

Investigating Adapted Physical Education in the Network of a New Type of Teacher – Student Relationship

Abstract of PhD thesis

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century the health of children is gradually declining. Seeing the children growing up in front of the television, video or DVD and feeding on chips and coke, we are not surprised to find that data describing their state of health show a rather negative picture about the future (Valek 2008, European Health for all Database 2008, Bloom and Cohen 2007, Akinbami 2006, Grivas et al. 2006).

The causes of the present situation have been described many times using many different approaches but little has been done in order to eliminate them. One of these few attempts is a small-scale reform of the system of APE at schools (each school is required to provide the personal and physical conditions for APE; the number of APE teachers has been increased mainly by means of specialization courses). The recognition that training for a health-conscious lifestyle has to start in childhood is a right one; still, the problem cannot be solved by legislation alone. This is the reason why an investigation into APE was chosen as the research subject of the present study with special emphasis on the analysis of a new type of relationship between teacher and student. The phrase 'new type of relationship' is underlined here, since the youth of today are very different from those who were at the same age even 10 years ago. This is also pointed out by Gombocz (1999) when he talks about young students being undermotivated and PE teachers using a teaching style that is to a certain extent 'bound to earth'. Nowadays, as an effect of changing social expectations, there is a parallel change taking place in the teaching of PE as well: the traditionally dominant teacher behaviour is giving place to a teacher that is more of an 'instructor of activities' and an expert in instructing human relationships. This new type of behaviour is characterised by student-centredness and increased attention given to students. APE, being a kind of PE with special requirements, shows this new type of teacher behaviour to a greater extent. APE is in a special position compared to other school subjects, as well. As an educational task, it is characterised by the same features as the other subjects (e.g. compulsory attendance, marking, etc.) at the same time, through its positioning in time and space, the attitudes and expectations of parents and students strengthen its recreational, that is, laxer, more informal and permissive, character. Special requirements towards APE, its objectives and tasks result in a unique form of teacher-student interaction in which teachers form the right attitude and achieve the activity of students through devoted, accurate and professionally ambitious work.

Recent changes in society have influenced education and with it APE as well. The small number of publications dealing with this school subject mainly concentrates on lists of exercises (Érdi-Krausz 1996; Bencze et al 1995; Donáthné 2004), but there is almost nothing published on pedagogical approaches to the topic or the analysis of the system of relationship

between teacher and student. Practice shows, nevertheless, that more is required than an update of exercises; we also need research and publications studying and describing up-to-date pedagogical tools which help APE teachers work more effectively.

OBJECTIVES

The aim of the research

The aim of the present research is to investigate APE as a school subject in a comprehensive way from a pedagogical point of view and to examine to what extent the new type of teacher behaviour affects the use of pedagogical tools influencing the effectiveness of the subject. By analysing the relationship between teachers and students and the factors affecting it, we would like to show professionals in the field of APE an alternative that makes effective work possible.

Sub-aims of the research:

- to examine to what extent different educational factors (persons with authority or other social factors) influence the fulfilment of the goals and tasks of APE;
- to examine what factors influence the attitude of APE students to the subject and to the teacher in a negative or positive way;
- to look for pedagogical tools that can effectively influence the fruitfulness of APE work
- to examine to what extent the different educational factors influence students' judgement of APE
- to chart the teacher and student activities that give APE lessons their special character
- to look for the most characteristic ways in teacher-student interaction

Research questions

The fulfilment of research objectives has called for a multi-faceted approach to the topic which can be arrived at by answering the following questions:

- What knowledge do teachers have about APE and LPE (i.e. Lightened Physical Education) and what is their attitude to these school subjects?
- What knowledge do school heads have about APE and LPE?
- Is there a difference between the attitude of school heads to APE and the attitude of their colleagues?
- To what extent does the external environment (classmates, friends and parents) influence the attitude of students to APE?

- Does the educational background of parents influence the attitude of students to APE?
- Do factors like place of residence and type of school attended influence the attitude of students to APE?
- What are the pedagogical tools working towards a closer rapport between teachers and students and thereby towards enhanced effectiveness of APE lessons?
- What are the most frequent teacher activities in APE lessons and do they differ from those experienced in normal PE lessons and in sport trainings?
- What is the rate of activity of students in APE lessons and does it differ from that experienced in PE lessons?
- Are there any special kinds of teacher-student interaction to be encountered in APE lessons and to what extent do they differ from interaction experienced in normal PE lessons and in sport training?

