

The position and role of combat sports in teaching physical education in an international context

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Abstract

Based on human ethological studies, combat sports play a significant role in personal development and socialization processes of children in educational processes. Additionally, these activities have a strong developmental impact on students' motor and cognitive abilities. In Hungarian public education, the teaching of combat sports has gained increasing prominence, and self-defence has become integrated into the curriculum. In our study, we examined the incorporation of combat sports into physical education in schools, primarily in Hungary. Furthermore, we compared it to neighbouring countries Slovakia and Croatia. Our investigation was based on comparative document analysis, in which we reviewed and compared the Hungarian national curricula and briefly assessed the development of curricula in the respective countries concerning combat sports, and interviews with practical Physical Education (PE) teachers. In our research, we also analysed what kind of opportunities the examined countries offer to physical educators trained on the basis of previous training structures in dealing with the challenges arising from changes in the core curricula. The comparative analysis of the data confirmed our hypothesis that the higher number of physical education lessons in Hungary has led to a greater presence of combat sports.

Keywords: combat sports; martial arts; physical education; continuing education; curriculum

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Introduction

The emergence of combat sport stems from the natural psychological characteristics of man since the fight against each other has been a fundamental principle in the defence of property from the very beginning. Clay figures depicting combat sport movements have been found as far back as the Neolithic period, 4,500-year-old Egyptian papyrus scrolls depicting wrestling moves are also prominent finds, moreover victories in the ancient Greek Olympics gave champions a high status. In the Middle Ages, participants could improve and test their skills in countless jousting and combat exercises. As a result of the development of societies and socialisation processes, actions previously fought for survival were transformed into

competitions and fights within a regulated framework (Nagykáldi 2002). According to human ethology studies, the role of combat sports in personality development, socialisation processes, self-control, self-regulation, self-actualisation and cooperation of children (Mazura 2003; Barna 2006; Borbély-Jóvér 2007; Morvai-Sey 2010; Pavlicsek 2011; Béki 2015), as well as in the field of educational processes, is of great importance. Their application in physical education can also develop students' ability to fight, discipline and follow rules (Nagykáldi 2002; Béki 2015). Combat sports have a huge role to play in aggression management, assertive behaviour development and assertive communication for students. They have to respect their partner, their opponent, because in body-to-body combat they directly encounter the strength and skill of the other student.

As Károly Áros put it, respect for the partner is also a corollary, since "in combat sports, the object of the fight is the opponent himself" (Áros 1980). It is often observed that children react either too aggressively or too subordinately to a situation that is unfamiliar or perhaps too stressful for them. Such a situation may be when a stronger student uses their physical strength to dominate during a game or a task. Fighting games and combat sports teach students how to control their greater physical strength, thereby reducing the possibility of causing pain, recognising the potential for accidents and danger, and developing the ability to fight; in other words they will not give up in case of facing a stronger opponent, but will look for ways to resolve the situation. This body-to-body combat basically prepares students for following the rules of other games in which direct physical contact is often experienced, such as handball. This helps to develop a more efficient and effective game and to prevent injuries, both to themselves or to a partner. An important element is the stop rule, i.e. all participants must stop immediately at the signal of the person in charge of the game, such as the PE teacher, and must not continue the fight.

This element also teaches children to respect the other person and to respect the basic rules, which also helps them to carry out an as efficient socialisation process as possible, thus helping them to accept social norms and integrate into society later in their adult lives. Due to the specific competitive nature of combat sports, the student performs as a positive participant in shaping the community through the execution of the movement forms. While practicing fighting games and combat sports, students learn the basic elements of falling and rolling movements that will help them to avoid the negative consequences of a fall in later life through automated processes.

The specific form of movement patterns greatly facilitates the development of psychomotor learning processes, kinesiology, motor coordination, cognitive and motor control centres (Li 2003). While practicing combat sports, participants accept the norms within the group and adapt to the hierarchical structure (Partikova 2018). During self-defence training students learn what a legitimate self-defence situation is, how and what kind of defensive responses to make in the light of the proportional level of the attack, while at the same time, they learn the early recognition of the attack that allows conscious prevention and avoidance of dangerous situations.

