The Effect of the Amendments of the Public Education Act on the School Activity of Physical Education Teachers

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the legal regulations in the period after the 1989-1990 transition, teachers working in public education, in our case physical education teachers, were engaged in several activities which were not directly related to the competence of in-school educational work. Consequently, there has been a shift in their scope of activities. The author of this paper is interested in the experience of physical education teachers during the period. The objective of the paper is to reveal what effects such a comprehensive and permanent change had on the teaching of physical education in schools, and on the life of physical education teachers. In order to investigate the subject of research the analysis of legislative documents, in-depth interviews and the survey method were applied. The results show that in the period after the 1989-1990 transition, the work of teachers was not only hindered by the structural changes in accordance with educational legislation and the permanent amendment of documents, but the lack of consistency in pedagogical work as well. For the teachers taking part in the preparation of curricula, the extension of their activities resulted in a double workload. The decision that marks were replaced with textual evaluation in grade 1 of primary schools was not received positively on the part of physical education teachers. Based on the results it can be concluded that the efficient work of physical education teachers would be greatly assisted by more predictable legislation, which would ensure the possibility of planning in advance. Olympism, Olympic culture, sports education, pedagogy of sport

KEYWORDS

public education, legislation, curriculum, physical education teachers

Introduction

The 1989-1990 political and economic transition brought about major changes in the regulatory framework of the Hungarian educational system. The Act LXXIX of 1993 on Public Education laid the foundations for the democratic public education system, and defined the rights and obligations of its actors. It increased the period of compulsory education to 10 years and abolished the central(ized) curricula introduced in the 1970s. The values of the democratic transition were successfully incorporated into the text, which established the new, and sometimes unstable educational structure. The Act defined the long-term strategy of the content- and structural transformation of

Hungarian public education. It prescribed the weekly framework of lessons in the different school-types, and defined the content requirements. The previously existing rigid 8 plus 4-year school structure was made more flexible as well, which created a feeling of uncertainty on the part of teachers, parents and students alike. Everyone was looking for the beneficial solutions and challenges (Csoma 2000).

With the introduction of the National Core Curriculum new goals and tasks were shifted to the sphere of influence of the schools. The Act obliged the schools operating in the public education system to write their Pedagogical Programs, and as an integral part of the program, the local curricula. This activity took several months to be completed by thousands of teachers, who had to realize that the previously existing compulsory central curricula had provided a comfortable situation, but one lacking reflexive and critical elements.

Being a special segment of pedagogical activity requiring specialized professional preparation, the drafting of the local curricula was carried out with serious difficulties, mostly with the adaptation of the sample curricula issued by the Ministry, or of curricula made by other schools. Consequently, these new curricula were similarly centralized with few modifications, taking little account of the specialities, qualifications of the given students, and of the personal and material conditions and the special requirements of the schools themselves.

Today's Hungarian public education is regulated by the same Act, but with several amendments and supplementations. In 1996, an amendment reinforcing the rights of children and the obligation to introduce the National Core Curriculum was accepted. The Act LXVIII of 1999 required the schools to create framework curricula based on the type of school and to establish a quality control scheme (ELTE TTK, 2005). The structural division of the school system indicates an intention to ensure the differentiated advancement according to abilities from a pedagogical point of view, and to meet the differentiated demands from a social point of view. However, the result seems to be highly selective and segregating public education with all the features of early selection. As the first step of selection is already taken with the differentiation of school-types, the schools themselves are only given the freedom to enhance the actual competence-based differentiated advancement of students after this pre-selection process, which has a negative effect on the successful social integration of minorities as well (Csoma 2000).

With the country's nearing integration to the European Union, new perspectives emerged in the Hungarian public education system, and the planning of a new knowledge-program was also initiated. In Act XXI of 2002 the framework curricula were terminated along with the prescribed number of lessons accompanying them (ELTE TTK 2005). The amendment brought about fundamental changes in the content regulation of public education with the abolition of compulsory framework curricula, that is the obligation to conform the local curriculum to the framework curriculum. Accordingly, all local curricula which met the requirements of the National Core Curriculum were legitimate. In order to ensure that the top-level governmental objectives appear in the local-level programs, intermediary instruments were also needed; therefore, the framework curricula were also preserved for optional use, and certain non-curricular elements were implemented as well, resulting in a three-level regulative system consisting of the National Core Curriculum, the framework curricula and the local curricula (Vass 2003, OKI 2006). The next modification in 2003 made the first steps in reforming the system of assessment, by introducing textual evaluation in grades 1 to 3 of the primary school, and by making failure and the repetition of the grade a solution to be avoided. The most important objectives of the alternations were to strengthen the integrative cultural elements, to emphasize the developmental nature of the system of requirements and competence-centeredness.

