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Unpacking the Physical Education Lesson: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract: *The Physical Education (PE) lesson is regarded by many experts as an essential tool for combating sedentary lifestyles. However, to fully harness the potential of this tool, it is crucial to carefully consider the ideas we communicate to future PE teachers. Aim: This study aims to explore the main concepts conveyed to future PE teachers in Romania. Method: A thematic qualitative analysis was conducted on the mandatory bibliographic references assigned to prospective PE teachers in Romania's public education system. Results and Discussion: Of the 21 required study documents, 13 (62%) could not be found. A thematic analysis of the remaining 8 materials revealed 5 main themes and 10 sub-themes. One key message imparted to teachers is that sports competition serves as the primary educational tool in PE lessons, and teachers are responsible for identifying talent for high-performance sports. Conclusions and Future Implications: This study highlights the outdated ideas we pass on to future PE teachers. If we want a physically literate young generation, it is imperative to revise the specialized literature required for future PE teachers.*

Keywords: *physical education; teachers; physical activity; pedagogy; curriculum; thematic analysis.*

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Introduction

In 1890, Luther Halsey Gulick, a young graduate from New York University's medical school, proclaimed the birth of a new profession: the Physical Education (PE) teacher (Gulick, 1899). His assertion reflected the many physical, emotional, and cognitive benefits that physical activity (PA) provides. When (Gulick, 1899) first described the role of the PE domain, he began by clarifying what it was not, stating that PE is neither a field of sports (S) nor a branch of the medical profession.

Today, more than 130 years later, diverse perspectives on PE still exist. For example, the Society of Health and Physical Educators (2020) notes that PE is often confused with Physical Activity (PA), leading some PE teachers to overlook the educational nature of PE lessons, focusing instead on achieving the recommended daily PA levels for students (60 minutes/day).

This approach faces strong opposition. Critics argue that a quality PE curriculum should not only engage students in PA but also provide ample opportunities for them to acquire and understand the knowledge necessary to develop and maintain a healthy lifestyle throughout their lives (Cale & Harris, 2018; Castelli & Valley, 2007; Badau et al., 2021; Payne et al., 2009).

Another sensitive topic is the introduction of sports performance into PE lessons. This sport-based approach, which (Mierzwinski et al., 2019) trace back to Victorian ideals of masculinity, aims to foster values like leadership, teamwork, and sportsmanship (Corbin, 2021). Critics of this approach argue that it promotes violence (Dunning & Sheard, 2005) and, according to (Vertinsky, 1992), was created "by men, for men"—specifically, for boys. Some also feel that the educational nature of PE lessons is undermined by the inclusion of physical performance metrics inherent to this approach (Jackson, 2006; Macdonald, 2011).

In recent years, more countries have shifted away from a sport-based approach, favoring an emphasis on students' physical literacy (Iconomescu et al., 2021a; 2021b; Johannes et al., 2023; Keegan et al., 2019; Sum et al., 2020; Tremblay et al., 2018). This approach shifts the focus from sports performance to developing motivation, confidence, physical competencies, and knowledge (Talaghir et al., 2023) so that students value and take responsibility for engaging in physical activity throughout their lives (International Physical Literacy Association, 2017; Whitehead, 2001, 2020). UNESCO's Quality Physical Education (QPE) document states that "PL is

the foundation of PE; it is not a program but an outcome of any structured PE provision" (UNESCO, 2015).

Starting from this context, the aim of this paper is to identify the ideas that describe the outcome of Romanian PE. Therefore, we will unpack the literature that Romanian PE teachers are required to study in order to qualify for a position in the public education system.

The results of this analysis are particularly interesting because Romania presents an unusual case: unlike in European, American, or Australian countries, the name of the subject here is not simply "Physical Education". In Romania, the subject is called Physical Education and Sport (PE&S).

The necessity of this analysis is to spark a debate among specialists aimed at proposing updates, improvements, and/or changes to the theoretical content that current PE teachers must study.