In 2012, Hungary introduced compulsory daily physical education in all types of

public schools including both primary and secondary schools. Daily physical education has led to a significant improvement in the fitness and health status of pupils (Csányi 2023). Daily physical education has also allowed to include an increased number of sports and physical activities on physical education lessons.

In Slovakia and Croatia, everyday physical education has not yet been introduced, which may have the consequence that some forms of physical activities are less represented on PE lessons. In our research, we looked at the representation and role of combat sports in physical education in schools, comparing the characteristics of each country. The aim of our study is to present a comparative study of the characteristics of Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia in the context of physical education in schools and combat sports. We also aim to gain a clearer picture of how everyday physical education can influence the representation of specific sports, such as combat sports, in curricula and on physical education lessons.

Theoretical background

By examining lifelong learning and the professional development of teachers various levels of training were dealt with by many specialists (Wilson-Hayes 2009; Portilho - Medina, 2016; Anacleto - Ferreira - Januário - Santos 2017; Fernández-Rivas - Espada-Mateos 2019), to whom he agreed his opinion is that society needs a highly and well-educated, committed person and there has never been a greater need for an effective teacher than today.

In Hungary, a milestone in the field of physical education in schools was the introduction of compulsory daily physical education in primary and secondary schools under the Public Education Law adopted in 2011 and introduced on 1st September, 2012. A study by Tamás Csányi and his colleagues has shown the positive impact of daily physical education on both fitness and health indicators (Csányi 2023), so it is right to call the introduction of daily physical education a priority. Schools were free to decide on the form in which they would implement daily physical education according to local specificities. Either there were compulsory PE lessons in the timetable every day, included in the general lessons, or the school could decide to provide two lessons a week in the form of a school sports lesson or a sports club. Pupils had to submit a certificate or a request from their parents, after which they were exempted from attending the two PE lessons per week in the timetable by a decision of the head of the institution. Unfortunately, despite the well-intentioned introduction of daily physical education, which is a step forward for a healthy society, the infrastructural development of the institutions only been partially performed.

Another problem was the methodological training of PE teachers, which, despite the attempts, often fell short of what was needed, which in practice limited the effective teaching of the curricula. The National Curriculum 2012 included the Principles, the Development Objectives and the Content of General Education, and also defined the areas of Motor Skills and Abilities Development. The framework or cross curricula built on the National Core Curriculum 2012 specified the

precise number of lessons and the content to be taught in two-year cycles, in this way providing a more precise and centralised basis for the preparation of local curricula in schools than the previous core curricula.

The most recent National Core Curriculum introduced in 2020, defined in further details the content to be taught in a document called „Learning outcomes (overall requirements)”. In the new National Curriculum 2020, the area which was called Physical Education and Sport in the previous curricula, is now called Physical Education and Health Promotion, and several areas of competence have been renamed and modified. Of course, there are also framework curricula linked to this Basic Curriculum, and in addition to the central framework curricula, alternative framework curricula can be chosen, such as the „Karate Framework Curriculum for Grades 7-11” or the „Judo Framework Curriculum for Grades 1-4”.

The central framework curricula, like the previous ones, basically assigned the curriculum, learning outcomes, developmental tasks and knowledge, and concepts in two-year cycles. At the end of each topics in the framework curricula there is a section on the knowledge of movements in physical education lessons, an area that was not as closely linked to the topic in previous framework curricula as it is in the framework curricula for the National Core Curriculum 2020.

In Slovakia based on the centrally issued National Curriculum and the framework curricula, schools are basically free to decide the educational objectives, the content and coverage of subjects in their curricula, which are part of their own school curricula. Since 2008, this possibility has been ensured by the School Education and Training Act (Zákon č. 245/2008 Z.z. o výchove a vzdelávaní), which expects teachers to take greater activity and responsibility in the field of education and development (Dobay 2020). The respective framework curricula and the curricula developed must be in line with the relevant basic training requirements. The National Core Curriculum adopts a competency-based approach, aiming to promote the applicability of learning in everyday life (Csányi 2019). The minimum number of hours of „*Physical Education*” in lower primary schools is 3 hours, and „*Physical Education and Sport*” in upper secondary schools and grammar schools is 2-2 hours. The latest educational reform (Štátny vzdelávací program pre základné vzdelávanie 2023) was introduced as a pilot in 40 primary schools from September 2023, and is expected to be adopted by all schools in the 2026-2027 school year.

