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# The Implications of Physical Education and Sport in the Moral Education of High School Students

Cristian Mihail RUS<sup>1</sup>, Liliana Elisabeta RADU<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Moral education is determined by the social phenomenon, which confers its content and represents a component of general education; it contributes to the formation and development of moral conscience and behaviour, to shaping the moral profile of the personality, and to the elaboration of social–moral behaviour. In many European countries, there are educational policies that promote the social and moral development of young people. According to the provisions of the National Curriculum currently into effect in our country, all the areas in the curriculum have the obligation of contributing to the social and moral development of young people. In this sense, researchers in the field pinpoint that physical education and sport - mostly physical education and sport teachers - have an important role in reaching this objective. Nonetheless, there is only scanty conclusive evidence to support this theory. In addition, scientists consider the social and moral field differently. Currently, there is too little information on the way in which physical education and sport teachers become aware of their responsibility in the social and moral development of the students through the discipline they teach. There is also insufficient information of the way they understand and apply the objectives of moral education.

*Keywords:* moral education; social development; moral development; physical education and sport; physical education and sport teacher.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the way in which the physical education and sport discipline, as well as the physical education and sport teachers achieve moral education by applying its objectives. The physical education and sport teachers have no special training concerning the social and moral development of the students. The school curriculum for the physical education and sport discipline only includes general elements that outline the social and moral development of the students, but it does not stipulate that it should be integrated in the instructive-educative process. Hence, in this study we have used a social and constructivist approach based on the existing realities.

In many European countries, educational policies and curriculum documents promote the social and moral development of young people of a trans-curriculum objective and they mention the aimed central place of this objective within the educational process (Hardman, & Marshall, 2005). All the fields – including physical education – have to bring their contribution to the social and moral development of the students. It is assumed that physical education has an essential role in this sense, because it represents a context where many of the student–student and student–teacher social interactions occur (Bailey, 2006; Hellison, 2003; Janssens, 2004). Shields and Bredemeier (1995) describes the context of physical education as the most significant for the development of a moral character. Laker (2000) – following a study on the physical education teachers in England and Ireland – reached the same conclusion.

However, the specialized literature outlines a heterogeneous image, especially concerning the outcomes of the study that assess the extent to which this evolution occurs, the way the objectives of moral education are applied to various disciplines, as well as the teaching personnel's difficulties in differentiating between social and moral development.

Bailey *et al.* (2009) and Hedstrom and Gould (2004) have reviewed the studies on the contribution of school physical education and sport to the moral and social development of the students. They have concluded that the results of studies are positive, for the most part, concerning the modifications in moral motivation, such as attitude towards fair play, inter-human relations in sport, and personal responsibility. Vidoni and Ward (2009) have concluded that the use of fair play norms by the physical education teachers contributed to the development of social skills within a class unit. Similarly, Mouratidou, Goutza, and Chatzopoulos, (2007) conclude that the moral reasoning of the high school students was improved after attending the physical education and sport classes, which focused on such a reasoning. Considering these conclusions, it is not surprising that the decision-making factors in matters of educational policy and the curriculum developers have integrated the social and moral development of the students in

the syllabus for the curricular subject of physical education and sport. However, the application of these objectives is anything but simple, given that moral and social development does not appear immediately, but it is a long-term process and it depends on each physical education teacher. Bailey (2006) underlines that the extent to which physical education and sport positively contributes to the social and moral development of a student depends on the action and interactions between students and their teachers and on the likelihood of these teachers using their potential in this matter. The teachers may not always know to use this potential.

Furthermore, the evidence of social and moral development is little measurable, quantifiable. Armstrong and Biddle (1992) pinpoint that the social development of the students should not be a demand for physical education and sport teachers, because there is little scientific evidence to support this hypothesis. Bailey *et al.* (2009) showed the lack of any monitoring and assessment for social and moral development; for this reason, in their opinion, there are no means through which a physical education and sport teacher may contribute to the social and moral development of the students. This absence can also be noted after studying the school syllabuses. Though the National Curriculum refers to the objectives of social and moral development, it does not offer an explicit definition or a description of social and moral development.

The specialized literature contains various descriptions of these two development objectives, Nicola (2003) have: learning the norms of society, observing the game rules, the individual's capacity to take decisions. The different opinions were elaborated in order to delimit the social from the moral development. Bailey *et al.* (2009) propose an affective term for this field, seen as synonymous with the emotional and psychological balance and which comprises a series of elements, such as conflict-solving skills and moral behaviour. Other authors underline that the social and moral development of the individual is closely inter-dependent with his individual character.