This study addresses the following two research questions:

1. What is the outcome of the Romanian PE&S discipline according to the literature that future PE&S teachers must learn?
2. What are the tools that Romanian PE&S teachers are taught to use to achieve that outcome?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, this study used a two-step methodological approach:

1. First, we put ourselves in the position of a candidate applying for a PE&S teaching job in Romania and attempted to locate the 21 documents listed as mandatory study materials for public education teaching positions (MECTS, 2010).
2. Then, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2023) to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) related to the research questions.

Identification of mandatory reference papers

In Romania, to qualify for a PE&S teaching position in public education, candidates must pass an initial practical test, followed by a written national exam. Based on their scores on this written exam, teachers are assigned to available positions. For preparation, aspiring teachers have access to a document listing 21 mandatory references (MECTS, 2010).

In this phase, the authors (OBS, ITM, and TLG) placed themselves in the position of a candidate from the city of Galati, applying for a PE&S

teaching job in Romania. Each author independently attempted to obtain the 21 papers listed as required for the written exam.

The method we used to obtain these papers was as follows:

1. First, we searched in the central library of the city of Galati.
2. Then, we searched in the library of the "Dunarea de Jos" University from Galati.
3. Finally, we conducted an online search, willing to purchase any papers that we were unable to obtain through the first two methods.

The thematic analysis

The papers identified in the previous stage were then subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2023) is a qualitative method that provides a step-by-step guide to conducting a rigorous investigation to identify patterns and meaning in a data set. The method described by Braun & Clarke is the most widely used in qualitative literature, having been applied in over 100,000 studies. This method involves a six-step approach, as well as several choices researchers must make before beginning the data analysis.

Before detailing how we applied this method, we find it necessary to define four terms: (1) data corpus; (2) data set; (3) data item; and (4) data extract.

The data corpus "refers to all data collected for a particular research project" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In our research, the data corpus consists of the 21 materials listed as mandatory for the written exam required for a PE&S teaching position in Romania's public education system (MECTS, 2010).

The data set is "the data from the corpus that is being used for a particular analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For our research, the data set includes all instances from the data corpus where reference is made to the topic of our research.

Data item refers to "each individual piece of data collected" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In our study, each of the 21 documents presented to teachers as mandatory for study represents a data item.

Data extract refers to "an individual coded chunk of data, which has been identified within, and extracted from, a data item" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In our research, data extract refers to expressions within each studied document (paragraphs, sentences, groups of words) that relate to our research topic.

Next, we will outline the methodological choices made by the authors to clarify the perspectives that will guide the coding and analysis process.

Decisions

As mentioned earlier, before conducting the six-step thematic analysis, a series of methodological choices must be made. These choices were discussed and explicitly agreed upon by the two researchers before beginning the analysis. Below, we present these decisions:

From the research questions, it is clear that we do not aim to provide an in-depth description of the entire data set; rather, we are interested in a specific aspect that we intend to describe as thoroughly as possible. Consequently, our research is characterized by a theoretical framework in which we adopt an essentialist/realist stance, aiming to capture the real-world perspectives of Romanian PE&S teachers on the outcome of the Romanian PE&S lesson.

Regarding the "level" at which themes were identified (either at an explicit/semantic level or at a latent/interpretative level), we chose an explicit/semantic criterion. The analytical process began with a descriptive phase, identifying and describing patterns (themes), and continued with an interpretative phase, establishing relationships between themes, broader meanings, and implications as referenced in the literature.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted using the six-step method described by (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2023). The six steps and associated actions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Six Steps of Thematic Analysis

The step	Activity description
1. Familiarising with the data:	Reading and re-reading the data, noting possible meanings (codes/themes)
2. Generating initial codes:	Highlight data extracts and coding according to meanings
3. Searching for themes:	Grouping codes into themes
4. Reviewing themes:	Ensuring that the themes are in agreement with the codes and with the entire data set and generating a relationship map between the themes
5. Description of the themes:	A detailed description of how each theme is presented and the relationships it has with the other themes
6. Producing the report:	Writing a scholarly critical report using vivid data extracts that relate to the research questions and specialized literature

After each author (OBS, ITM, and TLG) read the data set twice, keeping the research questions in mind (Step 1), they each began the coding process individually.