2.4. Hypotheses

The research questions are to be answered only by means of a complex study using a range of methods and by verifying the following hypotheses:

- Teachers possess little knowledge about APE, which also influences their attitude to it.
- School heads have more knowledge about APE than their colleagues at school.
- School heads relate to APE in the same way as their colleagues.
- The way the external environment relates to APE influences the attitude of students towards APE lessons.
- There is no connection between the educational background of parents and the attitude of students to APE.
- The place of residence and the type of school attended do influence the attitude of students to APE.
- In the relationship between teacher and student a significant role is played by the positive personality of the teacher the main characteristics of which are empathy, informality, attentiveness to others and cheerfulness.
- In APE lessons the most frequent teacher activities are giving instructions, correcting, giving assistance and their combinations. These activities are present in APE lessons to a larger extent than in the case of PE lessons or sports trainings.
- Students are more active in APE lessons than in PE lessons.

- In APE lessons student activity is assisted by the teacher through instructions, assistance, correction and continuous motivation. This results in a more intense teacher-student interaction than in the case of PE lessons.

3. Method

Since APE occupies a special position in education, there are several factors that influence the work carried out in the lessons. The complexity of the research has called for a varied and multi-faceted use of methods and a differentiated approach to sampling that takes into account the peculiarities of APE. The research adopted two main methods. One of them is the written survey by means of questionnaires containing closed-ended questions with multiple choice answers and 5-point attitude scales, the other one is indirect observation, more closely, categorical observation, which was supplemented with unstructured interviews. The questionnaire method was used to chart the attitudes of teachers, parents, PE teachers and students towards APE, to investigate the influence of the environmental and educational factors and to find out about student expectations of APE teachers and the subject itself. Observation was employed in the analysis of teacher-student interactions and the features characterising teacher and student activities in APE lessons.

Table 2. Student categories and their marking (Bíró 2007)

Number	Student categories	Marking of category
1.	One student is doing exercise, the others are waiting	1
2.	A couple of students are doing exercise, the others are waiting	2
3.	A group of students are doing exercise, the others are waiting	3
4.	Everybody is doing exercise	4
5.	Students are listening, keeping silent, “not doing anything”	5
6.	Students are messing around, there is hubbub and chaos	6
7.	A student interrupts the exercise verbally or in another way	7
8.	Student(s) answer(s) the teacher or discuss the exercise among themselves	8
9.	Students move from one place of exercise to another	9

For the observation 9 student categories (cf. Table 1.) and 21 teacher categories (cf. Table 2.) were defined adapting the categorical observation method of Bíró (2007). Bíró himself used a modified version of the observation systems of FIAS (Flanders, 1965), CAFIAS (Cheffers, 1983) and Svoboda (1977) in his research. In order to be able to analyse the observation more accurately, we recorded the APE and PE lessons in total and without selection so that both

teacher and student activities could be followed. The observers marked the number of the most characteristic activity on the observation sheet every three seconds. The PE lessons observed were chosen so that they would represent practice or skill development because such lessons resemble APE lessons in their structure to a greater extent. The reliability of the observation was checked by analysing the extent of actual and random agreement between the two observers (Flanders 1967, Bíró 2007). Reliability was calculated using the Scott π value. Data varied between $\pi= 88$ and $\pi=90$ (in literature this value is thought to be acceptable over $\pi=85$) (Falus 2004).

Data were processed using the software StatSoft Statistica 8.0 and the Flanders matrix.

Table 2. Teacher categories and their marking (Bíró 2007)

Number	Teacher categories	Marking of category
1.	Organizing	O
2.	Preparing equipment	P
3.	Instructing, giving explanation	I
4.	Instructing and demonstrating	I/d
5.	Instructing and assisting	I+
6.	Encouraging	E
7.	Encouraging and giving example	E/g
8.	Correcting	C
9.	Correcting and assisting	C+
10.	Assisting	+
11.	Assessing	A
12.	Assisting during assessment	A+
13.	Asking a question	Q
14.	Disciplining	D
15.	Educating	E
16.	Observing	Ob
17.	Participating in motor activities	M
18.	Other activity	Oa
19.	Absent	/
20.	Other	O
21.	Listening	L

Sample

The research sample was collected in the region of Western Hungary, primarily Sopron, Szombathely and the communities in their catchment area and it consisted of teachers (n=316), APE teachers (n=16), students attending APE lessons (n=147) and their parents (n=147). The sex distribution of teachers is the following: 74 male (23.42 %) and 242 female (76.58%). The average age of teachers is 41.29 years (SD 10.17). Both these values as well as the distribution of teachers on the basis of the number of years spent in teaching (cf. Table 3.) correspond to the national average (which is 17.3% male teachers, 82.7% female teachers, average age of 42.6). The proportion of APE teachers to PE teachers in the sample is 5.06%, which corresponds to the proportion of students needing APE (5.56% according to Valek2008) to their healthy peers. This justifies the low number of APE teachers in the sample. The sex distribution of students is the following: 86 male (58.51 %), 61 female (41.49 %). The average age is 15.05 years (min. 7 years, max. 19 years, SD 2.77). Observation was carried out in the APE (n=2) and PE (n=1) lessons of 9 APE teachers.

