

RIGA VASSILIKI¹

Physical Education in Greek Early Years' Curriculum: Current Approaches and Prospects

Physical education consists a primary sector for young children's development in Greek Early Years curriculum. It is considered among the core objectives of all curriculums since the establishment of the first Early Years setting back in 1896, a fact that proves its eternal societal value. The aim of physical education at Early Years is the enhancement of motor, social, emotional and cognitive development of children through daily developmentally appropriate movement experiences. Therefore, physical education is not limited to training children in physical skills, but perceives movement as an integral part of their overall learning process. These objectives can be accomplished through the innovative way of working in the Early Years Foundation stage, which relies on an interdisciplinary method and project approach based on children's ideas and interests.

1. Introduction

Since 1975 all children in Greece have been entitled to free access to all stages of education, from Early Years to Higher education (University) (Greek Constitution, 1975, article 16, sec.4). Being overseen by the Ministry of Education, in 2006, Early Years Education, and more specifically the Foundation stage, became compulsory for all children 5-6 years old (L.3518, article 73).

In 2003, a significant change took place for Early Years Education, as one of Ministry's of Education initiatives included its equal inclusion during the cohesive educational planning, since it constitutes an integral part of any developed society's educational system. The Cross Curricular Framework (Official Gazette, 13/3/03) that was applied in all the compulsory stages of education was utilised to promote the initiative of unification of knowledge across the whole of the educational system (starting from the age of 5, all the way up to 15 years). The Cross Curricular Framework (CCF) is a coordinated system that outlines the content of children's learning, the procedures that need to take place for the learning objectives to be achieved, the teacher's responsibilities, as well as the context of teaching and learning.

¹ Associate Professor; University of Patras, Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, Greece; vriga@upatras.gr

2. The Greek Early Years Framework

One of the CCF's core objectives in Early Years education is the promotion of cross-curricular and interdisciplinary nature of learning, especially through the implementation of projects that are grounded upon children's ideas and interests. Concurrently, teachers can use further teaching approaches such as open ended questions, feedback, narrative of own experiences, recitation of literature, drama, data collection, pictorial representations, use of modern technology etc.

In accordance with the cross-curricular approach, knowledge is regarded as a wholeness, rather than being chopped into various cognitive areas. For instance, when children work on a specific subject the teacher starts by identifying the pre-existing knowledge and experience, and build upon that, expanding children's knowledge by linking it with different learning areas, such as: maths, expressive language understanding of the world, science, art etc. Through this approach children are actively involved in the educational process, take initiatives, co-modulate the daily plan, and adopt positive attitudes towards learning (Dodge–Colker–Heroman, 2002).

In this learning environment, the teacher acts as mediator for each child's learning endeavour, adjusting the curriculum to learners rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum (Hall–Strangman–Meyer, 2003). Children and the teacher “think alongside” and co-construct the knowledge in relation to the environment (both natural and material), highlighting Vygotsky's socio-cultural nature of knowledge, as well as the importance of social interactions. However, due to the fact that the holistic approach of dealing with children does not only aim to learning, but also to children's emotional empowerment and welfare, the teacher facilitates the interactions, the relationships with “others” like friends, family and the wider community.

Cooperation with family and connection with the wider community are based upon the notion that children learn in various environments, and that learning is enhanced when these environments interact with, and complete each other. This way, the conceit of knowledge and the continuity of children's learning experiences are facilitated, while their emotional development and academic progress are also benefited (Edwards–Fleer–Nuttall, 2008). Adopting such a philosophy, Early Years Education shows the essential respect to children and their families, regardless their language group, their sociocultural identities, or, their economic background (EYFS Framework, 2011a).

Concluding the illustration of some of Greek Early Years Education's core learning objectives, it should be highlighted that the effective planning of the framework and the learning

environment is based upon the observation of the children, and the interpretation of the emerging data. Regular observation provides the teacher with the opportunity to get to know the children better, and design the planning and teaching in accordance with their needs, abilities, interests, pre-existing experiences and learning style. It also enables the teacher to empower children's will to explore and learn, by providing the proper stimulus and experiences to help them express their theories and reflect upon their actions.