Step 2 involved identifying data extracts relevant to the research questions and then coding them (Table 2).

Table 2. Example of Coding a Data Extract

Data extract	Coded for
The competitive aspect of school physical education cannot, however, be excluded. This is illustrated both by the methods used (sports, movement games, contests) and by students' participation in school sports competitions (championships organized at the school, district, county, and national levels; cups, cross-country races) (Dragnea et al., 2002, p. 109).	1)School Physical Education 3)Competition 6)Sports Training

To ensure the trustworthiness characteristic of qualitative research (Elo et al., 2014), as with the first two stages described above, the remaining four stages in the data analysis process (Steps 3 to 6) were carried out independently by each of the three authors. After completing each activity (Table 1), meetings were held to compare the analyses of each researcher and make a final decision.

Results

This chapter presents the results in a descriptive form. Specifically, we will present findings regarding the identification of the mandatory references (Section 3.1.) and also describe the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the thematic analysis (Section 3.2.). The interpretive analysis will follow in Chapter "4. Discussions."

The mandatory reference papers

The document listing the mandatory references (MECTS, 2010) includes 21 papers. Following the methodology described in Section 2.1, we approached this as future candidates for a PE&S teaching position in public education. The result of the attempt to get possession of the documents by using the three methods is presented in table 1.

Table 3. Papers that could be found

No.	Citation	The location where it was identified
1.	Cârstea Gh. (2000) Teoria şi metodica educaţiei fizice şi sportului, Bucureşti, Editura AN-DA	central library University library on-line
2.	Dragnea A. (coord.) (2002) Teoria educaţiei fizice şi sportului, Bucureşti, Editura FEST	central library University library on-line
3.	Dragnea A., Teodorescu S. (2002) Teoria sportului, Bucureşti, Editura FEST	central library University library on-line
4.	Kunst-Ghermanescu I. Et al. (1983). Teoria şi metodica handbalului, Bucureşti , Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică	central library
5.	Motroc I. (1996) Fotbal la copii şi juniori, Bucureşti, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică	central library
6.	The curricula in force for each cycle of education	on-line
7.	Şerbănoiu S. (2004) Metodica educaţiei fizice, Bucureşti, Editura Cartea Universitară	on-line
8.	Sistemul naţional şcolar de evaluare la educaţie fizică şi sport (1999) Bucureşti	on-line

The other 13 papers could not be identified by any of the three methods proposed by us. So, these 8 references constituted the 8 data items that were subjected to the thematic analysis.

This inability to access 62% of the mandatory references should not be regarded merely as a methodological limitation, but as a critical empirical finding in itself. The fact that more than half of the official bibliography cannot be consulted by either candidates or researchers exposes a structural deficiency in the Romanian teacher training system. In this sense, the inaccessibility of these works is not just an obstacle to academic inquiry but also part of the very reality that prospective teachers face. Therefore, the absence of 13 references becomes both a limitation for the present analysis and a finding that highlights the urgent need for transparency and modernization in the preparation of future PE teachers.

The themes

Table 4 presents the 5 main themes and the 10 subthemes that emerged from the thematic analysis conducted on our data set.

Table 4 – Themes and Subthemes Identified from the Thematic Analysis

No.	Main themes	Secondary themes
1.	The Physical Education and Sports System	➢ School and University Physical Education and Sports
2.	The bilateral educational process	➢ Competition ➢ Sports for All ➢ Sports Training ➢ Motor Performance Standards
3.	Physical Education and Sports activities	➢ Motricity ➢ Systematic Exercise Practice
4.	The aims of Physical Education and Sports	➢ Motor Behavior/Movement Behavior ➢ Independent Physical Education ➢ Talent Identification
5.	Performance Sports	

The physical education and sports system

According to the research questions of this study, our paper focuses on the outcomes of the Romanian PE&S discipline. However, from the thematic analysis carried out, it became evident that School Physical Education is only a component of a broader theme – namely, the Physical Education and Sports System.