Table 3. Distribution of teachers on the basis of the number of years spent in teaching

Number of years	Number of teachers	Percentage	National average (Halász-Lennert 2006)
1-5 years	48	15.19 %	11.6 %
6-15 years	74	23.42 %	26.7 %
16- 25 years	100	31.64 %	35.7 %
over 26 years	94	29.75 %	26.2 %

Results

The background environment of APE

The position of APE work at school primarily depends on the school leadership. Since the subject is compulsory, it is closely connected to other lessons taught in the morning. At the same time, since the group of students attending the lessons is heterogeneous as far as their age and type of disorder is concerned, the lessons are organized outside the usual timetable. It depends on the school leadership whether they consult the APE teacher and strive at finding the most optimal solution or they fix the time of APE lessons arbitrarily and thereby make the attendance of students impossible. The appropriate measures can only be taken by a head who admits the importance of APE and has the health of students in view. Apart from verbal statements, supportive attitude can also manifest itself in the possession of proper knowledge about the given activity. The school heads participating in the present study found it important

that there would be preventive medical screenings as well as APE lessons at their school (96.2 %). The fact that more than half of the school heads (52.78 %) would fix the time of APE lessons in the afternoon, while a good proportion of them (25%) would help APE work by allocating a zero or seventh lesson to it, is a finding that is closer to daily practice. Others would opt for a so-called 'free slot'. In case of timetable clash with other private lessons, three-thirds of school heads and deputy heads agreed on the primary importance of APE. The positive attitude of heads is proved by actions as well as intentions. More than two-thirds (69.45 %) of them were aware of the number of students in need of APE and the same proportion of heads had the opinion that this number is too low, therefore, APE should be developed. Regular consultation with the school doctor can give school heads a picture about the effectiveness of preventive and health maintaining work carried out at school. In most cases such consultations take place annually or with the frequency of every semester. The survey done among school heads shows that most of them relate to APE as a school subject positively, which is revealed by the fact that they follow its situation and emphasise the importance of its development. This positive picture is only shadowed when time allocation is considered.

Teachers also play an important role in forming an adequate school environment because they can shape students' personality and attitude to work by giving example and voicing their opinion in different ways. Health, its protection and sport take a central position in the value system of the teachers participating in the study. This implies that they support activities, such as APE, that aim at restoring a deteriorated health status to a normal one. The majority of teaching staff is aware of the legislation regulating APE as a school subject; a higher percentage (54.11 %) of incorrect answers was to be detected only when they had to define who is authorized to give APE lessons.

The research results have lead us to refute the hypothesis based on practical experience that teachers possess little knowledge about APE, which would in turn influence their attitude to the subject. At the same time, the hypothesis that school heads have more information on the topic can be confirmed, although we could neither prove nor refute that the attitude of the heads affected that of the teachers. Supportive school background can provide a solid basis to effective work but the opinion and behaviour of students is significantly influenced by the family and peer groups. The relative strength of these factors depends on the age group of students.

Young people shape their lifestyle and manners as a result of a socialization process. In the first phase of this process parents play a decisive role in defining the value system of the family, giving example and setting the system of requirements. The parents participating in the study place values that have an effect on APE, such as e.g. health and regular exercise, high up on their list of priorities. The first place was given to health (an average of 4.78 on a 5-point scale), while the third and fourth place were given to two types of physical exercise: hiking (an average of 4.08) and regular sport activities (4.01). The parents of our times do not like to punish their children, which opinion was also voiced in the comment section, but should this happen, sport would be one of the last activities that they would ban their children from. This fact underlines the results of the value judgements.