In Croatia, the National Curriculum declares the autonomy of schools and teachers in the definition of educational and teaching objectives and in the choice of activities and content of outcomes, taking into account individual differences in pupils’ abilities and interests, as well as the specificities of the school. The objectives set are essentially geared towards lifelong learning, effective cooperation, and active and responsible participation in community life. The sport-related area is called Physical Education and Health Education (TZK) provided with a separate central curriculum by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education. The basis is defined as the acquisition of kinesthetic motor skills and knowledge, the development of motor and functional abilities and, ultimately, personal and social development. The number of physical education lessons was set at three per week in the first three grades of primary school and two per week in the other grades in both primary and secondary schools.

In the member states of the European Union, an important condition for quality education is that teachers continue to train and participate even after completing their studies in organized continuing education. In most countries, the direction of continuing education is dictated by the educational policy ideas of the country and the national one fits in organically for education development trends. By country the decentralized nature of training is different. In general, however, we can say that, regardless of whether further education is optional (such as in Spain, Portugal, Iceland, Bulgaria, in Poland and Slovenia) or mandatory (such as in Hungary, Belgium, Estonia, Malta and from 2019 in Slovakia also), significantly determines the progress of teachers (Borbélyová–Pataki Tóthová, 2023).

Characteristics of the study

Hypothesis

H1: It is assumed that the basic curriculum in Hungary is more direct in the way it defines the presence of each sport in physical education.

H2: It is assumed that the introduction of daily physical education in Hungary will allow a higher level and number of hours of combat sports in physical education classes in public schools.

H3: It is also assumed that in Hungary, combat sports are much more prominent than in the other two countries studied.

Method

In our research, we conducted a comparative document analysis of:

- the Hungarian National Curriculum and the related framework curricula introduced in 2012 and 2020,
- the curricula in Croatia, the Croatian curricula prepared on the basis of the Decree 27/2019, and
- the Slovak curricula published in 2008 and 2009.

In addition to the document analysis, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and the results were coded using content analysis.

Our sample consisted of physical education teachers from Croatia and Slovakia (N=6).

Our research questions are formulated below.

What is the profile of physical education in the countries surveyed?

How are combat sports reflected in the curricula of each country?

At what ages and in what grades are combat sports taught in schools?

What sports are included in the field of combat sports in school physical education in the countries studied?

To what extent are the requirements in the given field precisely defined?

What further training opportunities are available for practising PE teachers to improve their knowledge of combat sports?

Limiting factors of the research were that there is less literature analysing the presence of combat sports in schools in the countries studied, and that basic legal

documents are typically available in the official language of the country, but not in English.

The method of data processing

In the case of examining the documents, we first performed a qualitative content analysis and then during a comparative analysis we have established the similarities and differences.

During data processing, descriptive statistics for data and content analysis were created using Microsoft Excel.

Results

In Hungary, one of the very important innovations of the National Curriculum introduced in 2012 was the introduction of compulsory daily physical education in public schools. In the framework curricula, specific numbers of hours were assigned to each thematic unit, and the curriculum to be taught was defined in detail in two-year cycles along the development requirements. In the lower primary school, the thematic units „Natural movement forms in self-defence and fighting” provided 15 and 14 lessons respectively for pupils to learn various types of co-strikes, pulls, falls, escapes, wrestling forms and fighting games. In the upper secondary school, in the thematic unit „Self-defence and fighting tasks”, in grades 5 and 6, 38 lessons of the curriculum included self-defence holds, the basics of basic wrestling and various techniques of judo, thus introducing the movement material of specific combat sports. In the last two grades of the upper school, 48 lessons of self-defence releases, judo ground fighting techniques and falls, ground wrestling lifts and, alternatively, karate movements were introduced. In secondary school grades, the curriculum provided 30 and 20 lessons of „Self-defence and combat sports”, respectively, with thematic content that basically extended the primary school curriculum and sought to develop new links between elements.