Regardless of the definition given to the moral and social development, the common point is that the physical education teacher focuses on assessing the students, and not that much on accomplishing the objective of the curriculum, that is the social and moral development of students. The identification of the objectives of moral and social education is crucial for any approach of social and moral development. The abovementioned authors have focused on the development of children and not on the concrete ways in which the physical education teachers can actually contribute to the social and moral development. This outcome shows that scientists have not paid attention to the way in which the physical education teachers could reach the objectives of moral education.

The educational policy and the physical education syllabuses do not provide clear orientations, skills, teaching methods, and assessment criteria to integrate

the social and moral development of the students through the physical education and sport discipline. After studying the way in which the physical education teachers project and apply the physical education and sport syllabus, the conclusion is that the objectives of moral education are not applied.

There is a discrepancy between the theories elaborated by researchers in the field and the concrete way in which a physical education and sport teacher can actually contribute to the moral and social development of students. Hence, the purpose of this study is to analyze the way in which the physical education teachers interpret or execute practically the objectives of moral education stipulated by the National Curriculum. The purpose is for the physical education teachers to study the National Curriculum and to try to put into practice the educational objectives. The research concerns the physical education and sport teachers in high schools. Rus (2010) says they did not study any didactics of social and moral development. Moreover, the syllabus for physical education and sport offers only some ideas, which outline only vaguely the social and moral development of the high school students, but no concrete way of achieving it.

As this is an exploratory study on physical education and sport teachers with no instruction in the field of social and moral development, we can place it within a constructivist–social framework. We have started from the hypothesis that schools – including gymnasiums – are proper settings for the social and moral development of the students. More specifically, we assume that in these settings the social and moral development of the students can be achieved, based on the teachers' previous knowledge, on the didactic experience, and through the interactions between students and between students and their teacher. Hence, the social and moral development of the students is a social activity. The social and moral development is not an objective that the individual should decide upon, but an objective of the society he lives in. Each individual interiorizes the social and moral norms of the society he lives in depending on his own previous experience and knowledge. Only a few studies chose such an approach of physical education and sport and they involved a comparison to the teachers from other disciplines.

The formation of social and moral skills constitutes an objective of the National Curriculum and as it is assumed that teachers play an important role in the formation of these general skills. This is the reason why this study involved asking the physical education and sport teachers to define social and moral development and to specify the way in which they apply them in the teaching–learning practice. Hence, the basis of this study is made up of the fusion between the two questions below (Jacobs, Knoppers, & Webb, 2012):

1. How do the physical education teachers define, understand, and facilitate the contribution of physical education and sport to the social–moral development of the students?

2. What resources do the physical education teachers use during the physical education and sport class in order to reach the objectives of moral education?

## Method

### *The subjects of the research*

148 physical education and sport, approximately one third of all, teachers who carry on their activity in various types of high school, situated in urban and rural areas of the Iași County. The teachers who participated to the study have between 1 and 30 years of teaching experience.

Table 1. *Repartition of research subjects by teaching experience*

Nr.	Experience in the educational field	Number of subjects	%
1.	1-5 years	22	14.88
2.	5-10 years	36	24.32
3.	10-15 years	19	12.83
4.	15-20 years	34	22.97
5.	more than 30 years	37	25

### *Research methods used*

This research concerned the pedagogic activity from the perspective of the students' social–moral education. The study focused on the objectives of moral education and it used the following methods: the method of collecting and recording data, the method of analyzing and processing data, the statistical–mathematical method, the interview, and the questionnaire. The research involved an inductive approach and the data collecting process comprised three stages. The selection criteria for the teaching staff were as follows: teaching experience (between 1 and 30 years) and the area where they carry on their activity (urban/rural).

The first research stage was a pilot study that comprised open interviews with 10 teachers. The purpose of this stage was to determine whether physical education and sport teachers had in view and developed the social–moral side of their students. The discussion themes of the interviews were the following: the potential of educators in the social–moral development of the students, the moral skills that teachers manage to form, and the way in which this process occurs. These subjects were discussed in detail with 10 physical education teachers selected by the recommendations of the professors within the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Iași. After a minute analysis of data from the interviews, discussions took

place regarding the emerging methods and the possibility of continuing the study. Because the resulted data indicates that the 10 teachers pay considerable attention to the moral education of their students, we advanced to the second research stage.

The purpose of the second stage was to confirm or to adopt the conclusions of the exploratory study by using a model. Hence, we used a written questionnaire with non-determined duration, through which we covered the subjects approached in the first interview. The recruiting method for the teachers (57 physical education teachers) was the same as for the first stage; the snowball sampling method was used. The results were similar to the ones obtained in the pilot study; hence, we combined the data of the two stages for the initial analysis. The outcomes indicated that the teachers underlined the social and moral issues of fulfilling the moral education of the students during the physical education and sport class. In practice, they all assumed the role of educators for a moral attitude, which was essential to reach the objectives of moral education of the students. Nonetheless, the data indicated only scanty sources on the practical methods used.