If the family background is supportive, APE teachers have an easier job in achieving acceptance of the subject among students and motivating them to active attendance. A good percentage of parents (74.83%) were aware of the difference between physiotherapy and APE, although only one-third of them were able to define APE properly. Two-thirds of the parents were aware that the lesson is compulsory. The extent to which parents follow the development and school activity of their children influences the performance of students at school. Based on the information collected from parents and APE teachers we can state that two-thirds of the adults check on the development of their children, although most of them obtain information from the children themselves and only a minority asks the APE teacher. It is interesting to note that only 20% of the parents thought it was their task to control whether their child attends APE lessons or not. A further evidence for a supportive parental background is the fact that more than 74% of parents would move the time of other private lessons in case they clashed with APE in the timetable, and the same proportion of them would not let their children skip the APE lesson if they did not feel like going.

The average age of students participating in the study (15.05 years) makes it likely that peer groups have a larger influence on them than their parents. The opinion of friends or classmates can be decisive in forming the attitude of students to APE. Most of the friends and classmates of students knew about their peer attending APE, they accepted it, did not tease them for it, neither did they speak about the subject disapprovingly. They correctly assumed that APE is necessary in order to restore health.

APE students participating in the study are surrounded by a supportive environment regarding their attitude to the subject. Parents contribute to this supportive environment through their

positive attitude, peer groups through the acceptance of the subject and by emphasising the importance of physical exercise through deeds.

Analysis of the teacher-student relationship

The effectiveness of APE lessons is primarily influenced by the relationship between teacher and student. In the present thesis we examined this relationship from several viewpoints using different methods. As far as students are concerned, we applied the written survey method by means of questionnaires, in the case of teachers categorical observation complemented with unstructured interviews was used alongside the written survey (i.e. questionnaires).

The work of the APE teacher is influenced by many factors. The positioning of the lessons in time (zero lesson, seventh lesson or afternoon slots) and place (i.e. whether it takes place in the own school of the student, in a central place or in the framework of social service) might make it difficult for the student to attend them. This, in turn, can lead to students skipping lessons more easily. Therefore, teachers are required to create an inclusive atmosphere where students enjoy work.

Among the circumstances hindering APE, teachers most frequently mentioned the fact that the students attend a different school to that where APE takes place (87.5%), unfavourable timetable (75%) and private lessons (75%). The same findings were confirmed by the unstructured interviews as well with the addition that many students ask for a release from APE or change to normal PE because of private lessons. APE teachers also listed the lack of help from parents (67.5%), which seems to contradict the information gained from the parents themselves as long as we do not consider that parents usually make enquiries from their children. If we take this fact into account, we can understand why teachers complained about lack of help from parents.

Student-centredness of APE teachers was affirmed by several factors in the study. Their main objective is to assist students as much as possible in accessing APE and rehabilitational activities. In case students cannot attend all lessons because of their engagement at school or elsewhere, they offer them further options. Most of those who also teach PE would invite the students to visit their PE lesson and would give them extra tasks but many would also allow students to visit another APE lesson held at a different time. Only a few would ask the head teacher for an extra time slot. At the same time the majority of APE teachers think that

involving NGOs to relieve the situation is not a solution to the problem. APE teachers generally agree that adapted swimming is a good method to enhance the effectiveness of the subject and find it important to coordinate the two physical activities; however, opinions differ on the extent of integration of adapted swimming into APE. 50% of teachers would opt for one swimming lesson a week, 37.5% would prefer two lessons and both extremes were represented by 12.5%, although significantly more of them answered that adapted swimming lessons attended outside school should be credited to some extent.

Teachers definitively refused the statement that they have no means to influence the attitude of their students to APE. A 100% of the teachers marked conversation as the most effective method of exerting influence. The same fact was also confirmed by the results of categorical observation since the proportion of teacher questions and student answers was high compared to other studies. Varied tasks and the personality of the teacher are decisive in shaping judgements about the lesson. The fact that both of these factors were given an average of 4.75 points on the attitude scale implies that teachers also agree with this statement. Informal lesson management and the use of games can further assist the formation of the right attitude.

APE teachers need to possess a range of positive characteristics if they want to be successful in their work. These positive characteristics include the skill of empathy, informal behaviour, the ability to inspire trust and to understand children, attentiveness to others and helpfulness. These characteristics are listed in student questionnaires as requirements towards APE lessons. Students added that teachers are required to start and finish lessons punctually. Student answers also reveal that the features mentioned above generally characterise the teacher giving their APE lessons. When we asked them to describe those lessons, they emphasised cheerfulness (an average of 4.15 points on the scale), a teacher understanding their problems (4.10 points) and a teacher that is pleased if they work well (4.01 points). Researchers made the same experience during observation. The lessons observed were characterised by informality, informal and cheerful atmosphere, where teachers and students mutually assist each other in their work and where verbal interaction is frequent. The topic of conversation most often centred on the improving health status of the student, reasons for the momentary bad mood of the student or feedback on the effect of the exercises.

