
Tasks for children's physical education in schools*

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1. Introduction

The process in which children grow to become teens and — later on — adults is at many levels a very complicated one. The way it ends, the question of what kinds of personalities will arise from this process, is usually dependent on the outer stimuli which have a severe effect on the children's development. For this reason no civilized country is willing to let the choice of stimuli effecting the development of their youth depend on accident or chance or even on the children's choice. On the contrary, all over the world people try to choose and arrange those stimuli in such a way that children will develop in a way which is accepted and wanted within the society they live in. This choosing and arranging of certain stimuli can be integrated within the term of 'education'. The more complex a society is, the less foreseeable the tasks of education therefore are; education grows more and more complex and difficult. Education then is in the need of taking place in separate organized institutions and of being handled by people who are especially trained for this important and difficult task.

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Because education is then seen as such a complex formation, the need of dividing 'education as a whole' into different smaller sections or subjects arises, since not even a trained person can appear as an expert of 'education as a whole' any more.

In the European countries this process of organizing and dividing of education has been pushed forward since the 19th century: Starting at the age of six, children spend much of their childhood in schools and are educated by teachers who are trained for their profession. Children's education at school is usually divided into at least five subjects; the children are confronted with almost as many different teachers. It is rare that children are taught most of their subjects by one teacher; often there are teachers with only one subject. This is especially true for the subject this congress is dealing with.

In general two facts are of basic importance for this topic:

a) Education is not divided into subjects by nature. On the contrary, we must state that we divide it into subjects because we think that education is a very complex phenomenon. For this reason we divide the responsibility for the development of our children into several sections.

This division can take place in different — and nevertheless sensible — ways. In all European countries children are taught one subject at school which concentrates upon their physical and motor development. But the expenditure of time devoted to this subject, the question of how narrow or broad the physical and motor development is to be supported, or the argument about the relationships which should exist to other school-subjects (e. g. through the teacher as a person) — all this differs quite a lot and needs to be discussed again and again.

The very different terms used for describing the subject already show different points of emphasis in different countries. A few of the best known terms — translated into English — are: Physical education, movement education, psycho-motor education, gymnastics, "Turnen" (which cannot be translated), sports, health education . . . and so on.

These are not only many different terms used to describe the same subject. Each term stands for its own tradition of the subject and con-

tains a special view of its meaning within the complex phenomenon of school-education.

b) The different tasks education as a whole has to fulfil are not assigned to certain institutions or organizations. The physical and motor development of a child depends on very different aspects: the stimulation granted by parents, brothers and sisters; the surroundings, which allow or do not allow a child to play and move around; contact with peers; organized offers by clubs, local authorities, commercial businesses; the information and models shown by mass media. All these aspects become valid and influence the physical and motor development of a child.

Bearing the responsibility for the development of the child in mind, the role that school — as an institution for education — should play in this context then needs to be discussed. To be exact, this should be discussed for each child individually. If this is not possible it at least needs to be discussed for the children belonging to the same region, the same level of development and the same grade in school.

This introduction is also meant to explain why it is impossible to deal with the topic in such a way that everybody will agree.

In the following a concept will be offered about the question in which way we should deal with our subject at school. There is not enough time to state all the reasons on which this concept is based. Nevertheless one can acknowledge the way this concept was developed. Through many observations and with the help of even more books opinion was formulated about the way that we want our children to develop and about the children's needs that must be fulfilled in order to reach this aim. On the other hand it was figured out under which conditions children usually grow up these days. Finally (as a conclusion) it was asked which demands our schools need to fulfil in order to contribute to our children's development in a helpful, completing and equalizing manner. These demands are called the "tasks for physical education in schools". One will acknowledge pretty soon that the given interpretation of the subject 'physical education' is not a very narrow one: It is taken into consideration that a child acting physically in a motor activity also uses his intellect as well as his feelings. But nevertheless this view of the

subject is not as broad as some of our colleagues might like it, who rather intend to interpret the subject as a universal education in terms of personal and social development of children. Sometimes we would like to interpret our subject in such a broad way: right now the view will be reduced to a level with which we usually have to deal in average conditions.

