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Curriculum Development for Teaching Swimming in Hungary

**Laszlo Révész, Jozsef Bognár, Marina I. Salvara,
Szilvia Gita, and Melinda Biro**

Given the lack of publications describing changing curricular matters and the role of teaching and learning swimming in Hungary, the purpose of this study was to analyze the curricula of 1995, 2001, and 2003. It also was the authors' goal to examine the role and place of swimming instruction in school education and provide discussion points to promote further review and the possible effects on teaching methodology and skill acquisition. The authors analyzed the Hungarian curricula for the years 1995, 2001, and 2003 based on records, official documents, administrative texts, and formal and reports on curricular structures and applications. They concluded that the process of continuous curricular change has impeded the process of teaching and learning swimming in Hungary and recommend that teachers and local curriculum developers make an effort to integrate the best parts of each curriculum.

Key Words: swimming instruction, teaching techniques, swimming strokes

Considering both the popularity of recreational swimming and the success of competitive swimming in Hungary, it is important to explore further the primary components of this accomplishment (Révész & Bognár, 2005). It is very well possible that this achievement lies in the structure and form of the process of learning to swim. Children in Hungary begin the learning process at an early age, through either institutional or extracurricular programs. The fundamentals of teaching swimming in kindergarten and in primary schools have been regulated by law and can be considered a standard process (Bognár et al., 2005, 2006). That is why we can be proud of the fact that most Hungarians learn to swim at an early age. According to a survey examining interest in various sport activities, both girls and boys ranked swimming first (Biróné, 1990). In spite of this, teaching swimming is ranked low in Hungarian physical education. Only 3.7% of physical education teachers often, nearly 10% consistently, 28.9% occasionally, and 40.4% never teach swimming (Kovács, Keresztesi, Kovács, & Andrásné, 2000).

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Looking back at the history of Hungarian physical education, it appears that there is no definite linear development in the class (year) ratio of curricula (Hamar, 2003). Despite significant changes in Hungarian school curricula during the past decade or so, swimming has not been consistently included as a subject of instruction.

The structural and material components of the Hungarian curriculum have been frequently discussed ever since the Ratio Educationist (1777/1913). A formal curriculum has existed in Hungary since the reign of the Empress Maria Teresa (1740–1780). We are defining curriculum to mean a central, uniform system of the teaching–learning process. By the order of Maria Teresa and her son Josef II, open-air swimming was prohibited in Hungary because it was considered life threatening. This was not unique to Hungary—at that time, open-air swimming was forbidden in most Western European countries. This prohibition often was included in local school regulations.

The Council of Sárospatak College was the first, in 1804, to accept a decree for encouraging swimming instruction. Since 1805 students in Hungary have participated in special swimming courses under teachers' guidance. Thanks to educational reformers, swimming has acquired a widespread positive reputation since 1839. Swimming as a compulsory and independent subject was included in teachers' training education programs since 1848. Swimming was emphasized less after the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849, but it was subsequently recognized as an important part of education again in 1856. It was in that year that the first indoor swimming pool was built in the country, in the town of Eger, where students were able to take part in regular swimming instruction.

Physical education as a school subject achieved prominence in the mid-1800s. The full acceptance of *physical education* as the name and topic of a field of study was not settled in spite of a lengthy process. It appears as late as 1869 under the name *physical exercise*. Clearly, curriculum developers neglected the subject, because only 5% of the curricular programs of the day allocated time for physical exercise (Hamar & Soós, 2004). In spite of these reforms swimming was not made a compulsory subject at the time. Furthermore, it was not even mentioned in the curriculum in 1869.

In 1905 when the so-called folk-school curriculum was introduced, physical education was given a much more prominent subject-matter treatment. Subjects and contents were established specifically according to the aim of each school. As an addition to this curriculum, aims and tasks of teaching each subject were added to the document, and specific methodological instructions for each subject were included. Nonetheless, there was no significant development in the number of physical education classes, which remained only 6–7.3% of the entire educational curriculum (Hamar & Soós, 2004).

