







A daily session of Physical Education: approach, organisation, and legislative viability through teacher perceptions

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Cite this article

Fraile, J., López-Sagrario, J., Zamorano, D., Ruiz-Bravo, P., Faná del Valle Villar, A. & López-Pastor, V. M. (2024). A daily session of Physical Education: approach, organisation, and legislative viability through teacher perceptions. *Apunts Educación Física y Deportes*, 155, 29-37. [https://doi.org/10.5672/apunts.2014-0983.es.\(2024/1\).155.04](https://doi.org/10.5672/apunts.2014-0983.es.(2024/1).155.04)

Abstract

Physical Education (PE) is a subject of great pedagogical and educational value. However, the administration can be constrained by utilitarianism against physical inactivity and overweight. This might have been the main reason for the implementation by LOMLOE of three PE sessions per week. However, there are schools which attach great importance to this subject, with a large vision and a long tradition of teaching PE on a daily basis. This qualitative study explored the approach and legislative fit of PE in a private school institution in the Region of Madrid, from infant to high school, with a daily PE session in a case study through the perceptions and experiences of PE teachers and teachers of other materials. In this school they extended the duration of breaktimes and used them for daily PE teaching, leaving aside the usual concept of breaktime. The teachers interviewed agreed that PE is fundamental for students' all-round development: healthy habits, academic performance, well-being, satisfaction with PE, etc. However, they also pointed to the increased risk of injury and organisational, economic, and logistical challenges. It was nonetheless argued that the legislative fit of daily PE was highly feasible. Considering the current situation, schools and PE teachers have the opportunity to demonstrate the importance and relevance of PE beyond its usefulness against obesity and sedentary lifestyles.

Keywords: challenges, integral development, legislation, obesity, pedagogical value, sedentary lifestyle.

Editor:

© Generalitat de Catalunya
 Departament de la Presidència
 Institut Nacional d'Educació
 Física de Catalunya (INEFC)

ISSN: 2014-0983

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Section:

Physical Education

Original language:

Spanish

Received:

June 15, 2023

Accepted:

September 29, 2023

Published:

January 1, 2024

Front cover:

Two alpinists climbing a snowy mountain in the Arctic under the northern lights.
 Adobestock @Urdialex

Introduction

In recent years, levels of inactivity, obesity, and excess weight at school age have increased, and this has been accompanied by Spain's rise in the European rankings (Pérez-Farinós et al., 2013). In order to curb the situation, and still under the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE), some autonomous communities proposed an increase of Physical Education (PE) hours in secondary education (e.g. Madrid). Currently, under the umbrella of the Organic Law amending the Organic Law of Education (LOMLOE), three sessions of PE are taught per week in the first three years of secondary education and two sessions in the fourth year and first year of baccalaureate.

Many studies show the contribution of PE to improving well-being, both physical (Committee of Experts on Physical Education of the COLEF Council, 2017; National Sports Council 2010) and mental and social (European Parliament, 2007). It is therefore clear, as Pérez-Pueyo et al. (2021) point out, that by extending PE hours, health problems could be solved and savings in public spending could be achieved. This fact may lead one to think that the administration's proposal to increase the number of hours of PE is utilitarian and not related to the pedagogical and formative value of PE (Pérez-Pueyo et al., 2021). However, even if the increase in hours is an administrative strategy, it does not negate the pedagogical value of PE and the two can be complementary. This simply reflects that, in order to achieve goals such as lowering the European obesity rankings or reducing health spending, the administration uses (physical) education as a tool. Thereby, two perspectives emerge:

The pedagogical, which reflects on teaching actions and their formative value with questions such as:

- How do the arguments justifying the increase in PE hours translate into teacher practice?
- What are the aims that PE would pursue after such an increase in hours?

The administrative, which questions:

- What are the difficulties that would arise from increasing the number of hours for PE?
- How would it affect other topics and their teachers?

In order to answer these questions, qualitative case study research was carried out in a school which from its beginnings in the 1940s gave great importance to PE, with more than one PE session per day for all its students. In this context, the reasons for this high number of PE hours, the educational aims pursued and, furthermore, how this school has achieved administrative viability under the different educational laws will be explored.