In this analysis it is taken for granted that our subject is to be applied to at least four basic needs children have got:

- Children need physical demands.
- Children need motor experiences.
- Children need challenges and appreciation.
- Children need to play games with other children.

Some might think: "That's nothing new!" It will not be tried to enrich the scientific discussion through up to now never mentioned ideas. Being a pedagogue those aspects will be emphasized which are of high importance in the interests of our children. Besides, there are still many questions left to science, which need to be settled, as for example the question which needs children have and which consequences do follow if we do not come up to them or do so in a wrong way.

2. Physical demands, health

To gain a healthy physical development children need movement. The organs of a human body (the heart, the lungs, the circulation, the muscles) as well as the skeleton apparatus mature not only with regard to a genetic plan, but develop — with broad limitations — in equivalence with the degree of the demands they are asked for: If they are demanded to a high degree, they grow to high efficiency, organs which are not demanded stay underdeveloped or drop back again.

This natural phenomenon leads to the fact that our body adapts — with certain limitations — to certain living conditions in a sensible, reasonable manner. But if a minimum of movement-stimuli is not being received, we have to notice diseased symptoms very soon. A heart which is not asked for enough work not only stays or grows smaller, but also works uneconomically and is susceptible to physical disorders. Muscles which are not de-

manded are not able to hold the spinal column or the arch of the foot. A skeleton apparatus to which no strain is put in terms of pressure and tension during the period of growth, stays underdeveloped and later on is susceptible to injuries.

In Europe adults have learned during the past years to accept the practical meaning of this law for their health, especially for their heart and circulation-system: resting means weakness. Many older people have acknowledged that movement can not only be a treatment when one's state of health is already damaged or at least endangered but also — and even in a better way — a means of preventive treatment. They have come to the conclusion that they should become active in fitness training, jogging, aerobics and so on.

Such activities undergone for health reasons are not suitable for children. Some people also think that one should not spoil the children's joy of movement telling them that movement is strongly connected with health education. Children — a widely spread view is held — do not associate movement with health or fitness and do not understand movement as a medical treatment; the association of movement with health and healthiness then would be a typical view held by adults.

At least concerning children's motivation to become active the opinion just stated seems to have a justifiable or legitimate nucleus, nevertheless, it is also a dangerous one. It is an undoubted fact that children need even more motor activities for a healthy development than adults for maintaining their health.

It is indeed possible to think of efficient fitness-programs for adults, which contain — taking as little time as possible, e. g. two times 30 minutes a week — all kinds of movement stimuli which are necessary to maintain at least some degree of physical fitness or health. These programs allow those adults to spend the rest of the week sitting or lying and even to feel well acting this way.

For children such programs would not only be more boring than they already are for adults; in addition, they would also not be sufficient. Healthy children need — no matter from which motives — to put strain on their heart and circulation system and their muscles several times a day to attain a sufficient training-

effect. This means that children must do such things as run around, race with bicycles or rollerskates, go wild in the water, scrap, try movement-tricks, climb trees. If they don't do these things, they won't stay healthy and are not able to participate in the life of other children the way they would like to.

And again this behaviour contains many long lasting and very serious consequences in terms of the children's physical, intellectual and social development.

In Europe, especially in the big cities, our children have got more and more problems in being able to fulfil the necessary amount of movement per day, of finding room and areas in which they are allowed to play, to run and to be active. Many examination reports on damaged postures and organs indicate that about every third child is allowed less movement than absolutely necessary for its health. This problem area contains a first task for our subject in school. The pedagogical as well as political difficulties which arise from this problem area will be dealt with later on.

3. Movement development experiences and practical knowledge through movement

In contrast to an animal a human being doesn't have any innate repertory of movement patterns, which are revealed due to the natural maturation process. Human beings therefore need to learn almost every single movement during a long lasting and arduous period of learning. Compared with the situation animals are in this — at first glance — might strike us as a disadvantage. Nevertheless it also contains a big advantage: While animals can only realize a very limited number of movement patterns, human beings are able to realize such a great variety of movement patterns that it seems to be inexhaustible. The attraction which is drawn from our different movement abilities — like in gymnastics, "Turnen", artistry and mime — is founded on this human advantage. How many of the immense number of movement possibilities a human being discovers, is usually decided during his or her childhood. Childhood, and especially later childhood (children of about 8 to 12 years) is regarded as the age in which the eagerness as well as the possibility to learn reaches its highest level. Of course this is not true for all areas of learning

in the same way; nevertheless it is surely true for the process of learning new movement patterns.

