

Introducing assessments and examinations in Physical Education in Malta

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Secondary school physical education has fundamentally been a practical and non-examinable subject at school level. Its values to the school and the individual pupils has been seen to lie in its 'expressive' functions, in its intrinsic qualities or in 'instrumental' terms in relation to fitness and health. The humanistic, personal, emotional and social developments are often included in the goals of the programme too, however, none of these objectives fall easily into the traditional academic pattern of examination. (Carroll, 1980)

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In Malta physical education is a non-examinable subject yet an assessment mark or grade is still an integral part of the end of term / year report of the majority of schools in Malta (Cassar, 1995). The assessment of physical education is quantified in the local National Syllabus of Physical Education (1992), nevertheless, physical education was omitted from the school-leaving certificate of fifth formers in government schools in the early 1990s. This last action is not consistent with the local requirements of the National Syllabus of Physical Education (1992). Now that the task of introducing a Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) in physical education is rolling, it seems appropriate to appraise the provisions for content and assessments in the National Syllabus for Physical Education (1992) and to relate them to teacher's practices in secondary schools. The implementation of the activities recommended in the four areas of study of the local syllabus and the assessment practices will be discussed in the light of the requirements of an assessed and examined subject.

The National Syllabus of Physical Education (1992) includes an activity-based classification outlining the following content:

1. Gymnastics including Games of Low Organisation and Athletic Activity: (*modern educational gymnastics, agilities, vaulting, displays, rhythm (boys), fitness; running, jumping, throwing, skills through lead-up games*)

2. Team Sports (*fielding, court/net: volleyball, court/invasion: basketball, football (boys only), handball, hockey (boys only), netball (girls only)*)

3. Individual Sports (*badminton, lawn tennis*)

4. Rhythm and Dancing (*square and folk dancing, creative dance (largely for girls)*).

This categorisation of activities provides for an exposure to a wide base of activities and

experiences to pupils, however, why athletic activities (power optimisation) are included with gymnastics activities (a movement replication activity) is not essentially beneficial to a balanced programme. A new classification; athletic activities is useful to accommodate for a variety of experiences for the pupils. The category team sports includes fielding activities, however, there aren't any such activities in the national syllabus. It is interesting to observe that rounders and softball, which qualify as fielding activities, had been previously incorporated in the Nations Syllabus of Physical Education (1981).

Individual activities comprise racquet activities, which easily fall in the net/court game classification too. Martial arts, aquatics and conditioning activities are individual activities, which ought to be classifications in their own right, together with outdoor activities. This is recommended to widen the spectrum of activities, irrespective of the minimum number of classifications of activities to which pupils should be exposed to, which also ought to be stipulated.

For example the syllabus will stipulate that over the five years of secondary schooling, three/four from six/eight classifications of activities ought to be included in the programme. Writing classifications and activities off completely will never justify their inclusion in a physical education programme. The engendering of activities in this syllabus should be seriously reconsidered. A syllabus promoting and justifying lack of equalities of access and opportunities for no psychomotor reason is not acceptable.

Practical Coursework Activities

Our knowledge of what actually goes on in the name of physical education results primarily from activity surveys (Underwood, 1983). The evidence of curricular value orientations of physical education teachers suggests that the value orientations of teachers are often different from those valued in the physical education curriculum and instructional literature (Ennis, 1992).

An activity survey circulated amongst physical education teachers in Maltese secondary schools (Cassar & Borg, 1991), revealed that both male and female teachers structure their programme around a selection of team games, gymnastics and athletic activities and that the inclusion of individual

activities (racquet) and rhythm and dance is not popular. The team games most practised in boys' schools include football (96%), closely followed by basketball (87%) and volleyball (83%). In the girls' schools the most popular team games comprise volleyball (94%), netball (78%), and basketball (61%). Athletic activities are very popular in both girls' (94%) and boys' (91%) schools. Individual activities are not as prominent in the programme with badminton being included in (56%) of the girls' schools and (43%) of the boys' school; tennis is much less popular. Without excusing anyone one must observe that racquet activities are much more demanding to organise for a class of 25-30 pupils and require very conditioned practices in a school gymnasium or outdoor courts. Rhythm and dance is very negligible in the boys' diet of activities, (4%), yet relatively popular in girls' programmes (43%).

It is also interesting to consider the rational of the teachers for giving more or less importance to particular physical activities prescribed in the secondary school syllabus. Athletics is regarded as an activity that should be given more importance since "it develops discipline in one's personality", "can be practised by everyone and involves competition and immediate rewards".

Gymnastics is an activity which in the opinion of some teachers should be given more importance because "it is the basis of all sport, co-ordination, strength and stamina" and is "an activity which develops all round motor skills". Other teachers feel that gymnastics should be given less importance because it is a sport for a selected few, and that a teacher must be very technically prepared". The challenge of teaching swimming and racquet activities has also received inconsistent support. Some teachers feel that the facilities for these activities are a "hopeless issue" while others

feel that these activities should be given more importance to "increase variation and experience" for the pupils.

Activities for examined physical education

It would make teacher's life more easy if the classification of activities of an examined physical education syllabus is consistent with the requirements of the national syllabus. The six areas of studies (classification of activities) of the National Curriculum Physical Education (UK), (1991) were adopted by the examination boards as from the examination sitting of the summer of 1998. The difficulties experienced with inconsistency of classifications led to the creation of a gap between examined and non-examined physical education programmes within the school and the transition from National Curriculum to examined physical education was difficult for both teachers and students.

