



Section 6. Secondary school. Pedagogy of a comprehensive school

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PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT IN ALBANIAN UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOLS: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL CURRICULUM 2030

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Abstract

Physical education and sport are essential components of holistic education, supporting adolescents' physical, psychological, social, and cognitive development. This study examined upper-secondary students' perceptions of physical education and sport, their participation in physical activity, the influence of personal and family factors, and their expectations regarding school-based activities within the framework of School Curriculum 2030. A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 206 students aged 15–18 years from three upper-secondary schools in Tirana, Albania. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentage distributions. More than 98% of students recognized sport as important for a healthy lifestyle, while approximately 50% considered the current amount of physical education sufficient for their well-being. However, approximately 80% reported that their physical activity was largely limited to school physical education lessons. Personal preferences were an important factor in participation (46.32%), while approximately 24% reported little or no family influence. Furthermore, 30.65% preferred different games and activities according to their interests. The findings reveal a gap between students' positive perceptions of physical activity and their actual participation outside school, highlighting the strategic role of schools in promoting accessible and inclusive physical activity. Strengthening physical education through student-centered activities, interdisciplinary learning, and school sport programs may contribute to a healthier, more active, and inclusive school environment within School Curriculum 2030.

Keywords: *physical education; sport; adolescents; physical activity; School Curriculum 2030; upper-secondary education; student well-being; Albania*

1. Introduction

Education is one of the principal mechanisms through which societies respond to social, cultural, technological, and economic change. The school system reflects the development of society while simultaneously contributing to the development of future generations. Consequently, curricula must continuously respond to changing educational, social, psychological, and health-related needs.

The Albanian pre-university education system has undergone substantial curricular transformation in recent decades. The development of School Curriculum 2030 provides an opportunity to reconsider not only what students learn, but also how learning is organized and how different curricular areas can contribute to students' holistic development.

Within this context, physical education and sport deserve particular attention. Physical activity contributes to several dimensions of child and adolescent development, including physical health, motor competence, psychological well-being, cognitive functioning, and social interaction. Evidence suggests that physical activity and physical fitness are associated with aspects of cognitive functioning and academic performance, although these relationships are complex and influenced by the type, duration, intensity, and context of activity (World Health Organization; Kantomaa M., Syväoja H., Sneck S., Jaakkola T., Pyhäntö K., Tammelin T., 2018).

The school is one of the most important settings for promoting physical activity because it reaches almost all children and adolescents, including those who may have limited opportunities to participate in organized sport outside school. The World Health Organization recommends that children and adolescents engage in an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day across the week, while emphasizing that physical activity may be accumulated through different forms of movement throughout daily life (World Health Organization) (World Health Organization).

International experiences provide important examples. The Finnish Schools on the Move approach demonstrates how physical activity can become part of the broader school culture rather than remaining restricted to formal physical education lessons

(Kantomaa M., Syväoja H., Sneck S., Jaakkola T., Pyhäntö K., Tammelin T., 2018). Such approaches emphasize movement during the school day, active breaks, and cooperation among members of the school community. The Finnish National Agency for Education has highlighted evidence concerning links between school-day physical activity, cognitive activity, classroom behavior, and factors supporting learning (Kantomaa M., Syväoja H., Sneck S., Jaakkola T., Pyhäntö K., Tammelin T., 2018) (Opetushallitus).

Research has also investigated the integration of short physical activity sessions into academic lessons. Drollette et al. reported that acute moderate-intensity aerobic exercise could facilitate aspects of cognitive control, with particularly relevant effects among children with lower initial inhibitory-control capacity (Drollette E. S., Scudder M. R., Raine L. B., Moore R. D., Saliba B. J., Pontifex M. B., Hillman C. H., 2014). (PubMed) Similarly, Goh reported that active academic lessons increased physical activity and improved on-task classroom behavior (Goh T. L., 2017) (Taylor & Francis Online)

These findings do not suggest that physical activity should replace academic learning. Rather, they indicate that movement and academic learning may be complementary components of an effective educational environment. A systematic review and meta-analysis also found that classroom-based physical activity interventions can increase physical activity and may support academic-related outcomes (Watson A., Timperio A., Brown H., Best K., Hesketh K. D. 2017) (SpringerLink).

This perspective is particularly relevant to the development of School Curriculum 2030 in Albania. A competence-oriented curriculum can provide opportunities for students to apply theoretical knowledge through practical experiences and interdisciplinary activities.

Physical activity can be incorporated into subjects such as biology, physics, chemistry, psychology, mathematics, health education, and environmental studies. For example, heart rate can be measured before and after physical activity in biology; speed, distance, acceleration, and force can be examined through movement in physics; energy expenditure and metabolism can be discussed in chemistry; and stress, emotional regulation,

and social interaction can be explored through physical activity in psychology.