At the beginning of the 19th century, reformers fought for compulsory school swimming education. Unfortunately only a few schools allowed the teaching of swimming, and even in those, swimming lessons were featured mainly only in after-school programs. Because of the high number of drowning incidents during World War I, and also the strengthening of physical education reform during the same period, swimming instruction gained renewed importance in curricula. More specifically, swimming was introduced as an official compulsory subject area in civil schools in 1915, in high schools in 1916, and in elementary schools in 1918 (Bakó, 1986).

Swimming was specifically included in the curricula between 1925 and 1927, but then lost importance until its reappearance again in 1941. After World War II, swimming was again included in the curriculum for the 1946 school year, but only for the second, third, and fourth elementary-school grades. In 1959 a ministerial decree modified the teaching of swimming to be compulsory only for the fifth grade of elementary school. The teaching period for swimming lessons was determined to be 16 hr/year. This decree, however, was flawed because teaching swimming to 10- and 11-year-old students is too late in every respect: methodologically, in preparation for lifesaving rescuing, and for competitive sport. During the socialist period, swimming was not even mentioned in the so-called assessment-type curricula.

In 1970 the Type Curriculum was introduced, which provided centralized educational guidelines, comprised ideological goals and tasks, and defined the details concerning requirements of each subject, as well as of the subject materials to be used. The Type Curriculum analytically described the forms of civil subject matter and students' activities. Implementation of requirements and evaluation of elaborated tasks were set, and standardized tests and exams were the basic tools of assessment. There was a slight increase in the number of physical education classes, which reached a level of 9–10% (Hamar & Soós, 2004).

Swimming first appeared in detail and as a compulsory subject for all elementary-school levels during the curriculum theory reform in the 1970s. The progressive educational plan of 1978 is considered a milestone in the history of curriculum in Hungary. Differentiation in methods and a system of achievement requirements appeared for the first time. Progressive developmental markers were mentioned among its methods of analysis. In addition to the primary activities, complementary (i.e., optional) activities were proposed, to which swimming was added. Primary activities accounted for two thirds of the total curricular time, and complementary activities made up one third of total physical education lessons. Swimming was among the elective courses.

Nagy and Pádár (1987) examined the effects of this curriculum on primary-school swimming instruction. They studied the basics of teaching swimming, the types and numbers of swimming strokes, the ratio of students to instructors, and the teaching period for the swimming lessons. Observation showed that the period of teaching was too short (i.e., only 8–12 lessons), the student:instructor ratio was far greater than the ideal, and there were additional adverse conditions. The number and type of the swimming strokes varied on a national level. Nagy and Pádár concluded that the instructional conditions were quite unfavorable for optimal learning of swimming. Curricular reform had been carried out in 1990, before the later two-tier system in curricular regulation was implemented in 1995. A specific number of class hours was allocated to swimming lessons, although diving and lifting objects from the bottom of the pool were included.

The fourth component of changes in Hungarian curricular revisions was the Core Curriculum, which was implemented after 1995 (Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996; Salvára, Bognár, Biró, Farkas, & Szikora, 2004). The National Core Curriculum (NCC; see Table 1) provided a central-societal curriculum for which each school designed and established its own local curriculum. According to the curricular structure, the NCC covered a variety of fields and subjects. Each field preserved a representative percentage that determined the particular number of class hours. The NCC provided general principles, values, aims, evaluation, and assessment through a detailed requirement system.

Table 1 Subject Matter, Requirements, and Minimum Performance Standards for Grades 1–10 Under the Original Hungarian National Core Curriculum (1995)

Grades	Subject matter	Requirements of development	Minimal performance
1–4	Familiarization with water Safety in water Basic exercises in water Simple water games	Skillfulness in one stroke	Knowledge of dangers associated with pools and natural water bodies Water-safety skills
5–6	Improvement in selected stroke Games in water	At least one swimming technique at an advanced level	Swim 10–15 m
7–8	Practice of selected strokes	Learn another swimming technique	Swim a stroke at an intermediate level
9–10	Breaststroke, freestyle, and backstroke arm and leg techniques with assistance and with flotation devices	Fine coordination, adequate rhythm Efficient stroke power Orientation in water	Learn practical safety behaviors in the water Swim two strokes

We have employed Ballér's (1996a) historical review and temporal division of curricula throughout the curricula analysis of this article. According to Ballér, the temporal changes in curriculum theories have included the following historical periods: early curricula (1777–1914), curricula between the two World Wars (1919–1939), curricula after World War II (1945–1950), socialist curricula (1950–1970), postsocialist curricula (1970–1995), and two-tier (central and local) curricula (1995 to present).

