

## AN EXAMINATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL PROFILES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION. A COMPARISON BETWEEN ROMANIA AND ITALY

IOSIF SANDOR<sup>1\*</sup>, ADRIAN PASCAN<sup>1</sup>, GABRIELA RUSU<sup>2</sup>,  
EMANUELE ISIDORI<sup>3</sup>, FRANCESCO TADDEI<sup>3</sup>, SABRI KAYA<sup>4</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** Physical education is a discipline in which there are often few possibilities for teachers to develop critical thinking and reflexivity. This is due to prevalence, in the curricula of PE teachers, of technified teaching and learning models that do not help them develop as critical reflective practitioners. Within this consideration, and in order to stress the importance of philosophy as a means capable of developing critical thinking in physical education, we have administered to two groups of Romanian and Italian PE teachers a validated questionnaire aimed to detect their philosophical profiles on the basis of five paradigms. The result of our study has shown that, between the two groups of teachers, there exist differences relating to so-called Idealist and Positivist profile. In conclusion, the results and assumptions to explain them and emerging from the study need to be better explored, verified and analyzed by future researches based on a wider sample and focus group of scholars, teachers and respondent informants.

**Keywords:** physical education, philosophy, profile, teachers.

### Introduction

Philosophy of education plays a fundamental role in helping teachers develop as critical practitioners and educators who transmit values in the school. This is particularly true for physical education teachers, who are used to teach a discipline in which, due to several factors and the utilization of technified teaching and learning models, there exist very few real opportunities to develop and implement critical thinking and reflexivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Sport High school Cluj-Napoca, Romania

<sup>3</sup> University of Rome Foro Italico, Italy

<sup>4</sup> Kirikkale University, Turkey

\* Corresponding author: iosif.sandor@ubbcluj.ro

Both in Romania and Italy, physical education teachers usually do not follow courses in educational philosophy applied to their subject during their training period in departments or specific courses for teachers' education. Their education tends to focus more on practical skills than on theoretical reflection and philosophical attitude towards the comprehension of their actions within the framework of the meanings of the complex subject they teach.

We know that the main aim of the philosophy of education is to teach educational practitioners to reflect upon why they act and do things, and on their behaviours (Reboul, 1971). However, teachers are mainly interested in learning what they do because for many of them the practice of teaching is reduced to actions devoid of a rationale or justification. This concept and false belief gives rise to the well-known dichotomy between theory and practice (Thomas, 2007), and between scholars and practitioners. This dichotomy represents one of the main controversial issues of pedagogy as a human science. Nowadays, there are many training models that are trying to solve the problem concerning this dichotomy in teachers' education helping them develop a "philosophical" attitude towards the world and its problems (Schön, 1983). Philosophy can act as a means capable to illuminate and help teachers deeply understand the main issues of the complex educational and political relationship of the school to the social order.

This is most true for physical education teachers, who, in Italy and Romania, for the reasons mentioned above, continue to be influenced by a mere practical conception of sport and physical activity, and not to be aware of their real role and function as educators who are not mere technicians but intellectuals.

Philosophy represents the efforts of human beings to understand their world, themselves, why they exist and search the truth. It stresses the importance of wisdom as mental activities aimed to search the truth, to know and understand the world. Philosophy helps physical teachers to (Pelton, 1970):

- 1) to examine and explore the meaning of the world, the individual, and the interaction between the two;
- 2) to arrive at and develop a personal philosophy which gives meanings and direction to her/his efforts as teacher and human being;
- 3) to keep in perspective the teacher's role, direct her/his choices, and maintain her/his personal integrity both as human being and practitioner;
- 4) to structure the totality of her/his personal beliefs and thus avoid contradictory actions and unrecognized compromise;
- 5) to analyze the consistency of her/his beliefs and determine if her/his practices conform to her/his beliefs.

Engaging in philosophy helps physical education teachers clarify what they do or intend to do and, as they act or propose to act, to justify or explain why they do what they do in a logical, systematic manner in the classroom, gym or pitch. Thus, the activity of doing philosophy aids physical education teachers in

understanding who they are or intend to be and why they do or propose to do what they do. Furthermore, through the action of clarification and justification of practice, physical education teachers develop specific reflective skills very helpful to their decision making.

Philosophy provides physical education teachers with tools capable to clarify their own notions of existence, knowledge, and values in teaching; that is, as we have said above, capable to clarify their personal philosophy of sport and of teaching sport/physical education.