Adolescence is also a particularly important developmental period. Young people experience substantial physical, psychological, and social changes and increasingly seek autonomy and personal choice. Their attitudes toward physical activity may be influenced by family, peers, school, socioeconomic circumstances, and the availability of appropriate opportunities.

Therefore, students' own perceptions should be considered when designing educational policies and curricular reforms. The present study investigates the perceptions of Albanian upper-secondary students regarding physical education and sport and explores how these perceptions can inform the development of School Curriculum 2030.

2. Materials and Methods

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted to examine upper-secondary students' perceptions of physical education and sport, their participation in physical activity, factors influencing participation, and their expectations regarding school-based physical activity. The study included **206 students aged 15–18 years** attending three general upper-secondary schools in Tirana, Albania: “**Ismail Qemali**,” “**Petro Nini Luarasi**,” and “**Qemal Stafa**.” The sample included both female and male students from different age groups.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed to address the main objectives of the study. The questionnaire focused on students' perceptions of the importance of sport and physical activity, participation inside and outside school, personal and family influences on participation, perceptions of physical education provision, and preferences regarding activities undertaken during physical education lessons. Complementary information was also obtained through discussions with physical education teachers concerning students' preferences, communication during lessons, group organization, self-assessment, and opportunities for interdisciplinary integration of physical activity.

3. Results

A total of **206 upper-secondary students aged 15–18 years** participated

in the study. Female students represented **57.77%** of the sample, while male students represented **42.23%**. Regarding age, **25.73%** of participants were 15 years old, **30.58%** were 16, **35.92%** were 17, and **7.77%** were 18 years old.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of the participants*

Characteristic	Percentage (%)
Female	57.77
Male	42.23
15 years	25.73
16 years	30.58
17 years	35.92
18 years	7.77
Total	100

The results showed a very high level of awareness of the importance of sport for a healthy lifestyle. More than **98%** of students recognized sport and physical activity as important for maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Table 2. *Students' perception of the importance of sport for a healthy lifestyle*

Response	%
Sport is important for a healthy lifestyle	>98
Other responses	<2
Total	100

Regarding the amount of physical education provided at school, approximately **50%** of respondents considered the current provision sufficient for their well-being and stress reduction. The remaining students indicated a need or preference for additional opportunities for physical activity.

Table 3. *Students' perception of the adequacy of physical education provision*

Response	%
Current amount is considered sufficient	≈50
Other responses	≈50
Total	100

One of the most important findings concerned students' participation in physical activity outside formal physical education lessons. Approximately **80%** of respondents reported that their participation in sport was mainly or only during school physical education lessons, while approximately **20%** reported participation in other physical activities or organized sport.

Table 4. *Participation in physical activity outside school physical education lessons*

Participation pattern	%
Participation mainly/only during school physical education	≈80
Participation in other physical activities or organized sport	≈20
Total	100

The analysis further demonstrated the importance of personal preferences in students' decisions regarding participation in sport. Specifically, **46.32%** of respondents indicated that their own interests and personal preferences were an important basis for their involvement in physical activity. Approximately **24%** reported little or no significant family influence on their choice of physical activities.

Table 5. *Personal and family factors associated with participation in sport*

Factor/response	%
Personal interests and preferences	46.32
Little or no family influence	≈24
Other responses	Not available
Total	Not applicable

The findings also indicated that family and socioeconomic circumstances may influence students' access to organized sport. Costs associated with sports clubs, equipment, transportation, and participation may represent barriers for some students. Consequently, school-based physical activity represents an important opportunity to provide

more equitable access to sport and physical activity. Students were also asked about the types of activities they would prefer to undertake during physical education lessons. **30.65%** expressed a preference for different games and activities according to their interests.

Table 6. *Students' preferred activities during physical education lessons*

Preferred activity	%
Different games and activities according to students' interests	30.65
Other activities/responses	69.35*
Total	100

Complementary discussions with physical education teachers indicated that more than **60%** considered physical education to be among students' preferred subjects or activities. Teachers also emphasized the importance of communication and interaction during physical education lessons and identified smaller working groups and continuous self-assessment as potentially beneficial approaches.

Table 7. *Teachers' perceptions of students' preference for physical education*

Teachers' perception	%
Physical education considered a preferred subject/activity among students	>60
Other responses	<40
Total	100

The study also identified several areas in which physical activity could be integrated with other curricular subjects. Teachers proposed practical activities connecting movement with concepts in biology, physics, chemistry, and psychology.