One objection to this could be: "Not every child needs to become an artist of movement. And those abilities which are needed in everyday-life are learned by our children anyway in time". This objection would be accurate if movement did not offer another dimension to human beings: Movement serves as our access to the world; through movement we discover many things concerning ourselves as well as concerning other people and things surrounding us. Especially for children movement means the first step — and for a long time the most important step — to discover the world, to achieve its own picture of what our world is like.

Children can make these experiences with tyres or hoops or while playing with balls, tins, barrels, boxes, beams, chairs; with ropes and swings, on stilts and rollers, in snow and on ice, and again differently in the water. But in every example we can think of children making experiences through their own body-movement. And the more diversely the movement conditions are varied, the more distinctive the experiences with different movement patterns grow.

With possibilities of body movement children discover and develop the perceptive faculty and movement experience which are mutually dependent on each other. With the help of their movement repertory children enlarge or broaden their picture of the world. This fact is known and appreciated by now, especially through the work of PIAGET. But that we are aware of the fact itself does not mean that we always realize the extensive consequences which result from it concerning the education of children in everyday life.

On the contrary we have to acknowledge that many developmental disturbances and handicaps that arise during the period of childhood, especially mental and educational handicaps, speech defects and also behavioural disturbances, must be seen as cause as well as consequence of motor disturbances. Many of these handicaps at least are shown through a certain movement-behaviour and therefore can be positively influenced by programs with the aim of improving movement-behaviour.

If it is possible to reduce disorders of the cognitive, linguistic and social development by enlarging the movement-repertory, it should also be possible to take precautions in stimulating the movement-development in time, so that as a result at least some of the disturbances won't occur at all. We know that kinetic encouragement with the aim of achieving a healthy body shouldn't start when one's health is already put at risk. All the same a kinetic encouragement which aims at enlarging the perceptive faculty and movement experiences must be orientated at preventive measures.

Up to now it has not been achieved (and may/be it is not possible to ever achieve it) to outline a system of those experiences which children should have contact with through their movement. More-over it is not possible at all to list up those movements which all children have got to have experiences at least once during their childhood. But there exists agreement to the point that what matters in this perspective is not that children should be able to perform certain standard exercises in an elegant way. On the contrary, it is important that they are offered impulses to develop adaptable and variable movement patterns, which they can use in repeatedly new and changing surroundings.

Therefore it is necessary for their development to be granted countless opportunities in which they are asked to try out new movement experiences by their surroundings.

Challenges for trying new movement patterns are also contained for example in embankments, puddles, ditches, sandy hollows, natural or built up caverns, trees, yes, even ladders, markings on the road surface and stairwells, if children are allowed to be there and if they can move free from the fear of danger e. g. due to traffic!

But the surroundings in which most European children grow up nowadays usually do not allow them to become active in the way that has just been shown. If this is a fact, then we have got to offer at least some supply or substitute for the children in our schools. This substitution of course remains poor and often contains some pretty artificial arrangements; nevertheless we have got to offer it and make the best out of it.

4. Challenges, praise, the process of self-assessment

Already at the age of three or four children start to think of themselves as "I", as a single and special person and begin to get an idea or image of this "I", this certain person. During the period in which children go to school this image grows to become outlined in strong terms and the differences that exist between this "I" and other persons become clearly perceptible. This image one has got of oneself — in some theories it is called self-perception — will surely be drawn more and more accurately during one's youth and also is often corrected in several areas, but in most cases the first sketch, the first outline which originates in one's childhood stays preserved for one's whole life.

