

Physical Education in Scandinavia with focus on Sweden – a comparative perspective

Introduction

Comparative physical education (PE) has historically received only modest attention, but interest in these kinds of studies is increasing (Pühse and Gerber 2005). This growing interest is probably due to better communication, more international aspects in higher education, necessary language skills and greater possibilities of working in other countries. Since 1978 there is a worldwide organization for research and education within the field of comparative PE and sport (ISCPES) as well as an international journal in the field – *International Sports Studies*.

To compare the similarities and differences between two phenomena in different contexts is stimulating and generative. The process of studying physical education in other countries is not just a means of understanding other people, but also a means of knowing your own system better. Even though comparative research in Sport Science is increasing, inquiries into the topic “Physical Education in Europe” are still, with a few exceptions, rare (Richter 2007). However, Hardman (2006) and Hardman and Marshall (2000, 2005) have presented several reports on the state and status of PE in the world and especially in Europe. Other researchers in the field have compared PE in two or more countries (for example Kougioumtzis 2006; Richter 2007). What is surprising however is that the newly published *Handbook of Physical Education* edited by Kirk, Macdonald and O’Sullivan (2006), which is a very extensive overview of research in PE, does not have any chapter dealing with comparative PE research.

The first comparative study of Scandinavian PE was performed by Larson in 1952 and was published in the *Journal of Educational Sociology*. Larson’s conclusion was that, despite a strong nationalistic spirit, there was a desire for unity among the people in Scandinavia and that this disposition was strengthened by the fact that most Scandinavians are Lutheran and that a close relationship exists between church and state in Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden. Even though the influence from the church is almost invisible today, it is still a fact that the Scandinavian countries have a common value-base (Daun 1999; Hofstede 2001) and that the social context is relatively similar; but of course there are, as this article will show, still some differences.

Aims

The purpose of this article is to investigate meanings attached to PE in the Scandinavian countries through (i) the different national syllabi, and (ii) interpretations and conclusions researchers make in their studies of Scandinavian PE and how these findings look like compared to other researchers’ findings on the same questions. More specifically, the following questions concerning PE in Scandinavia will be explored:

- What does the general education system look like and what are the legal requirements?
- What are the aims and objectives?
- What content and profiles does the teaching comprise?
- What about coeducation?

In the article, I will specifically concentrate on making comparisons with Swedish PE; therefore, Sweden is the country in focus as in all other articles in this PESP-issue, but comparisons will be made with Denmark, Finland and Norway so that results about Swedish PE can be compared to developments in a broader Scandinavian context. The article gives

new insight into Scandinavian PE, where the subject is designed somewhat differently than in other European countries. It also shows that there are more similarities than differences between the Scandinavian countries when comparing PE.

Theoretical considerations and methodology

This study can be seen as a qualitative textual analysis, and in this case analysis of syllabi as well as research texts produced about PE in Scandinavia during the last ten years. Through making comparisons between researches that study the same matter and being critical towards the results, there are greater opportunities of giving a more detailed picture of PE in Scandinavia. The research texts forming the empirical basis of this study have been produced by a number of researchers – including myself – within the field of PE in Scandinavia and were published between 1996 and 2008. Altogether 20 studies from Sweden and two from Denmark, Finland and Norway respectively were included in the analysis, as well as national syllabi in the four countries.

In qualitative textual analysis the researcher works intensively with a smaller number of texts that you read, reread and try to understand and discern the meaning of (Essaïsson et al. 2003; Mayring 2000). I have systematized the studies and mapped out and compared the results under main headings according to the specific research questions. To be able to carry out qualitative textual analysis, the researcher must be knowledgeable concerning the theory that forms the basis for the method, the context and the socio-cultural background (Mayring 2000). The results from the included studies have then been compared in the sense of triangulation and involved researchers from neighbouring Scandinavian countries to check the reliability and fairness.

Like all types of research, comparative PE faces methodological and theoretical problems. Among others, Brandl-Bredenbeck (2005) has discussed prerequisites for doing comparative research and has developed a set of criteria to assure comparability. These criteria deal with different aspects of equivalences. Currently, there is a broad agreement among researchers that if functional, conceptual, linguistic and sample equivalences are taken into account, valid comparisons can be made (Brandl-Bredenbeck 2005).