The above-mentioned amendments of the Public Education Act provoked reactions on the part of the educational research institutions, who demanded the stabilization of the institutional background of professionals dealing with content regulation and development. They called for a variety of opportunities to assist the schools in curriculum development, such as the adaptation of ready-made program packages and methodological guidance. In relation to this, they urged the elaboration of a strategy for lifelong learning, which could integrate the content development and assessment of public education, vocational training and adult education. They also voiced their concerns over the terminological uncertainty resulting from the 2003 amendment (framework curriculum, program package, program), and over the official controlling and assessment of public educational institutions (OKI 2003).

On the part of teachers, the constant changes resulted in them becoming engaged in several activities which were not directly related to the competence of in-school educational work. Consequently, there has been a shift in their scope of activities. The objective of the article is to analyze what effects the amendments had on the scope of activities of teachers, with a primary focus on the work of physical education teachers, and on how they perceived the continuous change in their teaching environment.

Methods

During the research work, in order to explore the legal context of teaching, the *analysis of educational policy documents* was performed to understand the direct affects they had on the work of teachers.

In-depth interviews were made with leading physical education teachers and headmasters of various types of public education institutions to see how they perceived the changes and how they acted upon them.

A *survey* was conducted among a sample of (primary and secondary) public education institutions, which was selected randomly to reflect the main characteristics of the overall population. The questionnaires were sent to the institutions by email, and contained open and closed questions focusing on issues such as curricula and assessment in physical education and attitudes to everyday physical education.

Results

The effect of legislative measures on the workload of teachers

In the educational process, the most important people for the children are the teachers, who teach values to the children and have an indirect influence by leading by example. They are more important than the curricula, or the organization of the school, and more influential than any teaching aid. Even so, the efficient pedagogical work of the teacher is hindered by the limited learning assets and curricula available, the over-bureaucratized organization of the school and, in some cases, the weak management of the school. The experience is that only the highly qualified and the most virtuous teachers can stay credible and successful. Naturally, the competence of the teacher is not only comprised of the knowledge of the subject. Pedagogical work also requires a professional competence, as the personality of the child has to be discovered, and the pathways of development have to be explored. As of today, this is given the least time in the school.

In the period after the 1989-1990 transition, the work of teachers was not only hindered by the

structural changes in accordance with educational legislation and the permanent amendment of documents, but there was also a lack of consistency in pedagogical work. Since in the period discussed, the National Core Curriculum has been modified several times, teachers were forced to react to these changes as many times. For physical education teachers, the amendments to the Act meant changes in various tasks, and on different levels.

Furthermore, the enforcement of quality control in education demanded a similar amount of creative work for them. This also involves preparatory activities, and the constant need for revision, in which physical education teachers also took part. The system of compulsory training and the introduction of a new evaluation scheme designed to ensure the quality education of teachers, move on a wide range. It was the 1996 amendment of the Act which enforced the compulsory training of teachers. It prescribed that teachers take part in training every seven years, which can be performed through 120 hours of accredited courses, the completion of a professional exam, or an exam of equal level (such as public education management), or through enrolling in graduate or post-graduate education.

In the 2003 amendment of the Act, there were no instructions referring to the measurement of students' physical condition, yet the methods of assessment are to be included in the curriculum (§48 of the Act on Public Education). All of our interviewees stated that they still measure and assess their students. In the context of the 2006 amendments, the issue of faculty-based education in grades 5 and 6, and the everyday teaching of physical education were the most emphatic areas. Owing to the introduction of faculty-based education, graduate physical education teachers working in the lower grades of primary school are to take part in a further 120 hours of training. On the other hand, the other emphatic issue was removed from the agenda. The amendment has had a significant impact on the working conditions of teachers.

From the 2006/07 academic year onwards, an extra two hours are required from the teachers which are to be used for out-of-lesson activities and face-to-face meetings with students, and do not mean financial remuneration. In the 2006 amendment, compulsory administration and the registration of lessons were enforced for all public education institutions. From 1 September 2007, the compulsory number of lessons was increased by two. Simultaneously, the above-mentioned extra hours became optional and were to be compensated by payment. The 2008 amendment included only one significant change: quality control was made compulsory, and the quality control programme of every school had to be prepared along the guidelines of the Act and the instructions of the maintainer. This resulted in another burden on the shoulders of teachers, allowing less attention to the children, "for whom the bell tolls".

All in all, it can be stated that in accordance with the Public Education Act and its amendments, teachers working in public education prepared:

The pedagogical programme of the school and the local curriculum,

The organizational and operational bylaws of the school including policy,

The quality control programme of the school.

In the past twenty years, these documents were revised every 2-3 years in accordance with the modifications in the Public Education Act.

The effect of legislative measures on the content of physical education lessons

Changes in the factors defining the content of physical education usually followed the tasks assigned by the amendments. One pivotal issue of the teaching-learning process is the question of assessment. The problem was dealt with several times in the period examined, however, the most

important milestone was Act LXI of 2003, which introduced textual evaluation in grades 1 to 3 of the primary school, and made failure and the repetition of the grade a solution to be avoided.