There exists a specific philosophy capable to provide PE teachers with reflective skills. This philosophy, which positions itself between the two system of so-called “sport sciences” and “educational sciences”, is the “philosophy of sport education”.

This specialized philosophy serves as a theoretical means to develop a conceptual framework for sport pedagogy, developing the critical and reflective perspective of this science (Grupe, Krüger, 1997). Applied to the cultural context of PE, philosophy of sport education can be considered as a tool (that is a critical and reflective way of reasoning) which allows teachers to examine and explore the meanings of this practice in relation to the construction of their identity as human beings and persons (Isidori 2012; Kretchmar, 1994).

We are convinced that physical education teachers have to be helped develop as reflective practitioners who take aware of their role both as educators’ intellectuals. They have to become aware of the values, beliefs, and prejudice that influence physical education both as subject and social practice. This critical exercise is very important for teaching physical education, traditionally focused on acquiring technical skills.

It can often happen that physical education teachers have no clear idea about the philosophical context of their teaching in terms of teaching techniques, values connected to PE and sport they intend to transmit, sense and meaning they give to human life through sport and physical activity. This lack of awareness of the paradigms that guide teaching practice don’t allow PE teachers to develop both a critical thinking and reflective attitudes towards the subject they teach in school, in which sport and PE are often conceived just a mere technical activities and practice for competitions and performance.

### **Physical Education Teachers’ Profiles**

As stressed in our previous theoretical background, due to the need for helping PE Teachers to take aware of their educational views, the Italian research team involved in this research has built and validate a questionnaire to detect the philosophical paradigms and pedagogical profiles of a group of Romanian and Italian PE Teachers. The questionnaire has been utilized to identify the theories of education upon which Romanian and Italian physical education teachers tend to base their teaching (Isidori, Abele, Taddei, Buzi, 2016).

Each philosophical paradigm of PE, which is tied to the overall philosophical and educational conceptions of sport and human life, reflects a combination of guidelines that are the result of different perspectives implied in teachers' educational background and in how they have been trained in schools of education. Since educational paradigms represent both a pre-understanding of the world and the root of human action, they reflect specific trends and they need specific pedagogical models to be implemented by teachers.

After thus defining the concept of paradigm, a research analysis of both sports philosophy and pedagogy scholarly literature (Safania, Ghorbanalizadeh, Tayebi, 2010; Wiles, Bondi, 2010; McFee, 2007; Davis, 1963) has allowed us to identify five basic PE teaching paradigms related to five main philosophical movements, mainly:

- 1) pragmatist paradigm;
- 2) idealist paradigm;
- 3) positivist paradigm;
- 4) existentialist paradigm;
- 5) socio-critical paradigm.

Each paradigm is inspired by a specific philosophy of education that has its basis in the thinking of many influential Western philosophers associated with each movement (Fernandez-Balboa, 1997; Morgan, 2006; Thomas, 2007). After that, we have identified five educational philosophical profiles linked and corresponding to the above-mentioned five specific philosophical paradigms. These profiles can be summed up as follows.

**1) *The Pragmatist Profile.*** This philosophical profile refers to the theories of the American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952). The starting point of this profile is Dewey's concept of experience, understood as the relationship between the human being and her/his environment. The human being learns from experience through freely and concrete actions: that is through practice and always together with other people. Learning is always the result of a practical interest from the person, who, to learn, has always to be interested and motivated. Every experience can be an educational and enriching experience if the person lives in an environment where people accept pluralism of opinions and recognize the right of individuals to express their creativity in the name of freedom and democracy. The pragmatist profile implies that the PE teacher uses a wide selection of types of sports and physical activities when she or he teaches her/his subject.

A pragmatist PE teacher tends to choose activities such as team sports and sport games that improve cooperation and conflict resolution among pupils. A teacher who belongs to this profile avoids, in the gym, the use of daily formal exercises and any type of routine, and tends to communicate and share experiences

in a non-directive communication environment. The exchange of ideas, collaboration, active participation is seen as a fundamental means to promote active learning styles in her/his pupils.