This study deals with PE in a Scandinavian context where the concepts used have the same meaning, and apart from Finland even language and spelling similarities. All the research forming the basis for this study has been written in either English or any of the Scandinavian languages included, which I am familiar with. Since I cannot read or understand Finnish, such articles have been excluded. The study is therefore founded on firm functional, conceptual and linguistic equivalence as the basic precondition. The problem of equivalence in this study has mainly been with sample equivalence. It is sometimes difficult, or even impossible, to compare data gathered from different sample procedures and sizes. Another problem is that there has been much more research conducted about PE in Sweden during the last ten years, and not at all as much in the other three countries.

In a book by Pühse and Gerber (2005) titled *International Comparison of Physical Education: Concepts, Problems, Prospects* the situation of PE was compared by means of a worldwide survey. It is one of the first qualitative approaches to provide comprehensive information on the state of PE. What I have done in preparing this article was to start out by looking at similarities and differences in articles in the above mentioned book dealing with PE in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland.

I also gathered as many research reports, dissertations and articles as possible about PE published during the last decade in the four countries, in order to get as clear picture as possible of what the field PE looks like today. I compared my results with those presented about Scandinavian PE by Hardman and Marshall (2005) and by Hardman (2006) dealing with PE in Europe. Having done this, I then asked two experts from each country to read through my preliminary analysis and check the facts about the different countries and to ensure that my conclusions were reasonable.

In presenting the results, I will move from analysing the general educational systems and legal framework, to giving a picture of PE in the four countries. Aims and objectives, content as well as coeducation will then be analyzed and compared and these are questions I find of specific interest to an international audience.

Results

General Education System

The school system in all four Scandinavian countries is almost the same and only marginal differences are visible. The compulsory school in Sweden is for children between 6 and 16 years of age. Almost all pupils attending compulsory school continue directly to upper secondary school and most of them complete their upper secondary schooling within three years. A new, rapidly growing phenomenon in Sweden during the last decade are the so called “independent schools” which are privately run schools that all have to follow the national curriculum but also receive the same amount of money per capita as the municipal schools. The starting point for these independent schools were steps taken by the non-socialist government in 1991-94 toward local autonomy and decentralization (Kallos and Lindblad 1994). The independent schools are open for everyone, but must be approved by the National Agency for Education. About 10 % of all children in compulsory school attend an independent school and 15% in upper secondary. This can be regarded as a shift of paradigm and with that percentage Sweden ranks as the Scandinavian country with the most non state schools (Skolverket 2008).

As elsewhere in Europe, the four Scandinavian countries have carried out several educational reforms in recent years. These reforms seem to have two main characteristics: the move towards decentralization on the one hand, and the emphasis on goals and final outcomes on the other (Lundahl 2005). Sweden was the first country to move in this direction in the 1980s and has followed this line further on than the three other countries (Kallos and Lindblad 1994).

In Norway the Reform 97 Act introduced 10 year compulsory schooling for all children aged 6 to 16, thus adding another year by lowering school-entry age to six instead of seven (Berggraf Jacobsen et al. 2001). “The Knowledge Promotion” is the latest Norwegian school reform and PE was then structured into main subject areas for which competence aims have been formulated.

The changes in Denmark of 2003 have meant that the new Folkeskole Act very much resembles the way the Swedish curriculum reforms have moved. In Denmark, all municipal schools have common aims and also Central Knowledge and Proficiency Areas for the schools to follow. However, the individual municipality is free to decide how to implement these areas and what they actually mean in detail (CIRIUS 2008).

In Finland, compulsory schooling is also a nine year system with a voluntary 10th year. From the 1990s the power of decision about the curriculum has been subject to change and was devolved first to local authorities and in a second step, to the schools themselves (Richter 2007).

The comparative analysis shows that the school systems in the Scandinavian countries have a number of commonalities with compulsory schooling from 6-16 years and then upper secondary for most of the pupils (90-95%) for another three years. The curriculum development has moved from centralization to decentralization with an emphasis on goals and outcomes. Aims and objectives are thus formulated in national syllabi, but content and methods are local responsibility. Within these frames, there are small differences between the countries. It seems as if Sweden has taken the first step and the three other countries have begun to move in the same direction (Annerstedt 2005).

Time allocation for PE

Time allocation for PE has fallen markedly in Scandinavia over the 20th century and this holds true also for Sweden. Today the issue of time allocation is however quite complicated in Scandinavia due to localized control of curricular timetables and practices of offering options or electives, which provide opportunities for additional engagement in PE and/or physical activity in school but not as a part of PE.

In Sweden, pupils in compulsory school have 500 hours of PE during nine years of schooling. This converts to about two 45 minutes lessons a week during those nine years. The Swedish timetable also enables the local school to either reduce or raise the amount of time spent in PE by 20%.