By "system", Dragnea et al. (2006) understand "a grouping of elements (institutions, organizations, administrative structures, etc.) of different natures, within specific space-time coordinates" (p.90). Therefore, the Physical Education and Sports System is presented as one of the social systems, alongside economic, defense and security, culture, education, and science systems. Regarding this Physical Education and Sports System, it is interesting to note (Cârstea, 2000) opinion, which states that

> "there can't be separate 'physical education systems' and 'sports systems.' There have never been, and will never be, anything other than 'physical education and sports systems'" (p.34).

The Romanian Physical Education and Sports System, also called the "system for practicing physical exercises," consists of 6 elements: (1) School and University Physical Education and Sports; (2) Military Physical Education; (3) Professional Physical Education; (4) Physical Education and Sports practiced for preventive or therapeutic purposes; (5) Sports for All; (6) Performance Sports.

School and University Physical Education and Sports is "a compulsory subject, with a differentiated number of hours" (Dragnea et al., 2006) in the curriculum. The main characteristic of this subject is its formative nature, focusing on physical development and the development of personality traits. As for the terminology, we will see that the term "School

and University Physical Education and Sports" is used interchangeably with the term "School Physical Education."

Returning to our research questions, an interesting first aspect emerges when it is stated that "the competitive nature of school physical education cannot be excluded" (Dragnea et al., 2006). It is also observed that within this subject, which takes place in educational institutions, there is also extracurricular sports activity that the teacher is expected to carry out in "lessons for preparing competition teams" (Cârstea, 2000).

Regarding the content of these "competition team preparation lessons", (Dragnea et al., 2006) state that they are "similar to sports training" (p.111). In other words, the PE&S teacher also becomes a coach. Hence, it is mentioned that "for the physical education teacher, it is important to specialize in a discipline during their university studies, usually in a sport branch that gives them the right to be a coach with higher education" (p.99). However, these books were written before the implementation of the Bologna system in Romania, and currently, a teacher with a bachelor's degree no longer automatically has the right to become a coach in a particular sport.

The bilateral instructional-educational process

We saw that School Physical Education is presented to future teachers as having a purely formative character. This formative process takes place in two ways: "(1) as a bilateral instructional-educational process, and (2) as an independent activity" (Cârstea, 2000).

These two modalities must be carried out in such a way that the first generates the second. That is, the instructional-educational process must lead to independent activity – or, as Şerbanoiu (2004) says, School and University Physical Education represents a preparatory form for "life-long physical education, which should mean a lifestyle, a way of thinking and acting for one's own benefit, but also for social interest" (p.18).

From this theme of the Instructional-Educational Process, four other subthemes emerged, which are nothing more than the tools through which Romanian PE&S teachers are taught to implement this process.

Competition – is the first, and the main tool that Romanian PE&S teachers are taught to use. The term competition is explained to future teachers as being derived from the word "contest" or "fight," "which originates from the latin 'campus', meaning 'battlefield'" (Şerbanoiu, 2004). It starts from the idea that "every individual has a greater or lesser desire to compete" (Dragnea & Teodorescu, 2002) and thus competition, which is "the essence of sport" (Singer & Dick, 1980 cited by Dragnea et al., 2006), represents the way in which aggressive instincts are transformed into a desire

for fair competition. According to this reasoning, competition transforms from a "battlefield" into "a field for promoting aspirations towards performance, for the development of positive character traits and behaviors that conform to current norms" (Dragnea & Teodorescu, 2002).

Additionally, Cârstea (2000) describes the period of writing his book as follows: "we are in an abusively competitive period" (p.16).

