

# CHOSEN PROBLEMS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

<https://doi.org/10.5817/CZ.MUNI.P210-9631-2020-25>

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## ABSTRACT

The main topic of the paper is the analysis of a state of physical education in primary and secondary education in the Czech Republic. The paper is engaged in an issue of the pupils (and their legal representatives) approach to the physical education as well as of the curricular grounding of the physical education. The next viewpoint is an analysis of a general social and individual value of physical education with the respect to a quality of life of a certain individual. As the last but not the least thing is that the paper evaluates current attitudes to the physical education.

The main goal of the paper is to analyse some of main problems to which the physical education in the Czech primary and secondary education currently is facing (namely big increase of exemption in secondary school and motivation to attend physical education classes). Partial goals are on one hand to uncover less obvious problems connected with above-mentioned, on the other hand point out some of the causes of a current state of physical education. The last partial goal is to offer a possibilities of a solution of the certain state.

The methodological background of the paper has a qualitative character, while the main method is the content analysis when the inductive approach prevails. A reason for using such method is its suitability for processing a new topic. Further, due to the interpretation of gained data we use also the phenomenological approach. Except of aforementioned, we realized open interviews with Heads of schools.

The author finds out that the physical education is currently facing to serious problems when some of them markedly overlaps the sphere of the physical education and their solution is not committed only to the sphere of physical education. Among the other things, these problems may negatively influence a quality of life of the Czech population. Finally, the paper offers possibilities of solution of a current negative evolution.

**Keywords:** Physical Education; Society; School System; Problems; Legislation

## Introduction

Much has been written about the importance and benefits of physical education. Some of the reasons why physical education is a significant and important school subject are evident and do not need to be traced in the literature. These include development of physical abilities and skills, motivation for regular physical activity, knowledge of basic hygiene habits, development of competitive spirit and cooperation, etc. Other benefits comprise, for instance, mental hygiene function of physical activities, knowledge of basic health promotion strategies, increasing mental (for example in case of loss or undesirable development of the game) and physical resistance, development of morals and volition, health-oriented physical fitness, development of social interaction, etc.. Of course, this list is not, and cannot be, complete. We may add, for example, general knowledge and orientation in the sports environment and many other reasons.

These are not the only reasons why physical education is a compulsory national curriculum subject in the Czech Republic, both in primary and secondary education, for the entire period of school attendance with the subject time allocation of a minimum of 2 lessons per week. Many school subjects are incorporated in the curriculum only in certain periods during primary and secondary school attendance, or only at a specific type of schools, with very few subjects being compulsory throughout the entire period of attendance. Physical education is one of them. From the two aforementioned sentences, it is thus clear that physical education is an important and indispensable school subject.

However, the current situation of physical education as well as its perception by students and, by extension, their legal representatives and a number of teachers or Heads of schools is not in line with its proclaimed importance. In reality, frequent exemptions from physical education classes are allowed to students, not only for medical reasons but also due to the students' leisure activities (activities in sports clubs or other). Participation of the remaining students in regular physical education classes is very low. Its perception by the rest of the Czech population, i.e. people who are not of compulsory schooling age, do not have children of school age or are not bound to the school by work context, is also questionable. It can be stated that intended, implemented and achieved kinds of curriculum does not correspond to each other. School curriculum and its components are in a focus of more authors in last three decades, i.e. Walterová (1994) or Průcha (2017).

The situation and position of physical education in the Czech education system as well as society is currently being discussed by several authors (for example Fialová, Flemr, Marádová & Mužík, 2015, Jansa, Kotlík & Němec, 2014 etc.), however, due to the complexity and topicality of the issue, the discussion is now also held among the professional public. The issue of exemption from physical education in the Czech Republic is quite comprehensively examined by Ješina and Tomoszek (2019a, 2019b), who do not neglect the legal aspects of the situation, and as one of the fundamental solutions, they propose introducing, or more precisely, reinforcing health physical education (or applied physical education) in primary and secondary schools. The first of the two authors deals with the issue of physical education exemption in relation to applied physical education on a long-term basis (Bartoňová & Ješina, 2012; Ješina, 2017; Ješina 2012 etc.).