The third stage comprised open interviews with another representative sample (of 81 physical education and sport teachers); it dealt with the same issues as in the previous stages, as well as questions targeting the emphasis on the sources that showed the teachers these practices. Considering that the data collected in this stage overlapped that of the previous stages, we combined the three stages for the final analysis. We have used the thematic analysis, which concerned the questions and inductive research data.

In order to determine the themes, we have studied the verbal definitions and clarifications of the research subjects. Together, they outlined an image on the way in which teachers believe they should develop their students morally and socially. Subsequently, we have looked for confirmation or counterevidence for these models. We assume that the three recurrent themes reveal the way in which our respondents perceived the role of the physical education and sport teachers in the social and moral development of their students. We list the three themes below: (1) the foundation of social and moral development on interaction skills; (2) the understanding of social interactions as an essential characteristic of physical education; (3) the use of previous experience to reach the current curriculum objectives regarding the social and moral development.

## Results

The definitions used by physical education teachers to define and apply the social and moral development reflect the diversity of definitions within the specialized literature. They synthesize social development as the interaction skill of “*working and playing together*”. Another teacher underlines that social

development is the “*conflict-solving capacity*”. Other commentaries include the following terms: fair play, solving the problems together, respecting the rules and the adversaries, and accepting victory or defeat. When they were asked to describe moral development, they used expresses which included the following words: norms, values, rules, and ethics. One teacher’s definition reads “*the capacity to acquire certain moral norms and values and to accept them; in other words, to live by the rules*”. Another one states, “*moral development means that the students should learnt to make ethical choices, based on moral norms and values*”. Fair play was mentioned, too. Moral development is the capacity of teaching the students to respect the point of view of others, to learn fair play.

The similarity in the definitions and terms used to describe the social and moral development suggests the didactic experience of these teachers. The physical education teachers – just like the researchers – find it difficult to make the distinction between the two fields: the social and moral development. On a general note, they suggest that moral development supposes teaching them to make ethical decisions, while social development supposes teaching the students to work with others. However, other commentaries suggest that physical education teachers see these fields as synonymous.

Despite the difficulty of describing the social and moral development, teachers interpreted the social and moral development of the students in their classes as an important objective of physical education and sport. They gave different explanations for this interpretation. The teachers believe that physical education provides to the students the opportunity to get to know each other, to explore the way in which they react to group situations, to teamwork. The following moral aspects were listed: self-image; learning how to deal with winning and losing, interactions, as well as social and moral aspects. The examples show the way in which the physical education teachers contribute to the social and moral development of the students in their classes. Teachers define this development from the perspective of improving self-esteem, of teaching the students how to interact, how to solve conflicts, and how to deal with victory and defeat.

## Discussion

Considering that they interpreted the social and moral development as an important objective of physical education, it is not surprising that the teachers pinpointed (with no exception) physical education and sport as an educational space for the social and moral development of children and young people. This contradicts the abovementioned researchers, who wonder whether physical education can actually contribute to the social and moral development of the students. The physical education teachers named several factors that play an essential role in the evolution of the students. They delimit physical education as a field that



requires much collaboration and interaction. Teachers explain the potential of physical education for the social and moral development through teamwork, solving problems together, and mutual support. In this sense, one of the respondents states *“I believe interaction is the key of physical education”*, while another one asserts *“physical education is not possible without interactions, teamwork, and mutual support”*.

This interaction may take various forms. According to the descriptions, the physical education class is a setting where the students work together, and teachers are the ones who teach the students how to solve conflicts. As one teacher explained, *“teamwork may lead to conflicts within the group and they have to be dealt with”*. Some of the conflicts arise when the students must face winning or losing situations. One teacher suggested that students should be allowed to learn on their own how to manage victories and defeats, how to work within a team, and how to solve various conflicts. Such issues tend to emerge when students must play other roles, such as that of referee, in this situation, the students *“must correct their classmates’ behaviour, they must try to provide them with the instruments necessary to do it”*. Similarly, another physical education teacher states, *“when they have different roles, the students must learn to manage situations and to correct each other”*. These physical education teachers pinpoint that, in order to do this, children must be taught the proper social and moral skills. More precisely, these teachers consider the management of victory and defeat within competition situations as a social and moral skill.

Other teachers describe physical education as a place where the students can develop their trust and perseverance. They mention, *“In physical education you learn to take the initiative and to be perseverant”*; *“the students will learn to explore and broaden their horizons, which improves their self-esteem”*. Though some researchers may not include conflict-solving and interaction skills within activities leading to the social and moral development, the teachers who participated to the study did pinpoint this idea. We assume that these activities illustrate and reflect the social and moral definitions provided by the physical education teachers.