Sports for All is the second tool we identified as a sub-theme within the instructional-educational process of Romanian School Physical Education. Sports for All (formerly mass sports) is presented as one of the subsystems of sport, which also includes: performance sports (or "sports for children and youth"), high-performance sports, and sport for people with disabilities. One aspect that differentiates these components is related to the level of competition. Thus, Sports for All is considered to be at the lower end of the spectrum, where "performance, as the result of sports confrontation with an opponent, and achieving victory, become secondary factors" (Dragnea et al., 2006).

Sports Training is the third sub-theme of the instructional-educational process in School Physical Education. Sports training aims at physical and psychological performance "for achieving high results in one of the competitive forms of physical exercise" (Cârstea, 2000). It refers to the necessity of "competitive school sports", which involves sports activities conducted within school and university sports clubs and takes the form of sports training.

Motor Performance Standards also emerge as a tool used by Romanian PE&S teachers to conduct the instructional-educational process. The most relevant indicator of this is the document "The National School System for Physical Education and Sports Evaluation" (Ministerul Educatiei Nationale, 1999), which is part of the mandatory study documents for written exams. This document presents a series of physical tests along with grading criteria, which teachers can use for evaluation. The existence of these motor performance standards as a tool in the instructional-educational process is a logical consequence of the fact that, in School Physical Education, "the improvement of motor capacity is a priority concern and falls under the category of first-level objectives" (Cârstea, 2000, p.18).

Physical education and sports activity

The Physical Education and Sports activity is distinguished as a theme that describes the concrete activity within the Physical Education and Sports lesson.

After examining the two forms of implementation (i.e., as an instructional-educational process and as an independent activity), physical

education is presented as "a component of general education, expressed through a type of motor activity (alongside sports training, competition, leisure activities, bodily expression activities, and rehabilitation activities)" (Dragnea et al., 2006). Thus, the vision behind this suggests that the PE&S lesson is one that focuses solely on education through motor activity. Even when describing the theoretical knowledge component — as part of the teaching process for this subject — the indication is that this knowledge should be taught "concurrently with the process of practicing physical exercises" (Cârstea, 2000).

From this theme of Physical Education and Sports Activity, two additional subthemes emerge: (1) motricity and (2) systematic practice of physical exercises.

Motricity, also known as human movement, "refers to the totality of movements performed by humans […] to maintain their relationships with the natural or social environment in which they exist, including through practicing sports" (Cârstea, 2000). In other words, motricity is the general aspect that includes all human acts, actions, and activities. Linked to this concept is the notion of "motor capacity," which refers to a criterion by which people differ in terms of the level at which their motor function manifests.

Systematic practice of physical exercises is a specific aspect of human motricity. For differentiation purposes, evaluation is done based on the intention or goal pursued. As Cârstea (2000) notes, "physical exercise is practiced with the goal of achieving the objectives of physical education and sport, while other human motor acts—such as those in agriculture, trade, industry, etc.—aim at different objectives" (p.41). For clarification, the example of the action of running is discussed:

> Running "can become an exercise when precise rules for practice, rational execution methods, a certain effort dosage, etc., are assigned" (Dragnea et al., 2006).

The clarification of these concepts indicates that physical education activities focus on the systematic practice of physical exercises with the goal of improving human motor capacity. In the authors' view, the concrete forms of physical exercise expression "are expressed through a multitude of branches or sports events such as athletics, gymnastics, sports games, swimming, skiing, dance, wrestling, or other modalities, etc." (Cârstea, 2000).

The aims of physical education and sport

The aims of the PE&S lesson indicate the ultimate direction that the subject aims to lead the student towards. In our dataset, this could be synonymous with terms such as "ideal", "ultimate objectives", or the "essence of Physical Education and Sport". In this theme, we have identified three subthemes that represent three directions: (1) independent physical

education (self-education); (2) motor behavior; (3) identifying talents.