While thinking about the tasks of our subject concerning the period of childhood, the following seems of high importance: In our modern industrial achievement-orientated-societies one essential part of one's self-perception is applied to one's own ability, one's own skill: What am I capable of doing? Which tasks am I really good at? What do I think I am able to learn? Which tasks are fulfilled by other children in a better way than by me? Theoretically speaking this means: A very important part of one's self-perception is the case of perceived ability.

In evaluating their own abilities even youth and adults are dependent on information about how their abilities are estimated by others. This information can be given in a direct way or indirect way. A human being is able to recognize someone's opinion concerning one's abilities in social interaction, e.g. when he is praised or criticized, whether he is given help or not, which kinds of tasks are assigned to him or even whether the face of this other person communicating with him expresses pity, pride or even joy.

Growing older most people attain a certain self-confidence and are not as dependent on other people's opinion: They know, or at least believe they know about their own value and their own abilities. Children, however, are not yet self-confident by themselves. They always keep waiting for someone's response, especially for a response of those people whom they

feel to be superior, and often adopt these people's opinions.

There are many different areas in which children develop their abilities. One of them is the sphere of motor skill which for several reasons moves into a special position. Motor achievements seem to be achievements fulfilled by the person as a whole. It seems to say a lot about a child when we ask how fast it is able to run, whether it is able to climb, in which way it catches a ball or whether it is able to swim or to ride a bicycle. For this reason a child's reputation among other children is strongly dependent on such motor abilities. A child therefore believes these abilities to be very important when estimating its own person.

The thought that motor achievements are rated high in children's self-perception, seems reasonable since in this field children are soon capable of judging their own achievements as opposed to other fields, e.g. other subjects in school, in which this assessing seems much more difficult. For this reason motor achievements naturally seem suitable for the process of determining a child's status in peer groups and school classes.

There is still another reason to be mentioned why children take these motor achievements so seriously. Much easier and better than in other fields, in which a certain ability is asked from them, in the field of motor activity children are able to compare themselves (or their achievements) with people who are much older than they are. They soon recognize that there are certain abilities in which they are as good as or even better than many grown-ups. It is fascinating for children to emulate youths and adults in those areas in which certain athletic disciplines attract large audiences and fill TV-programms. We should take advantage of this fascination! But we have got to be careful and take care not to let children specialize in a certain discipline. Many-sidedness must stay our principle, because there are many tasks to be fulfilled.

Whether we intend it or not, our subject will always be understood by children as a subject dealing with achievements which are very important for the children's self-perception. This is not only true for the positive case in which children will find confirmation and recognition. A child that believes that it cannot

achieve anything or only a little bit — compared to the others — in this area of motor skill, will draw farreaching conclusions: "I cannot do this! I will never learn it! The other children keep laughing at me! They don't like me. I'm no good, I'm useless".

For this reason children not only need instruction and encouragement by adults in general, but especially in the field of motor skills. They need to be assigned tasks which are adequate to their abilities; tasks which challenge them but do not expect too much of them.

They need to get the chance to acknowledge what they are able to learn in this field if they only want to. They need to be praised and to receive appreciation and respect for their efforts and not only for the results they finally attain.

This task — as compared to the others — is not one which children can fulfill by themselves if the circumstances are positive enough to allow it. For the fulfillment of this task we need adults who accept children as single personalities and who are able to teach them. Of course this can be the children's parents or older brothers and sisters; nevertheless, in most cases a physical education teacher with a knowledge of the subject is indispensable.

5. Games, social learning

Nowadays nobody would deny that learning to play is of high necessity for children's development. Although we know about many disagreements between theorists dealing with the field of games, we can state as an agreement which is not doubted, that playing games is inalienable for a healthy mental and social development as well as for achieving an emotional balance. Intercultural comparisons show that this level of importance increases according to the level of complexity a society reaches. The many results which are produced in children by their games can be summarized under two points: First, games function in an integrative or socializing way. This means that playing games children learn or come across simple and general actions, abilities, roles and so on, which are important for a life in a certain society. Secondly, games have got an innovative function. This means that children find out possibilities to act in their games, act out these possibilities without pressure and in all cases

try certain actions which they later on might reuse in the same or a slightly different way in 'real life'.