3. The Physical Education in the Greek Early Years curriculum

As it has been pinpointed above, planning in Early Years aims to support the development of all children's abilities in a universal way. Throughout the history of Early Years Education in Greece (started with the foundation of the first Early Years setting back in 1896), it can be easily seen that P.E (Physical Education) has held a prominent place in the curricula, as it has been directly linked to the child's universal development.

According to the current Early Years framework (EYFS Framework, 2011b; Teaching Guidelines, 2003), P.E aims to develop the child's overall motor development through designed activities that promote physical, social, emotional and mental development. P.E in Early Years is a fundamental expedient of learning, using the child's body and movement to create the grounds upon which the children will be able to develop as a whole, improve their health, have fun, integrate to their school environment, and socialise.

Adapting to the cross-curricular approach the way P.E is delivered (Cone–Werner– Cone, 2009) enables children with different learning styles to connect their cognitive, emotional and psychophysical learning in a more holistic way. The use of motor activities assist the young learner not only to understand fundamental pre-maths concepts and make empirical distinctions among geometrical shapes, but also to estimate natural scales, sort objects, obtain skills related to reading and writing, and create relationships to achieve a target, or solve a problem.

Participating in motor activities aids children not only to develop fundamental motor skills (stationary, locomotion and object manipulation), but also to obtain transferable knowledge and skills for their later life such as: (EYFS Framework, 2011b; Teaching Guidelines, 2003):

- Learning to maintain good shape to promote a healthy lifestyle,
- Activating creative and critical thinking,
- Developing verbal communication,
- Enhancing the cognitive skills through problem solving in movement,

- Developing self-expression, self-esteem and courage,
- Developing positive attitudes towards cooperation, acceptance and support,
- Demonstrating socially responsible behaviour,
- Understanding and respecting difference,
- Perceiving the notion of Olympic idea and the importance of great sports events,
- Learning to accept the rules' compliance, as well as the proper way of using the educational tools,
- Acquiring a positive experience from physical activity.

Thus, P.E in Greek Early Years Education is not limited to training in motor skills, but it is directly linked to the wholeness of a child's learning process. The teacher ensures that the environment is safe and has all the necessary equipment to facilitate children's participation in activities and games, always considering each age's individual needs and abilities. S/he takes advantage of children's inborn tendency to move and explore, and seeks the acquisition of positive experiences deriving from physical activities which could lead to a lifelong involvement with movement.

This specific framework of P.E includes all of Piaget's, Vygotsky's, Bruner's and Gardner's latest theories on preschool education, as it outlines movement as an integral part of the overall child's learning process and conforms with NASPE's (2000) main aim for children of this age to become physically educated persons who know and value physical activity, are physically fit, have the necessary skills for participation and engage regularly in health enhancing physical activity. It also harmonises with EU's directions regarding the societal value of physical education (Eurydice, 2013). It emphasises not only the connection between fitness, good health and well-being, but also the acquisition of basic knowledge in maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle, emotional welfare and the importance of human relationships (Thorburn–Jess–Atencio, 2011).

4. P. E's future in Early Years Education

Extending our research on Greek Early Years P.E framework into the international trends on P.E, we encounter an international interest expressed by organisations and researchers regarding daily physical activity starting during infancy. The World Health Organisation (2010) highlights that during this age physical activity related routines are established that could act as deterrents against future health problems while «EU Physical Activity Guidelines» (2008)

suggest to make physical education meaningful and successful for all children. For students' participation in sports and recreation activities to be encouraged, innovative learning theories and new perceptions of the physical education subject need to be considered, evaluated, and implemented starting for the first school age.

The imperative necessity to reinforce young children's physical activity derives from long-term researches' results that link modern illnesses with sedentary lifestyle, and prove that children's participation in physical activity is relevant to many aspects of their health (Binkley-Specker, 2004; Metcalf et al., 2008; Vale et al., 2010).

Governments and health services express their concerns regarding to the increasing rates of obesity, diabetes and lack of physical activity in children. The phenomenon of modern students' limited physical activity forms a hazard for the public health, as well as one of the most significant factors of death causes (WHO, 2010).