Arguments for increasing the number of hours of Physical Education and its pedagogical aims

As previously mentioned, the main driver for governments to increase PE hours is its influence on improving physical well-being and reducing sedentary lifestyles and obesity (e.g. Oliveira et al., 2022). Scientific evidence supports the link between PE and improved health. For example, in the Integral Plan for Physical Activity and Sport (Plan A+D), the National Sports Council (2010) highlighted the importance of PE in establishing healthy habits and overcoming sedentary lifestyles and childhood obesity in Spain. Similarly, in the *Proyecto para una educación física de calidad en España* (2017), the PE Committee of the Collegiate Organisation of Physical and Sports Education (COLEF Council) also concludes that PE provides a comprehensive education that improves the physical, mental, and social well-being of students, and the academic and cognitive performance of adolescents. There is arguably sufficient scientific evidence (e.g. McIntyre et al., 2015; Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2015) that this intervention is an adequate strategy to achieve its intended purpose. However, a number of issues arise in parallel to the increase in the number of hours of PE per week: (1) the aim of improving the status of the subject, (2) health turned into physical performance and measurement, and (3) the relationship between PE and academic performance.

Improving the status of the subject

To understand this factor, it is necessary to start from a traditional view that attributes fictitious features to the subjects. This traditional view of topics implies considering subjects such as Language, Mathematics, Biology, etc. as having a higher status than a subject such as Physical Education. In an attempt to increase the academic status of PE, grading tools such as fitness tests were incorporated, with the questionable argument that they endow the subject with greater scientific rigour (López-Pastor, 2006). However, as López-Pastor et al. (2013) show, these tests lack pedagogical value, are far removed from the guidelines of formative assessment, and have serious shortcomings precisely in terms of scientific rigour. In line with this, authors such as Lloyd et al. (2010) argue that while physical fitness is an important component of PE, it should not be the sole focus of assessment. They propose a more holistic approach, which places value on PE in the development of key motor skills, attitudes, physical activity behaviours and habits, positive body image, and self-esteem. This would reinforce the status of PE and links to the following issues.

Health turned into physical performance and measurement

The relationship between health promotion and PE is often taken for granted (Green, 2004). This excuse has been used to justify the application of physical fitness tests as a common teacher strategy, but it has also been criticised for its low validity and reliability, as well as for its illogical application in educational situations as a grading system for the subject (López-Pastor, 1999, 2000). This highlights two aspects. First, whether or not PE linked to physical fitness tests promotes healthy lifestyle habits, which does not seem to be close because it even breaks with basic training principles (López-Pastor et al., 2013). Second, students have repeatedly expressed disinterest and lack of motivation for these tests (e.g., Beltrán-Carrillo & Devís-Devís, 2019). Despite this, it is possible to combine a learning-based approach with a health-based approach (e.g. Devis Devís & Peiró Valert, 1992). One example is the proposal by Pérez-Pueyo et al. (2021), where they use high-intensity interval training. They propose the use of pedagogical models (Fernández et al., 2018) combined with formative assessment processes (López-Pastor & Pérez-Pueyo, 2017).

Improving academic performance and physical activity

This is another large piece of scientific evidence that can justify the increase of hours in PE. Numerous reviews and meta-analyses support that physical activity, and in particular school PE, improves not only academic performance—especially in mathematics and reading—but also behaviour (e.g. Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2017). This may convince even the most reluctant teachers who are interested in students' academic performance (Pérez-Pueyo et al., 2021). However, this argument diverts attention from the inherent aims of PE, in a similar way to what happened with the physical fitness tests, as if this subject was not capable in itself of justifying its pedagogical value or of justifying its presence as a subject.

The administrative dimension: the increase in hours and its feasibility under the current legislation

The administrative dimension is then addressed in order to explore the real feasibility of extending hours. The data for the present study were collected under the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE), although the Organic Law amending the Organic Law of Education (LOMLOE) follows the same line in terms of the procedure for a daily PE session.