Other authors approach the current problems of physical education in a more specific manner. Vařeková, Dařová, Levitová and Prokešová (2014) or Válková (2012) see applied physical activities as one of the possible solutions to some of physical education problems (exemption, attendance, motivation) in the Czech Republic. Kalman and Vašíčková (2013) examine health and lifestyle of schoolchildren, Flemr (2018) aims to identify the current problems of physical education.

Apart from the above-mentioned (and other authors), the status of physical education is one of the subjects of interest of state organizations such as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (2004), Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic (2013, 2015) and the Czech School Inspectorate (2016).

The National Institute for Education is engaged in physical education in detail, in terms of the curriculum content, required learning outcomes, student competencies, inclusive teaching adjustments, etc.. This organization has elaborated Framework Education Programmes for individual specific types of education (e.g. National Institute for Education, 2017).

In addition to professional circles (Flemr, 2018, etc.), a broad discussion with public participation (e.g. EDUin - Information Centre on Education, 2019) has recently arisen. This discussion is oriented mainly on motivation for physical education attendance and the evaluation in physical education.

In this article, we will attempt to analyze some of problems of the physical education, mainly exemption from the physical education classes, dominantly in the secondary education, and the motivation to attend physical education classes. Additionally, we will analyze also a part of a legislative background of the physical education. Last but not least, we will focus on the causes of above-mentioned problems and their potential interconnection. The last sub-objective is then to propose possible solutions to the current situation.

## Methods

Due to the nature of the topic, a qualitative approach was chosen for its elaboration. Content analysis with the predominance of the inductive approach was used as the main method. The reason for choosing the method of content analysis is the fact that it is the primary elaboration of the topic and also, that the examined problem concerns different social spheres and the collected data must be sorted first (Hendl, 2005). The necessity of the inductive approach arises from the fact that the situation of physical education is likely to be affected by many current social processes and phenomena, whether inside or outside the education sector and it is very difficult to approach the issue holistically and not merely some parts of it. The content analysis of legal documents (Framework Education Programmes, Decree No. 391/2013) and Report of Czech School Inspectorate carried out by the inductive approach will in this case also allow assessing the possible mutual influence of individual areas which affect physical education. From this reason, content analysis was conducted by a technique of non-quantitative analysis (Gavora, 2000).

In addition to the above-mentioned method of content analysis, some elements of the grounded theory method are also used when elaborating the topic, not *a priori* in order to present a comprehensive theory but on the grounds of the need to find relations between individual variables (Švaříček & Šedová, 2007). Not using this option would, in our opinion, significantly reduce the potential of the research.

In terms of the interpretation of the collected data, the phenomenological approach is used because of a deeper understanding and insight into physical education (Hendl, 2005). As part of the enrichment and verification of the thematic analysis results, a total of eight open interviews were conducted with the Heads of primary and secondary schools. Given that this is the primary elaboration of the topic, the headmasters were contacted on the basis of their personal acquaintance with the author; it was not a random selection.

## Results and Discussion

Let us begin with the widespread belief that in schools, especially in upper primary schools and in secondary schools, more and more pupils are allowed to be exempted (or partially exempted) from physical education. According to the Czech School Inspectorate (CSI), in the school year 2015/2016 at the second stage of primary school (upper primary school), this was the case of only 2.2 pupils per school (CSI, 2016). However, according to the same report, at secondary schools, it is approximately one average class, i.e. 26 pupils, per each school. This is an upward trend compared to the past. The question is, of course, how many pupils attend a particular school and how the school management approaches the requests for physical education exemption. In any case, according to the CSI, in the school year 2015/2016, there was at least 1 pupil completely exempt from physical education classes in 94.8% of secondary schools, i.e. practically every secondary school, which means that the problem of physical education exemption thus concerns virtually every school (CSI, 2016). The increase in the number of exemptions between primary and secondary school is sharp and alarming since the number of exempt pupils in secondary schools is as much as ten times higher. An interesting question arises here as to whether or not the number of pupils exempt or partially exempt at the lower stage of the multi-year grammar school is higher than at the second stage of primary school.