The significant nature of early and quality teaching of fundamental motor skills for both children's progress and adult life, is pinpointed not only by the wholeness of modern bibliography, (Kirk, 2005; Silverman-Ennis, 2003), but also by the curriculums worldwide (Eurydice, 2013). Children with positive attitude towards physical activity are more likely to have higher self-esteem, better health and well-being, good social skills, and to be more willing to undertake risks and keep up with an active and healthy lifestyle as adults (Developing Fundamental Movement Skills, 2014). The latest research in neuroscience suggest that there is a positive link between exercise, brain development and learning, and confirm that "the first five years last a lifetime – children's wellbeing, good nutrition, health, and exercise are critical to brain development and learning" (Winter, 2010, p. 5).

New academic terms keep appearing in the bibliography, with *physical literacy* being one of them (Whitehead, 2001). This new term has permeated the preschool education, covering the modern society's agony for a prompt acquisition of all the skills needed to ensure a healthier generation that is physically active for a lifetime. The term *physical literacy* refers to the development of the child's knowledge regarding the reasons why physical activity is important, as well as the positive attitude, the enthusiasm, the motives and the self-esteem that the regular physical activity results to. Per Whitehead (2013) it is not yet another pedagogical model, but a rationale for the value of physical activity which has been associated with motivation, rather than with the development of generic and specific competencies, like in P.E. This term extents Arnold's (1979) old objectives for P.E, which can still be found in modern curriculums, and

underline the three conceptual dimensions for physical education: education in, through and about movement, pinpointing the educational nature of P.E.

So far it has been made clear that the burden of children's education on lifelong physical activity has shifted more towards the educational systems rather than the family and the individual. Teacher's responsibility is great, and the objectives needed to be covered during P.E are many and differ in various levels. Thus, alongside children's free play in Early Years, there is a great need for specialised teachers, well designed planning, daily developmentally appropriate movement experiences, and teaching approaches and methods to enhance and ensure the daily spontaneous and organised children's involvement in physical activities according to their developmental level (Riga, 2017). Integral part of this framework is the data collection (through teacher's observation and recordings) that is used for future planning of new learning experiences that promote the development, progress rates, and motor related vocabulary (Gallahue–Cleland-Donnelly, 2003).

However, no matter how much effort the teachers put on (further training, planning, implementation, evaluation), it is hard to infuse the lifelong activity when there is no concurrent contribution made by other factors, such as family, the community and the child. Over the past years modern research and practice promotes more and more the *community participation* as a hallmark of planning, implementation and evaluation of human services (MacDougall, 2001). The communal participation consists one of modern education's and health services' cornerstone that involves a transfer of power from the state or experts to communities or populations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). The child's universal development can now be achieved, should his/her active involvement in environment is facilitated, and s/he is given motives for that participation.

There is a growing number of examples on children's active involvement in matters that affect their lives. Over the past couple of decades, researchers examine in a greater extent and depth the underestimation of children's voices, and request for them to be heard (Clark–Moss, 2001; Davie–Upton–Varma eds. 1996; John, 1996). Special features on listening and participation of young children are often published by distinguished international academic journals like the International Journal of Early Years Education that in June 2017 will publish a special issue on "Hearing Young Children's Voices Through Innovative Research Approaches". Numerous researches included in this issue highlight how significant it is for children in early childhood to be active social agents that form the procedures and the settings in which they live in (Bragg, 2007; Riga–Rouvali, 2012). MacDougall and Darbyshire conducted a research on children's physical activity and confirm that children brought to the

discourse about physical activity some ideas that challenge the views adults hold about children (MacDougall–Schiller–Darbyshire, 2004). They suggest that should we want to increase children’s physical activity, we have to stop dealing them as passive receivers of adults’ choices (parents, teachers, politics) and their environments’ influences, and concede to them our “authorities” and inform them on how to become active influencers over their social and physical world (MacDougall–Schiller–Darbyshire, 2004, pp. 385-386). Maybe this is a direction towards which all modern Early Years P.E frameworks should move for the children to actively participate during the planning of physical activities, while observing and caring about their physical development and health.

Physical Education’s cross-curricular and interdisciplinary nature that Greek Early Years Education has adopted works towards that direction, since it involves children in the learning process and provides them with the space to initiate and express their thoughts and opinions.

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