In the following not the significance active games in general have got for children's development will be discussed but rather the team games and games with standard rules. Those games are not only the well known games of sports or their subgames especially constructed for children, but also the many games that children play in groups. These games differ from country and even from one residential area of a city to another one. Children give names to those games and think out rules. The games are passed on from one age-group to another. For this reason it would be very confusing to talk about any names of these games. They will be characterized according to the theory of SUTTON-SMITH as follows: The antithetical or dialectical structure, the swinging between two poles, can be called the essential or fundamental feature of these games. They reflect contrasts and oppositions that can be called characteristic for our life, in a very concrete manner, like: order and disorder, approaching and rejecting, searching and hiding, escaping and following, collecting and robbing, or (more generally) being successful or unsuccessful.

Games reflect such contrasts in such a way that all players in general are granted equal chances to be on the one or on the other side in the game. At least playing children are not struck with any real consequences after finishing their game: they are not hit, robbed, rejected, found or caught and they are not unsuccessful. On the contrary: In a good game these contrasts are abolished on a higher level in an exciting and pleasure-orientated way. The question of whether a game turns out to be successful in the way just mentioned is not a question of fortune or chance but one of learning. Children learn such concepts while playing games with standard rules again and again in which they are confronted with this at first pretty easy and later on more and more complex dialectic structure.

If we look at the problem from a pedagogical point of view we have to ask: Which advantages can children draw from learning to play such games? Of course, games contain physical demands, allow movement experiences and in-

fluence one's concept of perceived ability. Nevertheless, the highest value of games in the context of children's development lies within the social experiences children undergo in contact with other children. These social experiences can be looked at from three different points of view:

First of all children learn while playing games with standard rules to put themselves in other children's places or positions. This is made possible by the dialectic structure of the games as well as by the permanent change of roles children have to undergo. The result of this process is that being the winner one time already contains the information about how one feels when one loses.

Secondly, children learn while playing these games how to handle the simultaneous situation of being cooperative (with the other children of the team) and being competitive (against the other team). The ability of handling such a situation is one which is a very important and determining factor within the society our children grow up in. They also might already learn that a rival of one game could belong to their own team during the next game; and they also should learn how to treat rivals as well as teammates.

As a third point children learn that rules are some kind of agreements which are reconcilable with the aim of keeping a game running and also of keeping it balanced and allowing every participant equal chances. They learn that rules can be and should be changed as soon as they are not sensible or useful anymore. If one watches children playing without an older organizer, one can often see that this is the most difficult task within the process of learning: The argument about rules, the squabble about their interpretation and application often takes more time than the game itself. But in the sense of development this amount of time is not lost.

One also has to ask which demands our schools have to fulfill in this area. It seems that a distinct culture of playing games for children is fading away. Especially for children living in the cities there are fewer and fewer places at which they could meet and play without being in danger. In those areas in which enough room can be granted the few children live so far away from each other that it is impossible

to meet unless with the help of the parent's car.

In addition, the well known games of sports are highlighted so much by the mass media that the games children play are being suppressed. One should not object to sports for children. Nevertheless it would be an unreasonable impoverishment concerning the social experiences offered in games, if children only learned those games which are a copy or "smaller" reproduction of certain disciplines sports contain. Two reasons are responsible for this view: Games are structured dialectically as well as antithetically and contain many different contrasts and oppositions. The athletic games as one distinct part of all games do not contain all of these contrasts but only a certain choice or selection. The demands that are made on athletes in athletic games are of such a high degree that social learning compared with the complex of learning movement patterns is pushed into the background.

Summing up these arguments the fourth task for physical education in school can be seen clearly: Physical education must try to preserve the variety of a child-orientated culture of games, to instruct children with the aim of attaining the ability to play and to grant time as well as space for the children's games. Physical education must fulfill this task — even against the predominance of sports.

6. What are we supposed to and also able to achieve in schools?

Four tasks for physical education were described with good reasons for their necessity. Many more tasks could be possible as well as reasonable. Those tasks were emphasized that seem to be inalienable for the interests of our children. At this point we have to ask who should get all these things done? To reach the aim of a complete physical education, which takes care of all four tasks, we wouldn't need only three or six but rather ten or more hours or lessons per week. We would also need different facilities than those we are usually granted. We would need teachers who are educated in a different way as well as much better books for the teachers.