An exemption from physical education is mainly received for medical reasons. Pursuant to the Education Act (Section 50 (2)), the headmaster may *“exempt a pupil, in whole or in part, from a subject on medical or other serious grounds, at the request of his or her legal representative; at the same time, the Head of school determines an alternative way of education of the pupil at the time of teaching this subject. The Head of school exempts the pupil from the physical education classes on the written recommendation of a general practitioner or a medical specialist. The pupil may be exempted from the first or last lesson, with the consent of his or her legal representative, without additional assignments for the unattended lesson”* (MEYS, 2004, p. 22). Here, we encounter several separate problems.

**Problem One:** Although it is stated in the above paragraph that the Head of school may exempt a pupil from physical education on the basis of a physician’s recommendation, it is (above) stated

that he or she may decide to do so for other serious reasons. It can be observed from practice that a frequent reason is the pupil's participation in sports competitions of the national scale, which is usually the highest or the second highest domestic sports competition. Here too, the situation further develops in different directions. Firstly, in terms of frequency and sometimes training requirements, there is a difference between a sport with a large membership base and many levels of competitions and a sport which has only one or two youth categories competitions in the Czech Republic and only a small number of individuals practicing it. Further, a question arises as to whether regular trainings really coincide with physical education lessons. Based on the interviews with some of the headmasters, it was found that they often receive requests which are signed by the management of sports clubs stating that the pupils are top level sportsmen or sportswomen, but on closer examination they learn that the pupil is on the 586<sup>th</sup> position in the Czech Republic (tennis), riding a horse and preparing for his or her very first races, playing the lowest class (football), finished 2 months ago etc.. At one of the grammar schools, the headmistress stated that the legal representatives of a pupil had strongly insisted on receiving a full exemption from physical education as well as other subjects for the pupil because of the proclaimed need for additional individual training (fitness classes – strength and recovery exercises - swimming), when in fact, the pupil (aged 12) had his regular training in the afternoon and the exemption was required for the morning lessons. In principle, the Head of school may exempt a pupil at his or her discretion for virtually any reason. It is not always easy to withstand the pressure from the part of the legal representatives and the pupils themselves. Here, we touch on other problems, which will be addressed later, namely the motivation and educational effect of physical education. On the utilitarian view: what is the use of having a pupil in physical education class who wants to avoid it at all costs? In any case, the aforementioned demonstrates that a not negligible part of parents and pupils consider physical education at best to be an unnecessary, at worst even a counterproductive subject for various reasons.

**Problem Two:** On the basis of medical recommendation, the Head of school is obliged to allow a student to be exempted from physical education. The medical statement may be questioned by the student's legal representative, but not by the headmaster (he or she can only recommend a review of the medical statement to the legal representative - but it will most likely meet with little response since the legal representative who seeks exemption from physical education for their child has no interest in the review). Of course, it is also difficult for physicians to cope with the pressure from the part of the applicants for physical education exemption but they undoubtedly have a stronger mandate than the Heads of schools. However, Garkish (2018) argues that a large number of doctors simply conform to the wishes of the parents or students' legal representatives. Often, obesity of the pupil is the reason for physical education exemption. Needless to say, physical education should counteract the increase in obesity. In this case, the doctor actually suppresses the potential positive effect and the very purpose of physical education (unless, of course, it is a case of obesity limiting the pupil in the basic locomotion).