In the National Curriculum 2020, two times 30 lessons are included in the lower secondary school curriculum as „Fighting tasks and games”, divided into two-year cycles, with the emphasis on learning physical contact and basic techniques based on simple pulls and pushes. At the upper secondary level, a total of 80 lessons will be devoted to „Self-defence and combat sports”. In addition to learning playful body-to-body combat exercises, this will include sport-specific training in judo, wrestling and karate. In secondary school, 42 and 40 lessons are devoted to this subject over two-year cycles, with a greater emphasis on socialisation skills, assertiveness, and conflict avoidance, in addition to the acquisition of sporting movement skills.

For practising physical education teachers there were few in-service training opportunities available, with Karate and Judo being offered after the introduction of the 2012 National Curriculum, but no such opportunities since the introduction

of the 2020 National Curriculum, however the number of lessons has increased significantly (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Comparison of the number of lessons in combat sports in Hungary

In Slovakia, combat sports or contact sports are rarely appearing in educational documents at primary school level, and are only mentioned in the context of physical education in secondary schools. Judo, karate, aikido and wrestling are mentioned as the main combat sports, and self-defence is also referred to in the curriculum under the heading „contact sports”, which are described as sports performed by pairs using strikes and holds. According to our Slovakian interviewees, „PE teachers are rarely able to participate in in-service training on combat sports, it is not common to have in-service training in this field” (Slovakian PE teacher). The interviews also revealed that the presence of combat sports in school PE lessons depends to a large extent on the attitude and sporting background of the PE teacher.

In Croatia, three or two physical education lessons a week are generally included in the curriculum, but this may vary in primary schools according to school policy. In secondary schools, judo and wrestling are recommended or compulsory physical education lessons, with karate, boxing and taekwondo being optional. Interviews with physical education teachers in Croatia revealed that „teachers are largely free to choose the curriculum and the time they want to spend on a particular form of movement. There is no in-service training in combat sports” (Croatian PE teacher), which makes it difficult to integrate these forms of movement into the teaching and learning process. According to our interviewee, „in Croatia, combat sports are not part of the national sports, like water polo or football, which is also reflected in the preferences of school sports” (Croatian PE teacher). PE teachers prefer to teach sport games rather than combat sports and students also prefer to turn to ball sports.

Table 1: Comparison of combat sports characteristics in the countries examined.

	Hungary	Slovakia	Croatia
PE lessons per week	5 lessons	2, or 3 lessons	2, or 3 lessons
The emergence of combat sports, fighting games in school physical education	All classes	In secondary school	In secondary school
Types of combat sports	Judo, wrestling, karate, self defence	Judo, karate, aikido, wrestling, self defence	Judo, wrestling, karate, box, taekwondo
In-service training opportunities in the field of combat sports	Limited	Limited	Limited

Source: Own editing

The comparative analysis of the data verified our hypothesis, that the basic curriculum in Hungary is more direct in the way it defines the presence of each sport in physical education. The introduction of daily physical education in Hungary allow a higher level and number of hours of combat sports in physical education classes in public schools. And in Hungary, combat sports are much more prominent than in the other two countries studied. The more centralised curriculum definition also plays an important role in this phenomena.

Conclusion

We compared the curricula of three neighbouring countries, Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia. The main questions of our research were how combat sports are presented in school physical education in the countries under study, how centrally regulated this area is, and what opportunities for professional development exist for physical education teachers. In Hungary, despite the fact that combat sports should be taught to an increasing extent as laid down in legislation, the teaching of increased curricula in the context of everyday physical education is a major challenge for PE teachers. The low number of in-service training opportunities for previously qualified PE teachers at population level limits the possibility of expanding knowledge on the subject and learning possible innovations. In Slovakia and Croatia, PE teachers have flexibility in the content of the curricula they deliver to their pupils and, although combat sports are included in the curricula, the lower number of PE lessons, the priority given to sports that are more socially visible, the low number of opportunities for further training and the limited local resources available, mean that it is essentially up to the teacher to introduce combat sports into PE lessons. It is recommended to increase the number of PE lessons in Slovakia and Croatia, and to increase the number of in-service training opportunities in all three countries studied, which could contribute to a higher boost of combat sports in school PE through improved staff conditions.

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