The physical education teachers underline that they follow certain principles in their attempt to build a teaching climate where the students feel safe and develop their social and moral skills. The physical education teachers alter or create specific norms for the children to follow when they play and interact together. As one teacher explained, *“I have made a deliberate choice concerning which competences to form in order to reach the social and moral objectives”*. The physical education teachers have tried to teach their students to reflect on their own actions and behaviours, to accept the differences, to learn to help each other, to be group leaders, to be empathic, and to understand that teamwork is more lucrative than individual work. *“As a physical education teacher, by choosing the teaching activities, I can make the students reflect on their behaviour”*. *“I*

*will discuss with them the themes of this lesson and, if necessary, I will give them feedback and I will help them reflect on their own behaviour, in order for them to learn that they are in charge of their own development and learning and that it is for them to make alterations in their behaviours”.*

Furthermore, the physical education teachers admit that not all the behaviours that emerge during the physical education class are adequate. Hence, they have paid special attention to inadequate behaviours. *“Sometimes I tell a student to take a time-out, when his behaviour requires it. After the time-out I talk to them and I tell them why I took this decision”.* Hence, a great part of the teacher’s explanations must focus on the students’ behaviour because physical education can contribute to the social–moral development of children. The physical education and sport teachers also admit that their own behaviour plays an important role in the moral education of the students. They are trying to model a proper behaviour in order to become a role model, to create a positive atmosphere, and to support their students.

In conclusion, results suggest that these teachers turn the physical education class into a setting where moral and social skills may be developed. However, the ways in which physical education teachers actually apply moral education are different for each case, though they all essentially tend to reach the curriculum objectives. Hence, it can be synthesized that physical education classes may be used to develop the moral and social skills. Though these teachers did not benefit from specific training on the ways to develop the moral, social, and behavioural skills of their students during their formation years, results indicate that they have emphasized on this development. A data analysis indicates that these teachers acquired the knowledge and practices on moral education from three sources: their family, their sports past, and their professional path. Any commentaries referred to their own childhood education: *“I was raised to be responsible for myself and for my students”, “my parents taught me to be respectful”.* Other commentaries referred to an independent thinking that observes the moral norms and values. These teachers have tried to model these qualities in their students, too. A second source indicated by the physical education teachers as being used to develop and social and moral skills of their students is their own sports experience. The following observations are relevant: *“At the sports club I was a part of, I learned many norms and values for sports practice. Now I am trying to transmit the same values to my students”.* Furthermore, teachers have often mentioned the name of a coach who had played an important role in their development. As teachers, they seek to imitate that coach. This affinity with sport is anything but surprising, because many physical education teachers practiced a performance sport.

The development of the social and moral knowledge and skills of the physical education teacher was influenced by the way in which it had been approached during the practice of performance sport. This implication can partially explain

why the physical education teachers found it difficult to make the distinction between the social and moral fields. Athletes can have different opinions on morality compared to non-athletes. Corrion, K. *et al.* (2009) conclude that athletes tend to develop unique moral disengagement mechanisms by ascribing their actions to others and by minimizing their own transgressive behaviours. Similarly, Camiré, M. and Trudel, P. (2010) conclude that athletes mentioned few moral skills when they were asked what they learnt by practising their sport; however, they tended to emphasize on learning social skills, especially teamwork. Athletes may have unique views on the social and moral skills and this could reflect in what they teach when they become physical education and sport teachers.

A third source for the ideas (but not also practices) on the social and moral development was the education program for teachers. A teacher explains: *“In college I was taught the theory, but I have applied my own knowledge”*; another teacher states, *“I took pedagogy and psychology classes in college and our professor taught us many things on the social and moral development in children, but it was only theory, nothing practical. Hence, I learnt to approach the social and moral development during my activity of physical education teacher, and not during my college years”*. These examples suggest that teachers learnt many theories on the social and moral development, but nothing on its application. The lack of practical instructions can explain why there are so many definitions of social and moral development reflected in teachers’ practices. Hence, it is assumed that these teachers used their previous experience to cover a significant lack in the National Curriculum regarding moral education.

## Conclusions

The physical education and sport teachers do reach the curriculum objectives of moral education though they were not especially trained for this in college. They reach these objectives through different paths, which reflect their individual practices, though they are not all included or described in the specialized literature. In other words, physical education and sport teachers have paid special attention to the social and moral development of their students. They chose to emphasize on specific aspects of social and moral development, thus reaching the objectives of moral education in their own way. Most curriculum-related practices identified throughout this study reflect a globalized socialization in and through sport, accompanied by the differences in the previous personal evolution.

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