**Problem Three:** A pupil may be exempted from the first and last lesson without additional assignments, with the consent of the legal representative - see paragraph above (MEYS, 2004). In most schools, physical education classes are usually scheduled as the first or last lessons for organizational purposes (regarding premises, contracts or schedule). The problem arises especially in the case of afternoon lessons which usually last 2 hours and are thus classified as marginal. Most headmasters stated that in the case of schedule changes after the start of the school year, the legal representatives often argue that they had already running and paid sports clubs.

In terms of the aforementioned paragraph, we consider the wording of the Education Act to be problematic and not addressing the current social needs.

The solution to the problem is offered, for instance, by Ješina and Tomoszek (2019a, 2019b), who see the general introduction of health (or applied) physical education as one of the possibilities. We fully agree with them in this regard. The number of requests for physical education exemption would certainly decrease significantly. Of course, one can only guess to what extent this could be credited to the inclusion of the concerned pupils in the health-physical education programme or because the option of their inclusion in the given programme would discourage them from submitting the exemption request. This case requires adequately educated teachers, and also the willingness

of headmasters to introduce the health-physical education programme in their schools, which is, of course, associated with schedule, personnel and, last but not least, financial requirements. Višňá (2017), based on reports from O. Ješina, argues that there is even a number of cases where the legal representatives of pupils with disabilities automatically receive an application form for physical education exemption from the management of the school where their children plan to study.

The situation is not helped by the Decree No. 391/2013 Coll., which deals with medical fitness for physical education and sports, and was elaborated jointly by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic and the Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic (Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic, 2013). According to this decree, obesity or muscle imbalance can be a reason for physical education exemption. In this case, the decree directly opposes one of the fundamental roles of physical education, which is the health enhancement and health-oriented fitness. It can be stated that the legislative area of physical education is not properly addressed.

Another area which affects the current situation of physical education is the motivation of pupils to actively attend physical education classes. It is necessary to emphasize the word “actively” because physical education lessons can often be only “sat through”. The problem of motivation is not a novelty; in 1992, the then Dean of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport of Charles University (FTVS UK), prof. Hošek (Hošek, 2019), mentions the problem of new technologies in relation to physical activity. The current situation is fully in line with the implied development since electronic devices, preferably the latest ones, take up a considerable part of pupils’ free time, and less time is left for spontaneous or organized leisure physical activities. It can be inferred that if the pupil does little or no sport in his or her free time, he or she will not develop a keen interest in sports, or this interest will weaken.

Physical education is characterized, among other things, by the fact that pupils should get acquainted with various types of sports and physical activities, which are defined, inter alia, by the individual Framework Education Programmes (FEPs) and further, by School Education Programmes (SEPs) elaborated on their basis by each school. Every pupil has a certain preference in terms of physical activities and possibly sports, and he or she likes some of the activities in physical education more than others. However, it is not possible for pupils to enjoy all the physical activities assigned by teachers within the physical education classes. Thus, internal motivation on the part of the pupils cannot be ubiquitous. At this point, it is very important how teachers approach and motivate their pupils. Of course, there is no clear answer to this problem, and no faculty can fully prepare its graduates to tackle it. Appropriate external motivation of pupils for active and conscious participation in physical education is, however, one of the basic prerequisites for successful work of a physical education teacher, regardless of the type of school. There are different solutions to the problem of unmotivated pupils. If the teacher wants to facilitate his or her work, he or she will allow the students who do not want to exercise (or conceal their unwillingness by claiming that they suffer from nausea, minor injuries or that they had forgotten clothes) sit and watch the physical education lessons. The question is then the efficiency of physical education as well as the activity options in a given lesson, when often fewer than 10 pupils in total are engaged in the physical activity (Flemlr, 2018). Another possible solution is to engage pupils in only one or two of the most favoured activities (e.g. football or volleyball) in physical education classes. Some of the pupils may still dislike these activities but they do not have much chance to protest, and the majority of pupils are at least taking an active part in the lesson. The two above-mentioned solutions are parallel to the submission to the pressure from pupils’ legal representatives and the exemption from physical education by physicians. At this point, we certainly do not want to speculate on the number of physical education teachers concerned in this problem, but it is apparent that this phenomenon exists. The third possible solution is to integrate more experience activities into physical education lessons and to accentuate own experience.