Independent Physical Education or **Self-Education** is the second type of process through which the Physical Education activity is carried out—the first being the instructional-educational process. This Independent Physical Education occurs only during the subjects' free time, without the presence of a teacher or any other activity leader. It is also necessary to comply with the requirements that delimit the systematic practice of physical exercises. For example, Cârstea (2000) states that "we cannot consider any `leisure movement` performed through muscle contractions and without any scientific rules as `independent physical education activity`" (p.11).

Independent Physical Education is thus presented as "the most important objective of physical education and sports" (Cârstea, 2000)—hence, future specialists are trained to design their instructional-educational process in order to develop the capacity and habit of systematically and independently practicing physical exercises.

Motor Behavior is the second direction regarding the aims of PE&S. This is what is achieved as a result of the systematic practice of physical exercise—it is "the possibility of constructing, assembling, based on learned movements" (Dragnea et al., 2006). From this perspective, motor behavior, which according to Dragnea et al. (2006) is expressed through motor behavior, is an aim pursued both by School Physical Education and by Performance Sports.

On one hand, School Physical Education aims to form motor behavior to build a harmonious personality—this is done through improving motor capacity and through educational norms. On the other hand, sport aims for an athletic motor behavior necessary to achieve sporting performance—this is achieved through improving performance capacity (Şerbanoiu, 2004).

Talent Identification for Performance Sports is the third identified aim. Even though, in terms of prevalence, this idea is rarely stated explicitly, it is implicitly present due to the significant influence that performance sport has on School Physical Education in Romania. Explicitly, Cârstea (2000) provides the following instructions for future PE&S teachers: "The affirmation of talents must be prioritized, especially in the competitive-sportive activities, both at the national and international levels" (p.27) or "emphasis should be placed on the physical education and sport of the young generation, especially the school-aged one, as it can be a prerequisite for higher-quality sports performance" (p.27).

Performance sport

Sport, viewed as a whole, is presented to future teachers as a social

phenomenon, with competition as its defining element—intended to satisfy the presumed innate desire for competition in every person. It is also stated that within sports, different levels of competition expression are found.

If Sport for All is presented at the lower limit in terms of the level of competition manifestation, Performance Sport is the domain where the most intense form of manifestation is assumed to occur.

Performance sport is said to be the field in which individuals showcase their physical and psychological abilities in competitions with the goal of achieving records, winning titles and medals, or securing places in official rankings. The connection of this theme with our study is made by the proposal of terms such as "school performance sport", as well as the fact that it is stated that the teacher must prioritize the affirmation of talents in competitive-sportive activities, thus school physical education becoming a "prerequisite for superior-quality sports activity at the performance level" (Cârstea, 2000).

Discussions

The mandatory reference papers

We remind that in the official document (Ministerul Educatiei Cercetarii Tineretului si Sportului/MECTS, 2010), 21 mandatory reference papers are listed for study for the written exam, and based on our search methodology, we were only able to obtain 8 of them. The other 13 papers could not be found in the two libraries checked, and there is no online store selling them. This situation, in which 62% of references cannot be found, presents an extremely problematic situation.

Another notable aspect is the publication year of the 8 materials that a future PE teacher must study. It is observed that all 8 materials were published more than 20 years ago. Moreover, one of the references was published over 40 years ago.

Historians who have analyzed the changes that Physical Education lesson have undergone over time show us that this subject has been, and continues to be, in constant change. This allows us to affirm that the current situation, in which no title has been published in the last 20 years, presents the literature of PE&S lessons in Romania as unlikely to meet contemporary social demands.

One could argue that the missing 62% of the mandatory references might, in principle, contain more contemporary perspectives that could nuance the present findings. While we acknowledge this possibility, we consider it highly improbable for two reasons. First, all the available texts were published

more than two decades ago, which suggests that the missing references, produced in the same period, are unlikely to reflect more recent conceptual developments such as physical literacy. Second, their very inaccessibility to both researchers and candidates makes them practically irrelevant for teacher preparation. Consequently, although the absence of these materials represents a limitation, it simultaneously reveals a systemic issue of transparency and availability within the Romanian educational framework.