With the LOMCE, prior to the 2022-23 academic year, article 3 of Royal Decree 1105/2014, of 26 December (BOE),

on the distribution of competencies, establishes that each educational administration may determine the timetable to be given to each specific subject and subject of free autonomous configuration. This opened up the possibility to deliver more than two PE sessions throughout the country. In the case of the Region of Madrid, where the school at the centre of this research is located, it is stipulated in the Official Bulletin of the Region of Madrid (BOCM). Thus, in article 6 of Decree 48/2015, of 14 May (BOCM), PE is included in the block of specific subjects, setting a minimum of two hours per week. However, in paragraph 4 of the same article, it is stated that it is possible to increase this number of teaching hours because each school is free to increase the timetable of some specific subjects or free choice subjects. In this section it is indicated that the subject “Sport” could be offered with two sessions per week. That is to say, without making a request to the Regional Ministry, under LOMCE a school could have two sessions of PE plus the option of offering two more sessions of Sport as an optional subject. In addition, Article 22 of Decree 48/2015, on the autonomy of schools, establishes that each school may decide to increase the timetable of subjects, provided that the teaching hours corresponding to other subjects are not reduced. The school should prepare a proposal to be studied by the competent Regional Ministry and, with this option, a daily PE session could be incorporated into the timetable.

In the 2022-23 academic year, two education laws coexist: LOMCE and LOMLOE. The LOMLOE, in Royal Decree 217/2022 of 29 March (BOE), establishes that at least three sessions of PE per week will be taught in the first three years of secondary education and two sessions in the fourth year and first year of baccalaureate. A weekly session of a core subject is reduced, in line with the main proposal of the Committee of Experts in PE of the COLEF Council (2018), published in the handbook entitled *Proyecto para una Educación Física de calidad en España: aumento de horas de Educación Física* (Project for a quality Physical Education in Spain: increase in hours of Physical Education). As with the previous legislation, the Region of Madrid provides autonomy to schools to increase the timetable of subjects without reducing the teaching hours of other topics, in Article 16 of Decree 65/2022 of 20 July (BOCM). Hence, there is still the possibility of a daily PE session.

Up to this point, the benefits of increased hours on health, mental state, and academic performance have been outlined. In addition, specific proposals or interventions related to the increase of PE hours (COLEF Council, 2018; Heras et al., 2017; Pérez-Pueyo et al., 2021) and administrative placement. However, due to the small number of schools with more than two teaching hours per week, no further studies and none have been identified regarding teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Objective

Therefore, the aim of this research was to analyse the implementation of a daily PE session in a school from a legislative perspective, as well as to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers of both PE and other topics with regard to this initiative.

Method

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted based on an interpretive framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A qualitative case study methodology was used to examine the phenomenon in depth and within its real context (Yin, 2009). This approach made it possible to explore the implementation and fit of daily PE, in accordance with current legislation, through the input and perceptions of teachers. The study followed the American Psychological Association (APA) standards for qualitative research by Levitt et al. (2018).

Context and school

The research was carried out in a private (not subsidised) secular school in the Region of Madrid, located in a high income per capita area. Of line five or six, depending on the course, with around 2,000 students. This school was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, because it is one of the few schools in which all students, from nursery to baccalaureate, have at least one daily PE session. In secondary education, they have a daily PE session, adopted as breaktime (see appendix 1). Secondly, because, unlike other schools where under the LOMCE there was an optional subject taught to interested students, all students have a daily PE session, without distinction or optional subjects. It is a school founded under the philosophy of the Free Institution of Education (Institución Libre de Enseñanza, ILE), with a tradition of PE that goes back decades, which allows us to really see the culture of the school and the identity of PE in students and teachers. According to its pedagogical model, the ILE included PE as a fundamental and integral element of education, which was totally groundbreaking for its time—and it seems that it still is (Felipe, 2014).

Participants

Twelve secondary school teachers of PE, English, Mathematics, Language, and Social Studies took part in the project. One participant was a secondary school head teacher. The sample consisted of 9 women and 3 men with a mean age of 36.9 years (min. 27, max. 51, $SD = 9.4$), 11.25 years of average teaching experience (min. 3, max. 23, $SD = 7.4$) and, of those, 9.75 years on average (min. 1, max. 23, $SD = 9.9$) in the school used in this research. A quota

sampling strategy was used to select participants (Coolican, 2014). That is to say, the opinions of teachers of different subjects and not only of PE were explored, with the aim of ascertaining their perception of how this number of hours of PE per week fits into the timetable and the consequent harm to teaching hours in other subjects in favour of PE. All secondary school teachers were contacted and 12 responses were obtained, which were considered appropriate due the variability of viewpoints provided, the quality of these, and the type of qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Research team

Six researchers participated in this study. Four of them had training and experience in qualitative designs and five had a background in physical education. None of them had any previous relationship with the participants.