A very interesting observation made by Flemlr (2018) is that in the interviews with physical education teachers, the second most frequently mentioned topic was security. More specifically, the teachers saw the need to find the right balance between safety and adventure in physical education. At this point, we fully agree with him. If the exercise does not contain at least a small degree of risk or uncertainty regarding the outcome, it has little potential to engage and attract pupils. Such exercise or sport activity is often perceived as pointless and therefore boring. In today’s society, it is generally

true that safety standards are gradually becoming stricter and more strengthened; we may even go as far as to speak of a hyper protective society. L. Flemr conducted the above-mentioned interviews mainly at the faculty schools, which implies that in practice, safety issues can cause relatively great difficulties in terms of motivating pupils and teachers. No teacher wishes to fill in the accident report (no to speak of the school management), but sport always carries such a risk. In practice, this may lead to the absence of some specific compulsory exercises (e.g. somersault = overhead exercise, etc.).

The problem of motivation is associated with the issue of approaching the educational role of physical education. Ideally, the pupil should not feel that he or she is being educated, but on the contrary, he or she should perceive the individual educational aspects of physical education (rules, conformity, hygiene, mental resistance, etc.) as very important skills for personal development. However, this is often very difficult for teachers in terms of motivation.

The above-mentioned problem of motivation for active participation in physical education is associated with another social problem. A high number of children at the first stage of primary school do sports in sports clubs or school clubs. At the second stage of primary school, this number decreases and a large number of children quit the sport when they start attending the secondary school. Thus, there is a clear parallel between the numbers of physical education exemptions in primary and secondary schools as well as the motivation to exercise in physical education lessons. These data were obtained by the author during several years of discussions with the students of the Coach study programme at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport of Charles University (FTVS UK). These coaches, often with a long-term practice in training pupils in many different kinds of sports and levels, admitted that they were unable to do anything about the problem. At the same time, it is the motivation of children and youth for sport activities that the attention is focused on both on the part of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, individual sports unions and the Czech Olympic Committee, for instance in the form of grants for coaching activities or specific activities such as the Badge of Versatility of Olympic Champions (OVOV), Corny Cup, etc., as well as private companies (McDonald Cup, etc.). To summarize this part, it is necessary to state that the problem of motivation of children for active sports is not successfully solved. Yet, many adults return to recreational sport through experience activities. We currently witness a rapid growth in activities such as obstacle course races, cross-country cycling, triathlon, etc.

The issue of motivation is also associated with the evaluation in physical education. There was a moderated panel discussion under the auspices of EDUin dedicated to this subject matter (EDUin, 2019). The discussion was conducted with specialists in music, art and physical education (civics was not represented), with the participation of the public. The discussion and, in particular, the public inquiries showed that in the public opinion, evaluation often equals marking, and that marking in musical, art and physical education is quite problematic. The primary issue relates to the question of what should be marked. In physical education, this concerns adjusting the limits in individual sports or exercises to the physical abilities of the current population, the matter of marking performance, progress or motivation, etc. and especially, the question of whether to give marks at all. The panel discussion also showed that a more appropriate method of assessing the abovementioned subjects would be verbal evaluation, but it is certainly necessary to evaluate them (e.g. because of the educational role of physical education).

The last evaluated aspect is the curriculum position of physical education. Since 2005, the Framework Education Programmes (FEPs) have been binding for basic and secondary education (different for each type of school). Individual FEPs are currently being updated, e.g. the FEP for primary education was last updated in 2017. The FEPs have enabled schools to develop their own School Education Programmes (SEPs) based on their specific needs. SEPs allow schools to differ from one another and thus be more interesting for the future students, and also, to shape in areas which they consider important. The aforementioned FEP for primary education was modified on the basis of an amendment to the Education Act (Act No.82 / 2015, Coll.), the requirements of the European Commission and the Action Plan for Inclusive Education for the period 2016 - 2018 (National Institute for Education, 2017). The changes compared to the previous FEP version mainly concerned the area of inclusion, where, for example, the so-called minimum recommended level for the expected