Given the lack of publications describing changing curricular matters and the role of teaching and learning swimming in Hungary, the purpose of this study was to analyze the curricula of 1995, 2001, and 2003. It also was our goal to examine the role and place of swimming instruction in school education and provide discussion points to promote further review and the possible effects on teaching methodology and skill acquisition. Although swimming pools are provided in only a few schools in Hungary, it is worth considering the possibilities of school swimming.

Method

Our analysis of the curricula for the years 1995, 2001, and 2003 was based on records, official documents, administrative texts, and formal reports on curricular structures and applications. Previous analysis of Hungary's NCC already published (Salvara et al., 2004) helped in the current analytical process. Informal interviews, personal thoughts, and notes of unofficial discussions with national curriculum developers also were included in the examination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Our analysis was based on the aims of each curriculum, physical education representation, teaching of swimming, and the theoretical analysis of its instruction.

Results

Swimming Instruction in the Core Curriculum of 1995

The change in the political-economical system created a new situation in all segments of Hungarian society, including in public education. The two-tier regulation in education presented both a different means and a new basis for teaching physical education. The central and local curricula together accomplish the two-tier subject-matter regulation. A government act of 1995 legislated and prescribed the tasks to reform education and created the National Core Curriculum (NCC). The NCC formulates structural contents in 10 cultural fields, which are given in the form of percentages of time devoted to instruction and learning. The field of physical education and sport constitutes 6–14% of class time, which means two or three lessons per week for Grades 1–6 and 1.5–2.5 lessons per week for Grades 7–10. The ratio of physical education and sport for Grades 1–12 according to the original Hungarian NCC was as follows: Grades 1–4, 10–14%; Grades 5–6, 9–13%; Grades 7–8, 6–10%; and Grades 9–10, 6–10%.

There is a significant question in relation to the NCC: Who was competent enough to make a thoughtful decision on the number of classes given in any local school? School autonomy clearly created numerous conflicts in Hungarian education. Although the NCC upgraded the role of physical education compared with previous curriculum, it also provided an official document regulating the internal process of education. The time percentages allocated by the NCC presented an opportunity to teach swimming, specifically in cases where the facilities were available.

According to the general development requirements of the NCC for Grades 1–6, the goal was to acquire only a single swimming stroke during these elementary-school grades. Neither specific tasks nor the swimming stroke was specified in this goal. Provided that the NCC was a core curriculum, its designers were not generous to the subject matter compared with previous curricula. The NCC clearly provided overly broad goals and objectives and also time intervals that were too general for acquiring the subject matter. Familiarization with water as the primary focus of swim lessons was evident consistently through Grades 1–4. In addition, for Grades 5–6 and 7–8 the scope and sequence of swimming skills were ambiguously determined, and the aims of acquiring swimming skills were not described in a linear fashion. Table 1 summarizes the subject matter of swimming, requirements of development, and the minimal swimming performance that students must achieve (Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education, 1995).

This minimalist approach to describing swimming instruction might provide the grounds for physical education teachers to draw the wrong conclusions regarding swimming requirements. For example, by the end of Grade 10 there might be some students who were still familiarizing themselves with the water while other students might demonstrate excellent swimming skill in two or more different strokes.