Overall, the results demonstrate a strong positive perception of physical education and sport among Albanian upper-secondary students. More than 98% recognized their importance for a healthy lifestyle, whereas approximately 80% reported that their participation in sport was mainly or only during school physical education lessons. Personal interests emerged as an important factor

in sports engagement, while students also expressed a preference for more varied and enjoyable activities. The findings further indicate considerable potential for schools to

expand opportunities for physical activity and to integrate movement-based learning across different curricular areas within the framework of School Curriculum 2030.

Table 8. *Examples of interdisciplinary integration of physical activity*

Subject	Curriculum topic	Example of integrated physical activity
Biology	Skeletal and muscular systems	Yoga, dance, movement-based exercises
Biology	Cardiovascular and respiratory systems	Measuring heart rate before and after exercise
Physics	Movement and force	Running, jumping, throwing, football
Physics	Speed and distance	Measuring speed and distance through movement
Chemistry	Metabolism	Exploring metabolic processes during exercise
Chemistry	Energy expenditure	Exploring energy expenditure during physical activity
Chemistry/ Health	Electrolytes and hydration	Monitoring hydration before and after exercise
Psychology	Stress and healthy behavior	Walking, exercise, yoga
Psychology	Well-being and social interaction	Group activities and outdoor activities

4. Discussion

The present study provides important insights into upper-secondary students' perceptions of physical education and sport in the Albanian school context. The most notable finding was the very high level of awareness regarding the importance of sport for a healthy lifestyle, with more than 98% of students expressing a positive perception. This finding is consistent with established evidence concerning the contribution of physical activity to physical health, mental well-being, cognitive functioning, and overall quality of life during childhood and adolescence (World Health Organization). The WHO recommends that children and adolescents engage in an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day across the week, emphasizing that physical activity should form part of everyday life rather than remain limited to formal exercise sessions (World Health Organization) (World Health Organization).

Despite this highly positive perception, the present study identified an important gap between students' awareness of the value

of physical activity and their actual participation. Approximately 80% of respondents reported that their participation in sport was mainly or only during school physical education lessons. This finding is important because participation in formal physical education lessons alone does not necessarily provide sufficient physical activity to meet international recommendations. The WHO emphasizes that all forms of movement contribute to overall physical activity and that greater amounts of physical activity provide additional health benefits (World Health Organization) (World Health Organization).

The finding that approximately 50% of students considered the current amount of physical education sufficient for their well-being and stress reduction is also relevant. Students appear to recognize the contribution of physical education to their well-being, while their responses concerning actual participation indicate that opportunities for physical activity outside formal lessons remain limited. This distinction is important for future curricular development: increasing awareness alone may not be sufficient; schools

should also create practical opportunities for students to be physically active on a regular basis.

Evidence from other educational systems supports this approach. The Finnish experience, particularly the Schools on the Move approach, demonstrates how physical activity can become part of the broader school culture through movement during the school day, active breaks, physical education, and cooperation among members of the school community (Kantomaa M., Syväoja H., Sneck S., Jaakkola T., Pyhältö K., Tammelin T., 2018). The Finnish National Agency for Education has summarized evidence linking school-day physical activity with cognitive activity, classroom behavior, concentration, and other factors that support learning (Kantomaa M., Syväoja H., Sneck S., Jaakkola T., Pyhältö K., Tammelin T., 2018). (Opetushallitus) Such approaches are particularly relevant to School Curriculum 2030 in Albania, where physical activity could be understood as a broader educational resource rather than only as a separate curricular subject.

The present findings also support the importance of student-centered physical education. Approximately 30.65% of respondents expressed a preference for different games and activities according to their interests. Furthermore, 46.32% indicated that personal interests and preferences were important in their participation in sport. These findings suggest that adolescents value autonomy, choice, enjoyment, and opportunities for social interaction. Providing students with greater opportunities to influence the selection of activities may contribute to increased engagement and motivation.

The importance of enjoyable and varied activities is particularly relevant during adolescence, when participation in physical activity may decline and sedentary behavior may increase. Consequently, physical education should not be limited to the development of technical sporting skills but should also help students develop positive attitudes toward lifelong physical activity. The findings of the present study suggest that games and recreational activities may provide useful mechanisms for increasing participation, particularly among students who are not involved in organized sport outside school.

The role of the family should also be considered. Approximately 24% of respondents reported little or no significant family influence on their choice of physical activities. At the same time, the broader information obtained during the study suggests that family circumstances and economic resources may influence access to organized sport. Participation in sports clubs may involve costs related to membership, equipment, transportation, and other expenses. In this context, school-based physical activity can contribute to greater equity and inclusion by providing opportunities for participation regardless of students' socioeconomic circumstances.