**2) *The Idealist Profile.*** The starting point of this profile is that the nature of reality and what really matters in our life is something spiritual and ethical. Human beings must always conform their life to the principles of moral duty and ethics. The PE teachers who embrace this educational philosophical worldviews, he/she thinks to know what is better and right for her/his pupils. What she or he teaches in the classroom, gym or pitch does not specifically focus on technical aspect of physical exercise or sport games, but on ideal concepts and values of education and learning. This profile puts emphasis on moral and spiritual values of the experiences related to sport. Sports activities and competitions are not important in themselves but as a means to achieve spiritual or moral ends. This profile implies a vision of teaching-training centred on discussion, analysis and decision-making dealing with, for example, fair play, the ethical choices and moral behaviours that sport, especially in its competitive form, implies. In this profile, values are considered more important than athletic and physical performance, and personality is considered central in the process of individual learning.

**3) *The Positivist Profile.*** Positivism puts great emphasis and trusts in the objectivity of science, in rationality, and in woman/man seen as a “rational animal” capable to develop, through science and its methodology, as a better human being. The PE teacher who follows this profile tends to scientifically select activities that enhance physical strength and technical sports skills. Moreover, she/he tends to use tests and measurements to verify the level of technical skills achieved by her/his pupils, and to test the effectiveness of her/his teaching, rejecting any subjective and personal approach to the teaching of physical education and the sports. Within this profile, the teaching and learning process in physical education is mostly implemented through methods that go from individuality to the whole, through an inductive methodology, and are based on a systematic, sequential, and organized presentation of subject contents.

**4) *The Existentialist Profile.*** This profile is based on the concept of existence as conceived by Existentialism, which look at the world and human life as something precarious but at the same time also contingent and dynamic. This profile enhances the subjective dimension of knowledge, of behaviours and relationships with others, and highlights the character of uncertainty of human life. The existentialist PE teacher is indifferent towards measurable objectives, even if, as a facilitator of learning content, can organize training sessions so that

her/his pupils can autonomously achieve their learning objectives. The teacher who follows this profile does not like a close and direct supervision/control on their students through discipline. Actually, they tend to evaluate pupils as a whole, taking into account both the skills achieved and the values transmitted through sport activities and physical exercises, as well as their effects on pupils' personality.

**5) *The Socio-critical Profile.*** This profile, inspired by the critical theories of the Frankfurt School (Fernández-Balboa, 1997). A socio-critical PE teacher trusts in sport and physical education seen as a means capable to develop critical and transformative abilities, as well as social or people skills. That is, skills that allow the person to be aware of social problems, and to understand the social construction of different voices and identities in physical education and sport, and how these are related to historical and social forces and how they can be used as the basis for change in our society. Values and terms such as "inclusion", "fairness" and "justice" are those which give meaning to physical education and sport and their practice, and are more important than those related to "efficiency", "performance" and "victory" conceived of as an achievement of the final result at any cost and mere aim of the competition.

Moreover, this profile requires by the teacher a permanent use of dialogue and democratic communication with their pupils, and a view of the relationship between teachers and pupils as a complementary relationship between equals, never asymmetrical. Within this context, the teacher plays the role of facilitator whose main aim is to promote free creativity, body movement, the pleasure of playing sport, joining others, and sharing with them the gratification and joy.

### **Main Aims and Scope of the Research**

On the basis of this hermeneutical interpretation aimed at identifying the five main educational philosophical profiles of contemporary PE teachers, we have administered to two samples of Romanian and Italian physical education teachers a questionnaire of 50 items (10 items x 5 profiles). This research tool, based on a Likert scale, centred on a score system from 1 to 5, is aimed to detect the level of agreement or disagreement of PE teachers with reference to the items contained in the questionnaire.

The above-mentioned questionnaire, drafted in Romanian and Italian and validated in both languages, was inspired by a previous research tool, statistically validated, and aimed at detecting the philosophical profiles of youth football coaches (Isidori, 2013; Isidori, Migliorati, Taddei, Abele, Sandor, 2011) and theoretical researches (Jones, 2006).

## Method

**Participants.** As mentioned above, the questionnaire was administered to a group of 50 Romanian PE teachers (mean age=38.3 yr, SD=11.9), and to a sample of other 50 Italian PE teachers (mean age=54.1 yr, SD=4.6). The Italian teachers were significantly older than the Romanian ones ( $F_{(1,96)}=62.4, p<.00001$ ).

This is because teachers' hiring system in Italy has been stopped for many years. This is the actual reason for which very few young physical education teachers are teaching in Italian schools.