The London EDEXEL Foundation GCSE Physical Education syllabus (1999) includes all six areas of studies of the national syllabus:

Athletic activities (jumping, running and throwing)

Dance (Modern/contemporary, Ballet, tap, jazz, Folk/traditional, ethnic)

Games (court, invasion, striking)

Gymnastic activities (gymnastics, martial arts, trampolining),

Outdoor and adventurous activities (board sailing, climbing, canoeing/kayaking, orienteering, sailing, skiing),

Swimming

In GCSE physical education syllabi, the students are examined on 4 or 5 activities selected from a minimum of three of the six areas of activities. This accounts for 50-60% of the final mark. The rest of the marks are allocated to anatomy and physiology; health related fitness and factors affecting participation in physical activity. The practical coursework programme of the National Curriculum Physical Education is central to the success of the introduction of examined physical education. Aylett (1990) reported that schools had 'scrutinised and amended' the content and activities taught in the first three years of secondary schooling to equip students with higher standards and the versatility demanded at GCSE level. It makes sense to provide a wide and balanced programme of activities in National Curriculum Physical Education before going on to the depth required in performance and cognitive outcomes of an examined course.

Provisions for assessment

The local National Syllabus for Physical Education (1992) includes a section on assessment of physical education. The assessment procedure suggests that

"In the case of P.E. if we are to educate the child through the "physical", movement competence is to be given priority over theoretical knowledge. In the upper forms, however, theoretical knowledge may be assessed through oral and written modes but always alongside performance"

The assessments recommended above refer to both practical coursework, "movement competence" and theoretical knowledge, with priority, possibly in terms of weightings of marks given to the former.

The syllabus also recommends oral and written modes of assessment for the theoretical knowledge, however there isn't clear specification of this theoretical content in the syllabus. It is also clear that the structure outlined in this paragraph approximates the methods used for GCSE physical education, where the practical performance coursework and the theoretical components related to physical activities, sport science and factors affecting performance are examined through unseen written papers, oral examinations and project work.

Assessing National Curriculum Physical Education

Three suggestions for an effective system of assessment are recommended in the national Syllabus of Physical Education (1992), namely:

for every teaching unit (physical activity), aspects which will be assessed should be clearly pointed out to students;

as homework students must keep a diary of activities as "an opportunity for analysis and criticism"; and the compilation of a Practical Performance Profile (PPP), indicating a mark on a scale from (1 to 10) on a diagram for every activity type for each student, which will represent "the movement competence and the all round personality of the student".

When teachers were asked to identify the modes which have been adopted for assessments in their schools (Cassar, 1995) it transpired that a variety of procedures are applied in respect of assessing each teaching unit.

The most popular criteria for assessing teaching units of physical activities in local secondary schools are based on "motivation, general effort and abilities of pupils across different activities during a term".

This method was claimed to be implemented by 56% of the teachers. It is interesting to note that this mode was neither found to be significantly different across the various types of schools ($X^2=8.355$ $p>0.07$) nor to the gender of the teachers ($X^2=2.202$ $p>0.137$). These findings imply that this method of assessment is conventional and is being implemented in government, church and private schools by both male and female teachers.

The practice of assessing every physical/

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sports activity is gradually gaining popularity, however, the absence of standard assessment criteria renders teachers to adopt further varieties of approaches. The assessment on the general performance of the student throughout “every sports activity during that term” is compiled by 5% of the teachers while another 14% dedicated a lesson to the assessment of a particular sports activity after every block unit. Some teachers distribute their mark on the theoretical and the practical content of physical education (9%). Another group of teachers award marks on a combination of factors including the pupil’s effort and motivation throughout the sessions and the level of performance competence at the end of the teaching unit (9%), while (5%) stated that it is not the school policy to assess physical education.

Other components awarded marks for the term/yearly report include regular participation, good and co-operative behaviour, bringing the school PE kit for every lesson and fitness tests. The implementation of assessments in local secondary physical education is based on effort and achievement. Veal (1988) argued that teachers find it confusing when requested to base their assessments solely on the achievement of performance coursework. Effort as an integral quality of performance, judged by specific behaviours such as working on a skill instead of talking during practice, improvement itself, and being energetic and enthusiastic are often given importance by teachers. It was further noted that teachers were unwilling to lower a grade for lack of ability, but they felt it justified to give lower marks for lack of effort.

There is a relatively high number of teachers (68%) who claimed to include a variety of written activities as homework. These included tasks such as asking students to keep a diary of lessons (15%), answering questions on sports activities (24%) and project/chart work (32%). The use of the (PPP) Practical Performance Profile is not implemented by any teacher. None of the teachers mentioned the use of videos to assess rules, techniques and tactics of the practical activities. In the era of examinations, the approaches to teach first and then decide what to assess, of norm referencing and the dominance of effort are inadequate (Carroll, 1994).

P.E. assessments have often been characterised by their vagueness and generality. The main feature of these assessments might easily fall into this description:

“lack of specific criteria, the lack of systematic observation and recording and the reliance on general impressions” (Carroll 1994 pg. 19)

An examined course in physical education requires of teachers to strictly adhere to a criterion-referenced model, where the criteria for assessments is set for every single activity, is precise, clearly identified and related to the teaching-learning objectives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The provisions for content recommended in the local National Syllabus of Physical Education (1992), comprises a structured classification of activities which needs to be enlarged to provide for a broad and wide base of activities and experiences for the students, as well as bridge the gap between national curriculum and examined physical education. The activities which teachers select for their physical education programmes mainly include athletics, gymnastics and team games. This is more of a specialisation course and a wider coverage of activities should be considered for inclusion in National Curriculum Physical Education. The provisions for assessment as recommended in the national syllabus lack clarity and specificity and are not adhered to by most teachers. This implies that teachers will have to become involved in the ideologies of assessments, and some training in the application of assessing the performance coursework using criterion referenced system is recommended. The closer the content and the criteria for assessing National Curriculum P.E. and examining Secondary Education Certificate physical education, the more positive the benefit for the subject, the teachers and the pupils.

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