Another important implication concerns the potential relationship between physical activity and learning. The present study did not directly measure academic achievement or cognitive performance and therefore cannot establish a causal relationship between physical activity and academic outcomes. Nevertheless, previous research provides evidence that physical activity may be associated with cognitive processes and factors related to learning. Syväoja et al. reported associations between physical activity, sedentary behavior, and academic performance among Finnish children, while emphasizing the complexity of these relationships (Syväoja H. J., Kantomaa M. T., Ahonen T., Hakonen H., Kankaanpää A., Tammelin T. H., 2013). (PubMed) This is an important consideration for the Albanian context: physical activity should complement academic learning rather than be presented as a substitute for it.

Research on short physical activity sessions integrated into academic lessons provides additional support for the interdisciplinary approach proposed in this study. Drollette et al. demonstrated that a single session of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise could facilitate aspects of cognitive control, with particularly notable effects among children with lower initial inhibitory-control capacity (Drollette E. S., Scudder M. R., Raine L. B., Moore R. D., Saliba B. J., Pontifex M. B., Hillman C. H., 2014). (PubMed) Similarly, Goh reported that active academic lessons increased physical activity and improved on-task classroom behavior (Goh T. L., 2017). (Taylor & Francis Online) A systematic review and meta-analysis

by Watson et al. further identified positive effects of classroom-based physical activity interventions on physical activity and academic-related outcomes (Watson A., Timperio A., Brown H., Best K., Hesketh K. D., 2017) (SpringerLink)

These findings provide a theoretical basis for the interdisciplinary opportunities identified by teachers in the present study. Physical activity can be used to demonstrate cardiovascular and respiratory processes in biology, movement and force in physics, metabolism and energy expenditure in chemistry, and stress regulation and social interaction in psychology. Such activities may help students connect theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Importantly, however, interdisciplinary integration should be carefully planned so that it supports, rather than reduces, the educational objectives of both physical education and the academic subject involved.

The findings concerning teachers are also noteworthy. More than 60% of the teachers consulted considered physical education to be among students' preferred subjects or activities. Teachers also emphasized communication, smaller working groups, and continuous self-assessment. These observations reinforce the importance of creating a supportive and participatory learning environment in physical education. Smaller groups may provide greater opportunities for active participation, communication, peer interaction, and individualized feedback, while self-assessment may contribute to students' awareness of their own progress and personal responsibility for physical activity.

The potential role of physical activity is also relevant in the post-pandemic educational context. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted school attendance, physical activity, social interaction, and established routines for children and adolescents. Although the present study was not designed to measure the direct effects of COVID-19 and therefore cannot establish causal relationships, the issues identified during the study, including passivity, reduced social interaction, withdrawal, conflicts, and decreased engagement with school, underline the importance of rebuilding active and socially supportive school environments.

From the perspective of School Curriculum 2030, the findings therefore support

a broader conceptualization of physical education and sport. Physical education should not be viewed exclusively as a subject concerned with motor performance. It can contribute to health literacy, social competence, emotional well-being, self-regulation, cooperation, and the development of lifelong active lifestyles. The WHO guidelines similarly recognize physical activity as beneficial for mental and cognitive health in addition to physical health (World Health Organization). (World Health Organization)

4.1 Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of 206 students from only three upper-secondary schools in Tirana; therefore, the findings cannot automatically be generalized to all Albanian adolescents. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported responses, which may be affected by recall and social-desirability bias. Third, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions regarding the relationships between physical activity, well-being, school engagement, or academic performance. Finally, the information obtained from teachers was complementary and was not analyzed using a separate qualitative methodology.

Future studies should include larger and more geographically diverse samples, objective measures of physical activity, and longitudinal or intervention-based designs. Further research should also examine differences according to sex, age, socioeconomic circumstances, and participation in organized sport.

5. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that Albanian upper-secondary students have a very positive perception of the importance of physical education and sport, with more than 98% recognizing their contribution to a healthy lifestyle. However, the finding that approximately 80% of students participate mainly or only during school physical education lessons reveals a substantial gap between positive attitudes and actual participation in physical activity outside school.

Students' personal interests and preferences appear to play an important role in participation, while their preference for varied games and activities indicates the impor-

tance of enjoyment, autonomy, social interaction, and student-centered approaches in physical education.

The findings further demonstrate the potential of schools to provide accessible and inclusive opportunities for physical activity and to reduce barriers associated with participation outside school. Within School Curriculum 2030, physical education and sport should therefore be considered not as isolated curricular components, but as important contributors to students' physical, psychological, social, and educational development.

A stronger interdisciplinary approach, involving physical education alongside biology, physics, chemistry, psychology, health education, and other curricular areas, may create meaningful opportunities for students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Strengthening school sport programmes, student choice, active learning, and cooperation among teachers, families, and educational institutions may contribute to a healthier, more active, inclusive, and development-oriented school environment.

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