The Romanian PE teachers group consisted of 16 females (mean age=42.8 yr, SD=12.1) and 34 males (mean age=36.1 yr, SD=11.4) randomly selected in Cluj Region's schools. Most of the teachers had a major in physical education (98%). 48% had more of 10 years of teaching experience (>10 years 20%, >15 years 6%, >20 years 22%), and 90% had practiced sports at a competitive level (69% team sports, 31% individual sports). Moreover, 80% of the Romanian teachers were also sport coaches.

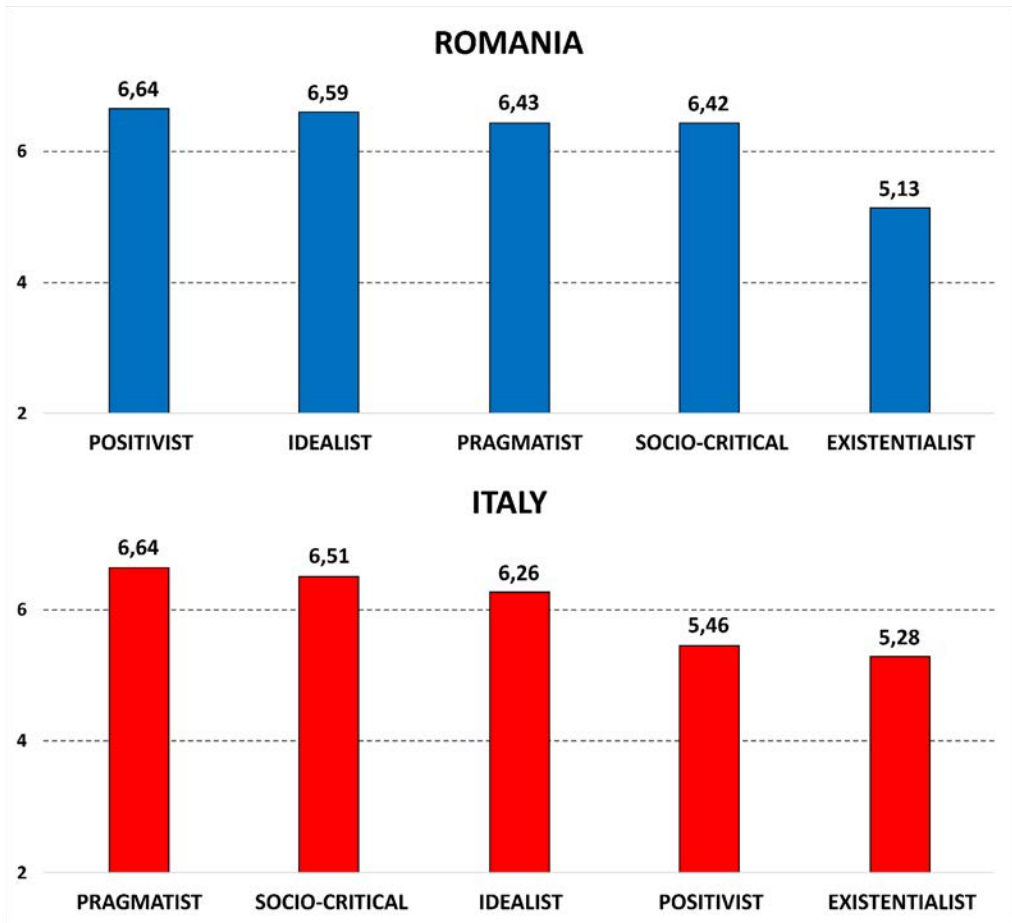
The Italian group consisted of 29 females (mean age=54.4, SD=3.6) and 21 males (mean age=53.8, SD=5.7). The sample of Italian PE teachers was randomly selected from schools in Rome city districts. The Italian PE teachers had majors in sport sciences. The majority of them (82%) had a long teaching experience (>20 years), and had practiced sports at a competitive level (88%), mainly, team sports (39%) and track and field (32%). Moreover, 44% of the teachers were sport coaches.

## Data analysis

Based on the scores obtained in each paradigm, we have found prevailing profiles in each group of PE teachers. In order to evaluate the differences between Romanian and Italian PE teachers, profile scores were subjected to analysis of variance (ANOVA), using the country Group (Romania, Italy) and the Gender (Male, Female) as independent factors. All analysis was performed using Age as a covariate. The alpha level was fixed at 0.05.