The Public Education Act prescribes two comprehensive measurements of the students' physical condition in a year, one in autumn and one in spring. To offer some assistance to the teachers, the Ministry of Education established a committee to create a testing protocol for optional use. The physical education testing scheme is applied by the teacher as a tool for the personality development of the student. This tool primarily means that with the experience obtained through testing, the teacher being familiar with the exact indicators of the class, group or individual, may plan the tasks for a lesson or a period of time, the organizing framework of the tasks, and the teaching methods to be applied, e.g. differentiation. If the teacher keeps track of individual data, the strengths and weaknesses of a given student can be identified and development can be enhanced (Gergely, 2002).

Physical education curriculum and assessment

Previous research by Gergely (2002) has shown that 27.3% of physical education teachers working in the capital Budapest prepared the local curriculum for the subject of physical education independently. However, even if they adopted a sample curriculum offered by another institution or the Ministry, this still meant an extra workload in addition to teaching, especially considering the fact that writing curricula is a task requiring specialized training which most practising teachers had not encountered.

In the survey conducted among public education institutions, the respondents were asked about who prepared the curriculum for physical education in the pedagogical programme of their school. The results show that in 47% of the cases it was the P.E. teacher(s) working in the school, in 41% of the schools the sample curriculum was adapted to the local conditions by the P.E. teacher(s), 4% adopted the sample curriculum offered by the Ministry, 1% of the institutions adopted the curriculum from another school, and 7% gave no answer. When creating the local curricula, and even when adapting an existing sample to the specific personal conditions and assets, a comprehensive piece of theoretical work was required from physical education teachers, who also needed to consider the abilities of their students. Consequently, it can be said that for the teachers taking part in the preparation of curricula, the extension of their activities resulted in a double workload.

The results also reflect the fact that since publication of the research carried out by Gergely (2002), the attitudes of physical education teachers to preparing the curriculum have improved.

Since the amendments of the Public Education Act also concerned the issue of assessment, we asked physical education teachers if they preferred giving marks to textual evaluation. According to the answers, 63% of the respondents completely agreed with giving marks, another 26% said that they agreed with it, whereas the share of those rejecting marks was only 8%, and 3% gave no answer. These results suggest that physical education teachers consider giving marks to be an appropriate and desirable tool for evaluating the performance of students.

At the time of our survey, at 50% of the institutions examined marks were used for assessment at the physical education lesson in every grade. In 42% of the institutions marks are used in certain grades but not in others, and in 5% of the institutions involved in the research, only textual evaluation was used. It is important to note here that since 2008, marks have been replaced by textual evaluation in grade 1 of the primary school, a decision which was not received positively on the part of physical education teachers. Their opinions are reflected in the fact that 63% would prefer to give marks, which can only be done in every grade in secondary schools. The data indicate the existence of a discrepancy

between the legislative measures and the attitudes of physical education teachers.

Conclusion

The reforms in public education legislation concerning policy and content have resulted in radical changes for the work of teachers. The regulatory measures have resulted in a more flexible and more democratic educational system than the one existing before the 1989-1990 transition, which was defined by rigid and centralized curricula. However, in the past two decades, the new structure and content of public education could not be stabilized, pushing the system out of the state of equilibrium. The necessary trial periods were omitted, and the teachers working in public education became uncertain in several cases; they keep looking for their place in Hungarian society with regard to both professional and financial prestige.

Based on the legislative amendments in public education, especially those concerning physical education teachers, and the opinions of physical education teachers, the objective of the current article was to identify the most important problems emerging in their daily routine of work.

Regarding physical education, the structural changes in the school system created a problem of permeability. The new types of schools did not have a curriculum, and the teachers working there did not have adequate experience in teaching the newly emerging age-group. It took several years of professional learning before the structural modifications reached their goals in content terms as well.

In addition to the structural changes, during the permanent amendments in the content of the curricula, the unity of terminal goal and task requirements has changed as well; the requirements became softer, more general and less measurable. The abolition of marks and failure in the first grades broke the consonance of requirements and assessment. Although the importance of textual evaluation is admitted, the lack of daily feedback is apparent.

The liberalization of the restrictions concerning absence causes a problem especially in secondary schools. Furthermore, another new challenge was the extension of the compulsory age for public education to 18, which causes pedagogical concerns in secondary institutions. The labour market aspect of this decision cannot be discussed in this article, but on the part of public education, keeping over-aged students in the schools definitely causes a problem for teachers and the management of schools alike. This issue is apparent in physical education lessons as well.

In our study, the impact of continuous legislative amendments on the everyday professional work of physical education teachers was investigated. Based on the results of our research, it can be concluded that following the continuous modifications meant a serious challenge for the teachers, even more so because the views of professionals were overlooked during the preparation of the legislative amendments. The responses of physical education teachers and headmasters are a reflection that owing to the above-mentioned fact, professionals could not become partners in realizing the prospective changes. The lack of partnership could also be identified in the fact that at the beginning P.E. teachers rarely took part in the elaboration of the local curricula; this tendency took more than a decade to be turned around. According to the opinion of the respondents, these processes did not assist them in the development of students. It can be concluded that the efficient work of physical education teachers would be greatly assisted by more predictable legislation, which would ensure the possibility of planning in advance.

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