How can we solve this problem? We should go back again to the first task mentioned in this analysis. It is the best example to clarify or to

elucidate the problem we are now dealing with. The result of the investigations was that children must put strain on their circulation and their muscles several times a day. This strain needs to be high enough to reach a sufficient training-effect — several times a day! This shows that it is not enough if our children are granted health education in school two or three hours per week. Each morning in nursery school, in Kindergarten or at school, each afternoon which is spent within the family or with peers must offer such periods of healthy movement. A guided organization with the aim of reaching a healthy amount of movement therefore would possibly not be necessary, if a child's day contained a balance of concentrated quiet playing or learning and boisterous and lively moving. If they are granted time, room and permission, children usually act in a way that is good for their health. Children still act this way.

But if we take a look at the flats in which many children have to live, if we look at the surroundings which they are allowed to explore without supervision, if we look at the rooms in which nursery school, Kindergarten and school take place, and if we finally take a look at those areas which are used as playgrounds or school yards, then we should not be astonished about the fact that — in spite of two or three hours of physical education per week — every third child suffers from bad posture or organ weakness, these are symptoms due to a lack of movement.

Special health programs for children cannot compensate for a certain amount of movement that is missing the rest of the week. Therefore all measures taken by health — or physical education teachers — especially the teachers of physical education in our schools — can only aim at an enrichment of our children's movement-repertoire in general. This means that all those measures only make any sense, if they are accompanied by consultations for parents, child-orientated house building, stimulating playgrounds, and schools which encourage our children to become active. Lessons at school should encourage our children to repeat after school during their leisure time what they learned at school. And this repetition should not be understood as homework but should be undergone for fun.

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Corresponding to the way the consequences arising from the first task were explained the results arising from the other three tasks could be presented. All the same we are not able to fulfil them totally and fundamentally within the limited amount of time of our lessons at school, even if we teach in an absolute concentrated and well-informed manner. Again it is of high importance that the stimuli and encouragements given at school have an effect on the children's lives outside the school gates. And again the tasks of physical education will only be fulfilled properly, if children are used to physical activities and if they are granted stimulation not only by their teachers at school but also by understanding parents. If those outer circumstances are not given, physical education will remain incomplete or unfinished.

Finally six points will be recommended to all people who — next to the parents — are responsible for our children's physical education, especially to the educators in Kindergarten and to the teachers at our schools:

a) Every teacher of physical education only contributes a small bit to the children's development. This small bit can only be used in a sensible manner, if the teacher or educators have got an idea of what the children he/she is teaching usually experience outside his domain. The lessons we are in charge of are far too valuable to be filled with things that our children are already being offered somewhere else.

b) The effects we achieve with two or three hours of physical education per week can only be very small ones. They increase, if we plan our lessons in such a way that the stimuli we offer during the lessons keep affecting our children after school or Kindergarten. Therefore we should try to offer as many stimuli and incentives as possible which they can cope with, without a teacher's guidance.



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c) Physical education should not only take place in a limited gym filled with standard equipment. We must be able to leave this gym and show our children what they can do with

in their usual surroundings and residential areas with non-standard movement-possibilities.

d) If a certain residential area does not offer such possibilities in which children can become active, teachers of physical education must support the children's case and see that such possibilities are soon provided. Who else — if not the physical education teachers — could do that with the necessary knowledge of the subject?

e) If the claim for changing the residential areas in a child-orientated way does not turn out to be successful at once, we can start changing the vicinities of our schools and Kindergartens. Nothing appears as wretched or pitiful as a bare schoolyard with asphalt surface of a primary school, where movement activities and games are forbidden for the sake of the children's safety. Schoolyards must be areas where children can move and play!

f) Usually teachers of physical education are — due to their own education — only familiar with one or two of the above mentioned tasks for physical education at schools and Kindergartens. These tasks are judged upon very differently in the different European countries. Therefore we need to talk about these things much more often and learn from each other, to finally reach the ability to understand the many-sidedness and variety of our pedagogical responsibility for our children!

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