education in Maltese State Primary Schools

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**“It is imperative that Physical Education be considered an important tool for maintaining and managing mental and physical health”**



M.D.(1990):

*There is little doubt that regular exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, but the mechanisms by which the muscular activity contribute to wellness are not well understood (Haskell, Montoye, & Orenstein, 1985). Certainly they are diverse.'*

● Biochemical (rise in HDL-cholesterol levels)

● Physical (increase strength, flexibility)

● Physiological (decreased resting blood pressure)

● Anatomical (increased bone strength)

● Psychological (improved self-esteem)

*These adaptations are all outcomes that have been observed following exercise training programmes. Given these very responses it could be predicted that multiple mechanisms link exercise with improved health.*

Now if this is a result of serious research carried out in the most advanced universities world-wide, it can only confirm what we notice in our everyday life, where a normal three year old child is observed to be in perpetual motion. The amount of action, the range of motion and the span of energy demonstrated by such an age group will then become tempered with time when the children enter the confines of the classroom, and come under the influence of television, computers and lack of roaming area in an island which is congested with traffic; has lost most of its wide open spaces; and ill affords young ones roaming around in sheer liberty. Hence children are, nowadays, from a very early age, being strapped into systems and conditions which render them similar, to a certain extent, to caged animals.

Although many tend to overlook the repercussions of such a situation researches carried out both locally and abroad have come up with some worrying indicators as to the deterioration of the average child's health. And in Malta, where the norm is school, 'Mużew' and Private lessons, the time for a daily form of exercise is fast diminishing. Further to this one should add that for such an exercise to bear long term fruit it should be based on good aerobic preparation which would improve the cardiovascular capabilities of the individual coupled with agility, alertness and skills. Finally the principle of enjoyment should prevail over any competitive aspect although in any games involved the element of competition (health and sporting) has to be introduced.

Parents, teachers and all children under their care thrive in the journey as happy and healthy adults.

In the western world most children

will survive most illnesses while infant morality is at its lowest. However some disturbing statistics show that:

● a high percentage of children between five and nine are obese.

● a high percentage have lost most of their body mobility by age ten.

● a high percentage lack basic sporting skills.

● a high percentage already suffer from physical disorders connected with bad posture, lack of physical exercise etc.

● a certain percentage suffer from stress with a smaller percentage showing signs of emotional disorders.

Unfortunately all the above have been proved to result mostly from lack of regular physical exercise. All of these can be traced in the Maltese sphere and while efforts are being made by different departments to tackle the situation, preventive work that can be carried out by a concentrated and dynamic Physical Education programme is not being tapped to the maximum. It is imperative that Physical Exercise be considered an important tool for both maintaining as well as managing mental and physical health.

*Classical Psychological theory places heavy emphasis on the roles of play and motor activity in the cognitive development of children. Far from being simply a way to release physical energy, play is a central means by which social, moral and intellectual growth is achieved. Piaget, Mead, Erickson, Bruner and Freud all viewed the contributions of physical activity to these functions from different perspectives, but considered exercise to be an essential element in the development of personality and cognitive capacity. “ (Sage, 1986)*

## Values

**I**would be quite correct to state that the main concern of all educators in Malta lies with infusing the right values in the young people under their care.

And since values take time to mature and are, at times, quite difficult to promote in an ever changing society, the earlier these are introduced in a person's life, the better are the chances that these would then become a person's lifestyle. The values will, then, in turn, become vital in building a society.

*...humankind will survive the stresses of the future not so much through their biologic nature but through their value system because values shape philosophy and philosophy influences not only the way people think but also the way they act.* Barrow (1983)

Since Physical Education is a “doing process” it provides ample opportunities for the child to initiate action, to integrate, to take risks, to accept responsibilities and consequences. All these form the foundation of character



formation and nowhere better can these be demonstrated than in the sphere of physical activity. The freedom from the confines of class and desks, and the limited liberty afforded in the school yard should serve as tools for the organisation of the children's development of skill and personality. However this will then depend on a properly organised and well structured Physical Education lesson or game where, even here, the new found liberty is goaded into a positive expression of physical exuberance.

In the early stages of Primary Education the values extolled by Physical Education would be laying the ground for the moral and ethical

values to be developed at later

stages even through more advanced sport.

However the basic elements of human relations, competition, participation, self-confidence, decision making or taking, and leadership start manifesting themselves. To cooperate with and accept others becomes steadily pronounced whilst the elements of fair play and discipline become, quite steadily, well accepted. Such therefore is the importance of physical exercise and sport and the participation there in. Depriving children from Physical Education lessons and the chance to participate in sports is depriving them of the chance of improving themselves not only physically but also morally.

## Concluding suggestions

Physical activity is a must and it should be part of a daily routine in a child's life. Naturally not all our schools are built to allow for such a purpose, however no effort should be spared so that Primary School children should have enough exercise everyday. One should note that I do not consider the forced breaks (10.00 am and 12.30 pm) as adequate physical exercise. Most of the time children bash themselves against each other or the four walls of the yard in a frenzied effort to 'let off steam' A Physical Education lesson should be a properly prepared lesson, with the aims to be reached clearly set out, with the equipment made available and with all the children participating actively.

Secondly, it is now time for all Primary schools to have a Physical Education teacher on the staff on the same lines as the Secondary schools. Most Private Schools have adopted this system. With so many B.Ed (Hons) students graduating with a Physical Education

Special the opportunity is now there.

Thirdly, other venues of physical activities should be explored. At present we have set up a Swimming Promotion Unit within the Education Division and with offices at the National Pool, Tal-Qroqq, to promote swimming within the schools. Some schools have already experienced this new venture.

Although the children were not allowed to make a 'Xalata' of it, but were rather given a proper one hour lesson in swimming, they thoroughly enjoyed it and asked to be invited back.

Fourthly, Physical Education lessons and Sport should be a means by which children gain their self-confidence; organise their time in a most profitable way and consider school as a place to look forward to. After all a happy (even if disciplined) environment will render children happy and this will make teaching that much easier and rewarding.

Finally, although the family has a major influence on child behaviour, school teachers also share these same responsibilities. And although school teachers cannot be expected to single-handedly alter the exercise habits of their students, together with the parents they should encourage regular physical activity at a time when snack foods and television are 'turning off' most children's desires for physical activity.

I am convinced that in some cases this is already happening but I look eagerly forward to the day when this becomes the rule and not the exception!

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**"Physical activity is a must and it should be part of a daily routine in a child's life"**