Data collection

The second author facilitated the contact with the school when he started his internship as a physical education teacher there. Following a meeting with the secondary school head teacher, he was granted permission to proceed with the study. Given the limited availability of teachers, it was jointly decided that the best resource to meet the objective would be a qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions, in order to obtain the greatest number of responses from teachers who freely agreed to participate, and that they could fill it in at times of their choice and convenience.

All participants completed an informed consent form, based on the principles set out in the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2013), in which they were informed of the purpose of data collection, their confidentiality in the processing, and the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time.

An *ad hoc* resource of 12 open-ended questions, created by the first and second authors, was used. A rigorous process was followed to ensure its validity and relevance to the research objectives, through a number of different processes (e.g. Creswell & Creswell, 2017): content development and validity from previous studies, review by two experts, pilot testing with two teachers not involved in this study, iteration with first responses, and continuous reflexivity by the research team. The resource collected personal data and included five sections of questions in relation to the increase in the number of hours of PE: the aim of the increase, the benefits and disadvantages of the increase, the perceived opinion of the students, how it fits into the school timetable, and the historical evolution of its implementation. The qualitative questionnaire was conducted via Google Forms and sent by email.

The second author contacted all secondary school teachers in person, individually requesting their participation and email address to send the link to the questionnaire.

Category coding and data analysis

In line with the open-ended nature of qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), an inductive thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes and the data was analysed in three blocks of four participant responses. Microsoft Excel was used, as this tool allows for an efficient and systematic organisation of responses of the nature of this study, facilitating the identification of recurring themes and emerging patterns.

Initially, and separately, the first, second, and third authors read all the responses to get a general idea. Next, they carried out mixed coding using both theoretical codes (based on the literature in the field) and “live” codes (codes emerging from participants’ responses). After analysis of the data from the first four participants, the coding done by each author was pooled and refined. Non-relevant codes were eliminated and others were merged or split according to their similarity or differentiation in order to improve the accuracy of the analysis. The first author then continued with the codification. Fourthly, a conceptual analysis was carried out based on a matrix with the main results and attributes (Bazeley, 2013), triangulating codes, and analysis in group reflections among four authors.

Results

Vision of Physical Education

All teachers stated that PE is of great importance in this school and agreed that there should be at least one session per day, and ideally between one and a half to two hours per day. Most teachers, including those who did not teach PE, made it clear that the main aim of placing so much importance on PE was the holistic development of pupils. Further elaborating on this idea, participant 12 (P12) links the school’s pedagogical vision with its origins in the ILE. For this teacher, the ILE recovered “the Classical Greek idea of the human being as an indivisible whole”, and this is what the school has done. This boils down, in other words, by P5, to the well-known Roman proverb *mens sana in corpore sano*. The teachers insisted that the integral development of pupils includes not only the physical component but also the social, emotional, affective, and mental aspects. Thus, teacher P1 stated that “it creates a bond between pupils and they feel much more identified with their school”. With regard to integral development within PE, teacher P7 stated: “It is ultimately about developing people who

will maintain these values and habits throughout their adult life”. Beyond a physical or performance approach, the subject of PE was, according to the teachers, taught with a wide variety of content that provides students with a wide range of experiences along the common thread of an integrative PE.

High teaching load in physical education: benefits and drawbacks

Several teachers pointed out that there were virtually no obese pupils, associating this with the seven hours of PE lessons per week in primary school and five hours per week in secondary school. Beyond physical activity, they linked it to the development of healthy habits and to the emotional-affective dimension and self-esteem to which it also leads. In support of this thesis, P12 alluded to an anecdote: “A group of French exchange teachers came to the school and I was struck by something one of them said: ‘the children in this school seem happy, they are always laughing’. Is this the relationship between exercise and endorphins, or a coincidence?” Similarly, P6 commented that, in his previous experience, students in other schools “look less happy”.

Teachers also alluded to the relationship between physical activity and increased academic performance as a benefit. Thus, P7 responded: “Recent studies in the field of neuroeducation seem to support these decisions, as they indicate that a high level of physical activity in children greatly facilitates the acquisition of other learning.”

