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S3 EP 04: carte blanche (EN translation)

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Current data on physical activity behavior among children and adolescents in Luxembourg

My name is Andreas Bund, and I am a professor of sports pedagogy and sports science at the University of Luxembourg, as well as head of the Physical Education unit within the Department of Education and Social Work at the University of Luxembourg.

We mainly focus on training primary school teachers. We teach students the methodology and didactics of physical education in primary schools – both in theory and in practice. We have two main areas of research: on one hand, the conditions, frameworks, and effects of physical education in Luxembourg, and on the other hand, the physical activity of children and adolescents.

So essentially, our main research question is: how much do children and adolescents in Luxembourg actually move? This is precisely the topic I would like to briefly address today by presenting a study that we have conducted over the past years together with psychologists from the University of Luxembourg.

This study focuses exactly on the two aspects I just mentioned: first, how physically active Luxembourgish children and adolescents are at school and in their leisure time; and second, what role physical education plays in this context. For example, are children motivated in physical education classes to be active in their free time?

Briefly about the method of this study: over a period of two years, we repeatedly recorded the physical activity of nearly two thousand children and adolescents – on one hand subjectively using questionnaires, and for some of them also objectively using a type of motion sensor.

The main results, in brief:

First: according to a guideline from the World Health Organization, children and adolescents should engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day in order to develop healthily in the long term. In Luxembourg, only 21% of boys and just 12% of girls meet this recommendation. The older the children or adolescents become, the less they move. With these figures, Luxembourg ranks in the international middle range – similar values are found in neighboring countries such as France, Belgium, and Germany.

Second result: children and adolescents report in questionnaires that they are significantly more active than they actually are, as shown by the objective measurements using motion sensors. They therefore tend to overestimate their level of physical activity.

Third notable result: unfortunately, children and adolescents are also surprisingly inactive during physical education classes. A PE lesson lasts on average 77 minutes in Luxembourg – at least in our study – mainly because it is often scheduled as a double period. Out of these 77 minutes, students are active for only about 14 minutes on average, which means they spend around 63 minutes either at rest or engaged in only light activity. Of course, there are many possible reasons for this, and one must also be considered that physical education has many non-motor learning objectives, such as developing psychosocial skills like communication, fairness, cooperation, and so on.

These goals are also meant to be taught in physical education. Nevertheless, this result is striking, especially since for an increasing number of children and adolescents, PE classes are the only regular opportunity to engage in physical activity.



Fourth—and final—result: a finding related to motivation. In fact, children and adolescents who are intrinsically or autonomously motivated in physical education classes tend to carry this motivation over into their leisure time and are therefore more physically active outside of school.

What conclusions can physical education teachers – or teachers in general – draw from these findings for their professional practice? Perhaps three main points.

Children and adolescents in Luxembourg clearly do not move enough – this is particularly true for girls and older adolescents. This means that school physical education is becoming increasingly important in two respects: first, as the only regular opportunity for many children and adolescents to be physically active and develop motor skills; and second, as a way for teachers to motivate students, through competent and varied instruction, to be more active and engage in sports outside of school.

Regarding the first point, attention should be paid to balancing the different learning objectives of physical education so that students are sufficiently active – even during class. In practical terms, **at least 50% of lesson time should involve moderate to vigorous physical activity – which means, students should be sweating a bit or slightly out of breath.**

Regarding the second point, teachers should **focus on teaching approaches that promote students' autonomous motivation – for example, student-centered instruction** which allows room for individual needs and involves students more actively in the learning process.

Of course, we are well aware that achieving all this under the practical conditions in which physical education often has to take place is anything but easy and represents a real challenge.