outputs adjustment within the support measures was defined. The FEP provides schools with a tool to assess the output of pupils with specific needs. Nevertheless, it would be appropriate to provide schools with an explicit manual on how to put this into practice. There is, of course, the option of creating and providing the pupils concerned with the so-called pedagogical support plan (referred to as “PSP”) or an individual educational plan (referred to as “IEP”). Ješina and Tomoszek (2019a, 2019b) seek to remedy this situation clearly and with guidance, explaining in their article how to create and implement the PSP and IEP and when these tools are suitable. In practice, the problem is primarily the assessment of pupils who do need a PSP or IEP and yet do not have it. Thus, they cannot be assessed adequately to their condition. If they are evaluated in the form of the common marking without supportive measures, it can make intact pupils feel unequal, which is the direct opposite of what the current FEPs aim for.

In addition to the curriculum of physical education, it is also necessary to mention the current discussion regarding an increase in the number of physical education lessons from 2 to 3 lessons per week. However, it must be acknowledged that such a step can only work if the issues of physical education exemption and passive approach to exercising are at least partially resolved (even if the pupil is present in the class). For this reason, we have so far omitted the financial and personnel aspects. In our opinion, the current situation of physical education is not ready for such a step forward.

Finally, one controversial finding made by the author himself: his bachelor degree student, D. Zálešák, worked on his thesis with the title “The Movement Illiteracy of Elementary School Pupils” (Zálešák, 2018). However, the Ethics Committee of the faculty at which the bachelor degree student studied expressed their strong disapproval with the title of the thesis. They subsequently recommended that he should change it to “Movement Literacy”, arguing that the word “illiteracy” has a negative connotation and may suggest that the author *a priori* assumes that something is not correct and that pupils may not be sufficiently physically literate.

## Conclusions

In the above paragraphs, chosen areas affecting the current situation of physical education were gradually analyzed. By no means, has this initial review study covered all areas concerning physical education in primary and secondary schools as it would go far beyond its format and scope.

Nor can it be argued that any of the analyzed areas has revealed some groundbreaking or completely unexpected data (possibly with the exception of the impact of Decree No. 391/2013 Coll.). Altogether, the findings provide a deeper insight into the current issue of physical education. In the words of the former President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, from his first New Year’s speech given on January 1, 1990: “Physical Education is Not Flourishing”. This situation prevails despite all efforts, whether legislative (inclusion, etc.), educational (training of new teachers), curricular (FEPs and SEPs), educative (Badge of Versatility of Olympic Champions etc.), school (offer of sports clubs) or others.

The individual findings show that we are unable to sufficiently motivate pupils for regular active and conscious participation in physical education. We clearly fail to convey the importance of physical education even to their parents. Of course, it is still too early to make a definitive assessment, as social processes have great inertia and their results may take several years to manifest due to this inertia as well as the society’s reluctance to absorb different impulses. However, the current situation does not give much reason for optimism. Significant changes are needed if physical education in primary and secondary schools is to fulfil its role. So far, the method of consecutive individual steps has been applied.

Another conclusion drawn from this study are the questions whether the current concept of physical education (subject based on upbringing but graded on performance, very important subject but also very easy to avoid it etc.) can fulfil its role at some point in the future, whether it corresponds with the social reality and whether it is possible to change the general public or it is necessary to change the concept of physical education in order to meet the needs not of the present but of the future society.

Therefore, what we should focus on in the future are not the partial changes in physical education (such as the third lesson per week or new competitions, remuneration of teachers, etc.), but it is primarily the paradigm itself.

For the future research it would be suitable to find out the current attitude of individual segments of the Czech population towards physical education in school. Other proper research topic is the determination of an active attendance of physical education classes by different methods of evaluation.

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