Focusing on the publication years of the documents, we observe the following statement in the official document presenting the mandatory bibliography for obtaining a PE&S teaching position in Romania: "The PE&S reference list for the teacher placement exam in pre-university education is developed in accordance with the current school curriculum" (MECTS, 2010). However, we see that the publication year of this document is 2010, while the curriculum for elementary education was published in 2013 and 2014; the middle school curriculum in 2017, and the high school curriculum in 2009. This situation shows that, at the time the document was published, only the high school curriculum could have existed.

All of this indicates an urgent need for the official document presenting the bibliography for the written exam to be revised.

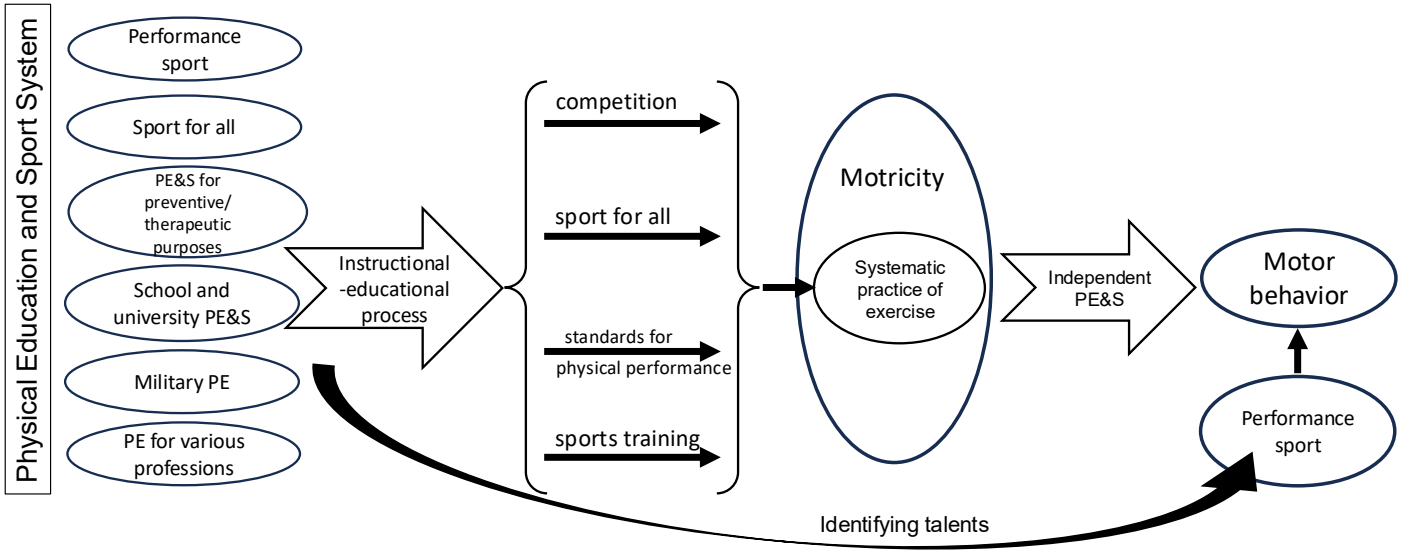
Interpretation of the identified themes

After the descriptive phase, in which the themes related to our research questions were identified and described, in this phase, we will interpret these themes. Figure 1 is a representation of the relationships between the themes and subthemes of the analysis we conducted.

It can be observed that the ultimate goal of the PE&S lesson in Romania is to develop the habit of independent physical exercise practice. The way in which it aims to achieve this is through an educational process that uses competition, sport for all, physical performance standards, and even sports training as tools.