In addition, it is worth noting the perspective of some of the teachers who had worked in other schools with fewer hours of PE per week. These teachers explained that they perceived positive differences compared to these schools. For example, “lower obesity rate, lower disciplinary incidences, more physical development” (P7) or “physical, social, behavioural, metabolic, academic, medical differences... I would never finish” (P12). Finally, it is interesting to note that all the teachers surveyed perceived that students were delighted with the high number of hours of PE, adding that it was the favourite subject of a large portion.

As the only negative aspect, teachers agreed that the biggest drawback was the increase in injuries: “There is more risk of small injuries to pupils, crutches are common in our school” (P7).

Organisation of PE in schools and how it fits in with legislation

The strategy followed in order to provide a weekly PE session, while respecting legislation, has been to reduce break and lunch time. Breaktimes, as they are usually conceived, disappear in order to make room for PE sessions. This is how P2 and P3 respectively described this strategy: “We cut back

on other non-compulsory subjects and breaktime”; “we have less break and that’s how we compensate it”. There were two teachers who referred directly to legislation to support their answer: “The law stipulates a minimum number of hours per subject, not a maximum” (P12).

The vast majority of teachers acknowledged that coping with the high number of hours of PE involved difficulties. P7 encompassed the views of other teachers as well, setting out the range of factors involved:

Economic (the more hours, the more teachers hired), material (adequate spaces and materials), logistical (organisation of timetables and spaces), pedagogical (increasing PE means taking time away from other subjects) and, perhaps, in some contexts, social (communities of parents who do not accept increasing PE at the expense of other more “cognitive” areas).

Among all teachers, the main concern was the reduction of time for other topics by increasing the number of hours of PE. In addition, the composition of timetables and space management are common problems to be resolved. However, despite these challenges and concerns, P12 stated that “fitting in the timetable is easy if everything revolves around PE and meal times and not around the other topics”.

Discussion

This research aimed to explore how the enforcement of at least one hour of PE lessons per day has been implemented and maintained through the perceptions of teachers of PE and other materials. Using a qualitative case study design, the results showed a positive assessment by teachers, a holistic approach to PE, the organisational and logistical fit in the timetable and in accordance with legislation, and the benefits and difficulties derived.

Vision of Physical Education and its high teaching load

The results show that the approach to PE in this case study school, with at least one session per day, is linked to the holistic development of students, beyond just skills and physical fitness. This view is in line with the report of the Committee of Experts on Physical Education of the General Council of Physical Education and Sport (COLEF) (2018). From the perspective of physical well-being, PE pursues the acquisition and maintenance of healthy habits (Pérez-Pueyo et al., 2021). This function seems necessary in view of the alarming sedentary lifestyle of 73% of the Spanish child population (National Sports Council, 2011) and estimating that up to 80% of schoolchildren only engage in physical activity at school (European Commission, European

Executive Agency for Education and Culture, Eurydice, 2013). However, as previously argued, tackling obesity should not be the sole purpose of PE (González-Calvo et al., 2022).

From a social perspective, as the participating teachers consider, it can improve coexistence in the school (Gil-Espinosa et al., 2016). In line with this, active breaks could also increase students’ social and cognitive interaction, as well as their motor participation (Jiménez-Parra et al., 2022). In addition, some teachers considered the opportunities it provides for their adult life (e.g. for leisure) and for the creation of a physical-sport culture to be important (López-Pastor et al., 2016). Finally, from a psychological perspective, PE contributes to better cognitive ability and academic performance (e.g., Ardoy et al., 2014).

Teachers also stated that students are very satisfied with the high number of hours of PE and that it is one of their favourite subjects. Most likely caused by the holistic approach of this school away from performance-linked PE that would generate disinterest and demotivation (e.g., Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2021).

Organisation of PE in schools and how it fits in with legislation

In general, teachers reported that it is not easy to logistically organise such a high number of PE sessions. The solution is based on the use of the time usually allocated to breaks, extending their duration, in order to convert them into PE sessions. That is to say, it means the disappearance of breaktime as it is usually conceived, partly leaving aside situations that are generated autonomously by the pupils in these freer moments and which are also important (Chaves-Álvarez, 2013).

The teachers surveyed, who are used to making PE a central part of their pupils’ daily lives, agree that the minimum number of hours per day allocated to this subject should be one. It must be considered that this school has a decades-long tradition of following this model and, although there may be some debate and opinions that partially deviate from this line, everyone assumes that it is a sign of identity and that it will be maintained.