Swimming Instruction in the Frame Curriculum of 2001

Frame Curricula were introduced to Hungarian public education in 2001, presenting a progressive benchmark system for Grades 1, 5, and 7. The aim was to provide a basis for particular subject-matter programs and local curricula. A Frame

Curriculum provides a summary of the general aims, tasks, and requirements of improvement; forms of activity; and subjects, as well as content matter. Its essence was for minimal and fundamental subject matter to be represented in 80% of the lessons. The remaining 20% could be used according to the preference and decision of each school. With this, Frame Curricula made it possible for extracurricular swimming activities to represent 20% of instructional time. This 20% facilitated improvement of new subject matters, areas of studies, better acknowledgment, and practice of certain fields. The allocated time for physical education lessons was 2.5 lessons per week for Grades 1–6 and two lessons per week for Grades 7–8 and high school students. Table 2 illustrates the ratio of physical education and sport for Grades 1–12.

Frame Curricula ensure uniform subject matter for education and permeability among Hungarian schools. It appeared that Frame Curricula constituted a guarantee for building a compulsory knowledge base and requirements of development in a harmonious manner into local curricula, while also leaving room for autonomous school decisions in the scope and sequence of curricular offerings.

Frame Curricula define the global aims, tasks, and requirements for development for Grades 1–4, 5–8, and 9–12. For the first time, a healthy lifestyle is mentioned as a general aim for students, along with a focus on positive thinking. Its comprehensive requirements for development refer to healthy physical development, to the development of motor culture, and to the need for and opportunities to engage in physical activity throughout the life span. Table 3 illustrates the changes in subject matter in elementary-school curricula (Frame Curriculum, 2001).

Compared with the NCC, the Frame Curricula clearly had more complete and specific descriptions of the teaching–learning process. In the same manner, learning seems to be acquired through a more purposeful and also realistic and linear process (Table 3). Throughout the 12 grades, it was assumed that students would be acquainted with three swimming strokes. For the lower grades, with the exception of primary tasks, games played an important role in the learning process. By the end of Grade 4, the aim was for students to be able to demonstrate one swimming stroke and to acquire one more.

The Frame Curricula, in terms of teaching swimming, were certainly structured in a more logical and favorable manner. Familiarization with the water until Grade 4 was among the main aims in the NCC (Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education, 1995), whereas in the Frame Curricula (2001), by the same grade students were expected to be able to swim two different strokes competently. On the other hand, no swimming activity was prescribed between the ages of 6 and 10 years, when learning is thought to be more efficient.

Table 2 Allocation of Physical Education and Sport Time for Grades 1–12 in the Hungarian Frame Curriculum (2001)

	Grades 1–4	Grades 5–8	Grades 10–12
% allocation for physical education	11–13	7–7.5	7–7.5
Physical education lessons/year	92	93	74
% of optional lessons	18.4	18.6	14.8

Table 3 Subject-Matter Changes in Elementary Schools' Curricula Under the Hungarian Frame Curriculum (2001)

Grades	Subject matter
1–2	Familiarization with the water Walking in shallow water Free exercises in water Gliding Gliding with flutter kick Gliding and arm actions Arm actions and flutter kicking performed in harmony Games (tag, trains, pearl diver, fishing)
3	Learning a swimming-stroke technique Jump into deeper water Games (tunnel, diver, piston)
4	Demonstrate another stroke arm action and leg movement Game (chasing under the water, heading)
5	Games in water Perfection of selected stroke (technical) Performance enhancement
6	Games and gymnastics in water Perfection of selected stroke (technical) Performance enhancement
7	Practice of selected stroke Gradually increasing exercises
8	Longer distances using two swimming strokes
9	Selection of two swimming strokes
10	Execution of two swimming strokes on a higher level
11	In addition to two strokes, acknowledgment and practice of another style
12	Practice of three strokes

Swimming Instruction in the NCC of 2003

In 2003, Hungary issued the revised NCC as legislated by an act of the government. With this revision, the government provided the opportunity for each school to create a local curriculum based on Frame Curricula issued by the Ministry of Education. In our opinion, however, this nonhomogeneous planning brought up serious issues of permeability among schools.