## Results

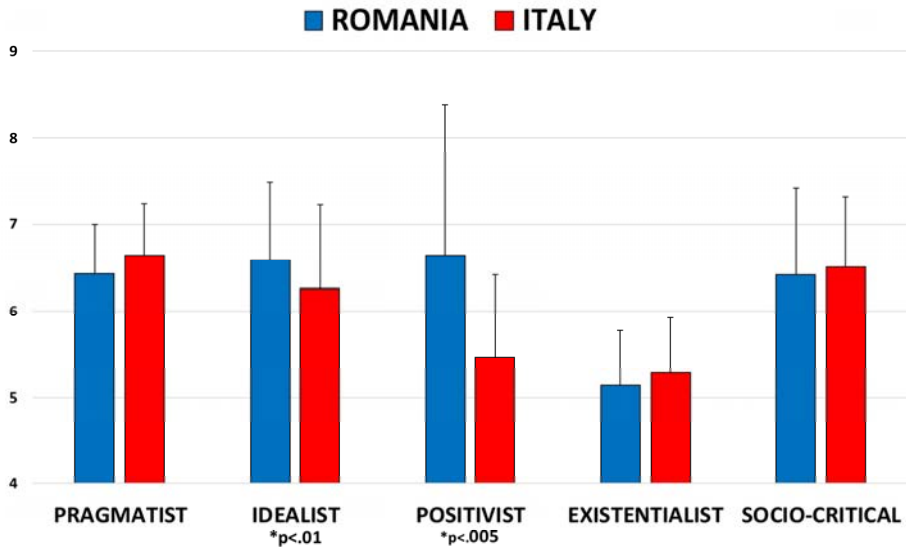
The data showed a prevalence of the Positivist paradigm (6.64) within the Romanian PE teachers. The other preferences appear distributed as follows: Idealist profile (6.59), Pragmatist (6.43), Socio-critical (6.42), and Existentialist (5.13). As regards the Italian group, the data from the questionnaire shows a prevalence of the Pragmatist profile (6.64). The other preferences are distributed in this way: Socio-critical paradigm (6.51), Idealist (6.26), Positivist (5.46), and Existentialist (5.28) [fig. 1].



**Fig.1.** PE teachers' profiles as they emerge from data.

The ANOVAs on the profile scores has shown a significant effect of the Group factor on both Idealist ( $F_{(1,95)}=7.29, p<.01$ ) and Positivist profile ( $F_{(1,95)}=10.25, p<.005$ ). The Romanian PE teachers group has shown higher scores than the Italian one for what it refers to the Idealist (6.59 vs 6.26) and Positivist profile (6.64 vs 5.46) [fig.2]. Other ANOVAs have not shown significant results.





**Fig. 2.** Differences between Romanian and Italian PE teachers profiles.

### Discussion and conclusion

It is clear from this research that the philosophical profiles of PE Romanian and Italian teachers appear to be rooted in the five philosophical paradigms which are fragmented, and not easy to analyze or define. Our study shows that there exist different educational philosophical profiles between Romanian and Italian PE teachers. Romanian PE teachers show a higher score relating to so-called Idealist and Positivist profile. To better explain this result, we could form the hypothesis that Romanian PE teachers are more devoted to the task and, moreover, are educated through a curriculum focused on a more technified approach to the subject they teach, that doesn't allow them to develop a critical view and perspective on their practice. In any case, this hypothesis needs to be better explored, verified and analyzed by future researches based on a wider sample and focus group of scholars, teachers and respondent informants. The questionnaire we have built and this study want to encourage, via educational support, Romanian and Italian PE teachers, to reflect on their characteristics, orientations and pedagogical models.

In conclusion, this study is an example of how the philosophy of sport education can be applied to practice in a context such as physical education teachers' training, in which there are often very few possibilities to develop critical thinking due to the misconception of sport and physical education as a

merely technical and not critically reflective practice. The philosophy of sport education can help PE teachers analyze the foundations and presuppositions underlying physical education as discipline, investigating its underpinnings as science and form of human education. Moreover, this philosophy can help PE teachers develop a comprehensive conception and apprehension of the world, integrating the interdisciplinary knowledge of the sport and educational sciences with that of ethics to achieve a more critical and coherent view of their profession.

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