As P12 pointed out, “the law sets a minimum number of hours per subject, not a maximum”. The State cedes this competency to each community and opens up the possibility of a daily PE session. In the case of the school in this study, we took the BOCM (Decree 65/2022) as a reference. As stated in the introduction, no maximum is specified. Schools have the possibility to increase the timetable of some specific subjects or free choice subjects, or to decide to increase the timetable of subjects, as long as the teaching hours corresponding to the other topics are not reduced.

Practical applications

Both the aforementioned proposals (Committee of experts on PE of the COLEF Council, 2018; Heras et al., 2017; Pérez-Pueyo et al., 2021) and the strategies carried out by this school can be taken into account by any school when designing the structure that supports the increase in PE sessions. Regarding the possible transferability of this proposal to other schools, the main issues to be taken into account seem to be the following: it should be a collective and majority decision at school level with broad support both in the school staff and among families and the school council; modifying the school timetables so that breaktimes become PE sessions and their duration is extended; shortening the canteen timetable and not putting PE hours after lunch; slightly adjusting the timetables of other subjects; and, probably, hiring more PE teachers or looking for efficient forms of management depending on the university training and specialisation of the staff (easier in primary education than in secondary).

While the benefits of a high teaching load in PE are indisputable, it is vital that schools anticipate and prepare for the inherent challenges, such as the risk of injury and the readjustment of hours allocated to other subjects. Each institution should also carry out a detailed assessment of its context in order to establish the most relevant organisational and legislative strategies.

In the school under study, the prioritisation of PE has been a hallmark since its foundation in the 1940s, making it a decisive factor for many families in choosing this institution. However, for schools without such an established tradition, it is essential to involve and raise awareness among the whole educational community, from teachers and students to families, highlighting the importance and benefits of integrating PE into the school curriculum.

Limitations and future lines of research

The school chosen for the research was one of the few centres that had the ideal characteristics to contextualise the research and provide a view from a qualitative perspective that would enrich the state of the question. However, at the same time, contextualising the study in this school has implied inherent limitations. Firstly, the private management system makes it difficult to generalise the results to other, mainly publicly managed, institutions.

In future research endeavours, it would be interesting to extend the view of both the number of schools and their ownership, as well as the different management regimes in place. This would allow the views of other teachers and schools to be heard, and the perspective of pupils and families could also be explored.

Conclusion

In this school, teachers of PE and of other subjects consider a daily PE session to be a very appropriate measure for the pupils and it has been an important feature of the school for decades. Participants highlight the importance of PE for all-round development: physical, cognitive, emotional, social, etc. This organisation in the school is achieved by extending the duration of breaktimes and allocating them to PE, leaving aside the usual use of breaks. Despite some difficulties to be faced and decisions to be taken, the legislative fit is perfectly possible. In these times of the LOMLOE in which the third hour of PE has been introduced, PE teachers have the opportunity to demonstrate the importance of this subject (Pérez-Pueyo et al., 2021). There is much more to PE than tackling sedentary lifestyles and obesity and therefore this cannot be the justification—or at least the only justification—for extending the school PE timetable. Therefore, it is up to PE teachers to seize this moment to change the value and status of the subject and to make it resonate with their students, fellow teachers, families, politicians, and society at large. In line with this, the importance of this study lies in showing how to go even one step further to incorporate a daily PE session in the organisational structure of any school.

Funding

This research has been funded by Francisco de Vitoria University within the Call for Research on Educational Innovation 2023 in the project “Towards practices that are more effective, personalized and close to teachers and students in Physical Education” (UFV2023-63).

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Conflict of Interests: No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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Appendix 1

Timetable	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:30-10:30	English	Laboratory	Arts and Crafts	Economics/Biology	English
10:30-11:30	Mathematics	ICT	Mathematics	Chemistry	Language
11:30-12:30	Physics and Chemistry	History	Biology	Language	Laboratory
12:30-13:30	PE	PE	PE	PE:	PE
13:30-14:15	Language	Language	History	Philosophy	History
14:15-14:45	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
14:45-15:30	Chemistry	English	Ethical values	Consultancy	Mathematics
15:30-16:25	Philosophy	Physics and Chemistry	English	Mathematics	Economics