Table 4 Subject Matter for Grades 1–10 Prescribed by the Revised National Core Curriculum (2003)

Grades	Subject matter
1–2	Familiarization, basic techniques
3–4	Technique of swimming, one swimming stroke Exercises of Grades 1–2 in a complex and more difficult form
5–6	Development of the acquired swimming techniques, continuous swimming of a longer distance, competitions
7–8	Aerobic type, different length swimming for having a good technical level, short-distance competitions
9–10	Swimming, with aerobic and anaerobic sprint types, with repetition according to training level, competitions
11–12	Mixed-type (aerobic–anaerobic) endurance swimming tests in competitive form, with repetition according to training level

The revised NCC (2003; see Table 4) was much more general in character than the previous one (Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education, 1995). The division of subject matter was no longer detailed. Requirements for development were described as regulating principles rather than as specific explanations of tasks. Minimal requirements were removed in this latest revision of NCC. The proportion of physical education and sport for Grades 1–12 under the most recent NCC is as follows: Grades 1–4, 15–20%; Grades 5–6, 11–15%; Grades 7–8, 10–15%; Grades 9–10, 9–15%; and Grades 11–12, 8%.

Compared with the Frame Curricula, the reformed NCC provided fewer tasks for students in Grades 1–4 but expected more achievement for students in Grades 5–6. The use of playful tasks as a teaching methodology was not even mentioned, and this could have a serious impact on the learning process. The inclusion of short-distance competitions, however, could be beneficial to the teaching–learning process by some estimates. For Grades 7–8 and for high school education the revised NCC presumed that instructors would have a professional background in teaching swimming. The need to teach and learn the training theory of swimming appeared for the first time in subject-matter development.

Concluding Remarks

The present study demonstrates the similarities and differences among the state curricula issued during the past decade in Hungary as they related to the teaching of swimming. Swimming had first appeared in the curriculum of 1915. In the beginning it was only a complementary (or optional) subject, primarily because of the lack of infrastructure (i.e., swimming facilities in schools). Subsequently, the increasing number of pools and social needs (e.g., drowning prevention, increased physical activity, healthier lifestyles) resulted in swimming gaining a more significant role in curricular content.

First, the NCC of 1995, within the field of physical education and sports, made clear that the aim of teaching swimming was for students to acquire one swimming stroke in Grades 1–6. This aim was at a very low level for the sport-specific content, and given that for Grades 7–8 the subject matter grew dramatically, students might not be able to meet this vigorous skill and technical-level requirement.

Second, the Frame Curricula of 2001 presented a more comprehensive plan for teaching swimming. The Frame Curricula program was similar to the progressive curriculum of 1978. Its main aim, for Grades 1–12, was for students to acquire, know, and develop three different swimming strokes. The subject matter was clearly structured and prepared, and progress in the learning process was taken in small progressive steps. New tasks were added to the previously learned material. Specific aims and tasks were for the first time well articulated and separated.

Third, the aims of the most recent NCC of 2003 had two parts. For lower grades (1–4), the main aim was to familiarize the students with the water and to have them acquire at least two swimming strokes. For upper grades (5–6), students should know other swimming strokes, and then, suddenly during the seventh grade, they should know swimming-training theory. It is quite certain that this process of continuous curricular change was not reasonable and impeded the process of teaching and learning swimming in Hungary.

Finally, the 2003 NCC needed improvement in its structure, so that the teaching methodology for swimming could be reconsidered. From the analysis of these curricular developments, the Frame Curricula were both the most complex and the most adequate for swimming instruction. Given that the Hungarian government offers the opportunity to integrate certain parts from the Frame Curricula with the revised NCC, it is our hope that teachers and local curriculum developers will take this opportunity to integrate the best parts of each curriculum.

To end on a related practical note, we feel strongly that comprehensive efforts are needed to increase physical activity levels during elementary physical education classes. In a recent study, Cardon, Verstaete, Cleroq, and Bourdeaudhuij (2004) found that students engaged in more vigorous physical activity during swimming classes than in nonswimming ones. This suggests to us that more emphasis on swimming in the physical education curriculum can have the additional benefit of increasing physical activity levels among Hungarian students, which one would hope would improve their health-related fitness and reduce the incidence of overweight or obesity.

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