In order to be able to give enjoyable lessons, teachers need to possess a wide range of methodological and pedagogical tools the most essential of which are giving instructions, correction, assisting students and motivation by praise. Students are of the same opinion,

since they listed the need for praise and correction among their requirements. The answers given by students reveal that the work of teachers in APE lessons is characterised by correcting (an average of 3.82 on the scale), instructions (3.49 points) and praise (3.44 points). The results of observations made also support the finding that the work of APE teachers is dominated by these activities. Based on the observations we can state that giving instructions added up to 41% of the activities performed by APE teachers in the lesson. This fact is easy to understand considering that APE can only be effective if the exercises are performed correctly. That, in turn, requires constant instruction not only at the beginning of exercises but also during the performance and, as the results imply, during the whole lesson. The second most frequent activity was observation which means that the teacher controls the performance of the exercises, receives and analyses students' feedback, decides on the use of further methods accordingly, corrects mistakes, assists, encourages or reproaches if needed. Giving assistance and correcting characterised the whole lesson and were often complemented with explanations by teachers. The APE teacher can increase the physical strain and the variety by using different equipment. Teachers participating in the study followed this principle, since preparing equipment took a significant amount of time in the lessons (9.8%). APE teachers emphasised these activities also in their PE lessons more than their colleagues, as shown by other studies (Bíró and Svoboda 1988), even if the extent to which the activities occurred in PE lessons was smaller than in the case of APE lessons. The hypothesis on the dominance of instructions, assistance and their combination in APE lessons was verified and we could also prove that the frequency of the occurrence of these activities is higher than in PE lessons.

After looking at these features of the teacher activities in APE lessons it is not surprising to find that more than 50% of the students ending up in APE lessons like attending them. The percentage of the students disliking APE lessons was quite low (10.52%). Student judgements are also supported by the results of the observation, since they reveal intense student activity (79.4%). The percentage of student questions and answers was also high (3.7%). An important feature of teacher-student interaction in APE lessons is the fact that student activities are rarely interrupted by teachers; they prefer correcting the mistakes, giving further instruction and assistance parallel to the ongoing activity. The hypothesis stating that students are more active in APE lessons than in PE lessons was verified.

Conclusion

APE goes back to a long tradition in Hungary and teachers play a key role in its success.

Summarizing the results of the study we can state that a renewal of APE is to be achieved only if APE teachers possess positive characteristics, a calling for their job, appropriate professionalism and a large amount of love for children and they are supported by parents, the school leadership, teachers and peer groups. It has to be emphasised again that the personal qualities of the APE teacher prevail only in a well-cooperating team of school leaders, school doctors, parents and APE teachers. Therefore, the question whether the promotion of APE within professional circles is effective or persuasive enough, is a fundamental one. The promotion of APE can happen in two areas:

1. Among APE and PE teachers

Postgraduate teacher trainings are attended by well-qualified and devoted teachers, who need to be reassured in their vocation and assisted in their professional development. They need to become conscious of the following factors that lead to effective teaching:

- proper exercises have to be accompanied by instructions explaining the right way to perform them, mistakes have to be constantly corrected and continuous assistance has to be offered
- teachers have to show understanding towards the problems of the students, they have to care for the students, they have to create a more informal relationship than what students are used to in other lessons and they have to provide a cheerful and free atmosphere.

Future APE teachers encounter these objectives during their studies but good intentions fade in everyday routine. That is why they need to be reasserted in conferences, postgraduate trainings and professional journals using the results of related research.

2. In the wider society

In the present study we pointed out that a devoted and ambitious APE teacher can only work successfully if he or she is sufficiently supported by parents, the school leadership, the school doctor and other members of the teaching staff.

Therefore, APE teachers need to see it as their primary task to promote APE and emphasise its positive effects in the wider public, mainly among parents. They should also work towards activating a supportive family background in order to shape the attitude of students to APE in a positive way.

At the same time we cannot give up on those children, either who do not make use of the rehabilitational possibilities provided by APE. In their case it is increasingly important to inform the parents about the advantages of APE and about its key role in restoring health. Parents need to be persuaded about the primary status of health as a main value.

APE teachers should not be left alone in their struggle to achieve the above mentioned objectives. Rather, a team should be established in which school heads, school doctors, social workers and parents all take an active role.

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