One key aspect that stands out is that the objective in Romania is to form individuals who systematically practice physical exercise, which in turn is manifested through the practice of various sports disciplines. This differs from UNESCO (2015) suggestions, which advocate the concept of Physical Literacy (PL)—a concept that assumes individuals take responsibility for and engage in physical activities throughout their lives. It is evident that countries that are closer to implementing this concept are focused on ideas such as "active schools" and "active lifestyles".

Figure 1. Representation of the relationships between themes and sub-themes identified in the analysis



Source: authors' own elaboration (based on the thematic analysis results)

Next, attention is drawn to how the instructional-educational process is designed in Romania. This process reveals a sport-based approach, which Kirk & Gorely (2000) noted was introduced after World War II and gained the trust of specialists and governments because it uses "logic", which is known to have an intuitive appeal for humans. The sport-based approach centers on an image of a pyramid, with Physical Education (PE) at the base, and elite sports performance at the top. The logic that gained the support of national decision-makers after World War II suggests that introducing sports performance in PE lessons will provide a broader base for the pyramid, leading to more elite athletes and consequently more Olympic medals.

However, this logic, aside from its shortcomings, has been contradicted by the objective results. The major shortcoming of the pyramid scheme is that it implicitly suggests that as one moves up the levels of the pyramid, fewer people participate in sports activities. Yet, the stated objective of PE is to involve as many individuals as possible in physical activities (or all, if possible). Additionally, research has shown that this sport-based approach is frequently in tension with, and can undermine, the educational and inclusive character of PE. This interpretation is supported by studies highlighting how sport-centered curricula tend to prioritize competition and talent identification at the expense of inclusion and broad participation (Mierzwinski et al., 2019; Macdonald, 2011; Kirk & Gorely, 2000).

The fact that Romania adopts a sport-based approach is also confirmed in other works (Iconomescu et al., 2021; Talaghir et al., 2023b; Talaghir et al., 2021a; 2021b).

Conclusion & future implications

This paper has highlighted a highly problematic situation regarding the written exam for PE&S teacher positions in public schools in Romania. Specifically, 13 out of the 21 mandatory references cannot be found.

Furthermore, this paper has identified the ideas underpinning the teaching of PE&S in Romania. In the current vision, the instructional-educational process in school PE&S involves initiating students into sports disciplines, assessing motor performance, and having only an exclusive group of students—the ones who reach the highest level of sports performance—participate in sports competitions. In this way, it is assumed that individuals will be motivated to engage in systematic physical exercise throughout their lives.

In this way, it is assumed that individuals will be motivated to engage in systematic physical exercise throughout their lives. While we cannot completely rule out the possibility that the missing references might contain more contemporary perspectives, two aspects make this scenario unlikely: their publication period (over two decades ago) and their current inaccessibility. These factors strongly suggest that the mandatory bibliography, as it stands, requires urgent revision—not only to ensure transparency and accessibility, but also to align teacher preparation with contemporary international perspectives such as physical literacy.

The contribution of this paper lies in the fact that, using a rigorous scientific methodology, it unpacks the theory and methodology of PE&S and challenges specialists to reflect and debate on the following issues: (1) For many years in Romania (and in many other countries), have we been overlooking the obvious information and insisting on telling future PE teachers that individuals will practice physical exercise independently if we force them to meet physical performance standards. (2) Is the way we approach this discipline an exclusive one—by addressing only students with talent or vocation? (3) Could this approach be an impediment both in achieving sports performance and in developing an active lifestyle for the entire population?

At the same time, it is important to recognize that this study has examined only the intended curriculum—the mandatory bibliography—without addressing how it is actually implemented or received in practice. Future research should therefore explore the perspectives of teacher candidates and current teachers, to better understand how these texts influence teaching practices, classroom experiences, and the professional identity of PE teachers. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive picture of the curriculum, bridging the gap between prescribed content and lived educational reality.

The answers to these questions should primarily take into account studies that show Romania's situation in implementing UNESCO (2015) guidelines regarding the level of PL implementation in PE curricula, but also in research, practice, and policy (Johannes et al., 2023; Carl et al., 2025).

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