Most researchers agree that there has been a radical time reduction in PE in Swedish schools as a result of the curriculum reform of 1994 (Ericsson 2003; Eriksson 2000, 2007; Allert and Bergh 1996; Annerstedt and Patriksson 2000), but Sandahl (2005), having a smaller and different sample, stands out as being the only researcher to state that the reduction has only occurred in some schools while others have remained stable. Other researchers have convincing evidence for quite a heavy reduction. For example Allert and Berg (1996) and Eriksson (2000) showed that the time allocated to PE in Swedish schools decreased in about 75% of the schools after the curriculum of 1994 was put into practice. The decrease was heaviest in the compulsory schools.

However, during the last years there seems to be a change. The turning point for PE in Sweden as far as time in the school timetable is concerned seems to be the year 2001. This was declared as the Public Health Year and the slogan was "Put Sweden on the Move!". This might be regarded as merely symbolic, but it seems as if it had impact. Annerstedt (2005) and Eriksson (2007) state that, since then, PE seems to have gained ground, both in terms of status and in terms of time allocated to the subject. According to Eriksson (2007), 73% of the compulsory schools today offer PE twice a week, while 15% state that they only offer it once a week. In upper secondary the picture is not as bright. Most schools have PE just once a week (less than 20% have stated twice a week) and they only offer it in year 10 and 11 and nothing in year 12.

In Finland the number of lessons has also declined over recent years and the low number of lessons is, according to Heikinaro-Johansson and Telama (2005), the main problem in Finnish PE. In compulsory education, pupils usually have two 45-minute lessons per week, but many

pupils also choose optional PE in their study program. In the upper grades of compulsory schooling, Finnish pupils have two lessons per week, which means that they get about the same amount of PE as their Swedish friends.

In Norway there was a time reduction up until 1970, but during the last three decades Norwegian compulsory schooling has not seen any reduction at all in lesson time (Berggraf Jacobsen et al. 2001). Options for PE in Norway are also possible, but not as common as in Sweden and Finland. With the latest school reform of 2006 teaching hours in PE were raised. Pupils in compulsory school now receive 705 60-minute units of teaching in 10 years of compulsory school and 168 in three years of upper secondary school (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2008).

The climate for PE in Denmark is not quite as positive as in the other Scandinavian countries and this can also be seen in the amount of hours for PE in the school timetable. Denmark experienced reductions from seven to four lessons in 1937, from four to three in 1958 and from three to two in 1970, now it is one to three lessons. Altogether, the recommendations for PE during the nine years of schooling in Denmark are 600 lessons. However, in practice the subject does not get that many lessons and the conclusion is that PE in Denmark is marginalized compared to the other Scandinavian countries (EVA 2004; Rønholt 2005).

Weekly timetable allocation for PE across the EU is, according to Hardman (2006), 109 minutes in primary schools and 101 minutes in upper secondary schools. There is a gradual 'tailing off' in upper secondary in several countries and optional courses become more evident. Basically these conclusions by Hardman mirror Scandinavian PE as well. In summary, Scandinavian PE, viewed with European eyes, is very much "average" as far as time allocation is concerned.

Sports profiles

Combining top-level sports and education has helped keep sports competitive at the international level in several countries (Metsä-Tokila 2002). The most familiar examples of this can be found in the former German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union. In the United States, almost all competitive youth sports also have been integrated into the existing school systems.

The Scandinavian countries have chosen a different model. These countries offer sports as either a specific programme or as available options. This occurs in both compulsory school and upper secondary, which includes boarding schools, where it is more common. The school offers a specific sports program where pupils are taught one or a few sports as part of the school day and coaches are involved in education and training. The schools can have either an elite approach, developing talents in different sports together with the sports confederations, or a sports-for-all approach, where the focus of sporting activities is on the health benefits (Riksidrottsförbundet 2008). Sports-oriented secondary schools were established almost at the same time in Scandinavia. Sweden was in the forefront in 1972, followed a few years later by Finland, Norway and Denmark in that order and almost copying the Swedish model (Thomson and Fairweather 2000).

Ten years ago, sports profiles in Sweden were only part of upper secondary schools. But in 2007, 17% of elementary schools (grades 1-6) and 34% of secondary compulsory schools (grades 7-9) offered a certain sports profile at their schools (Eriksson 2007). In upper secondary the figures were much higher; 51% of the Swedish state schools and 45% of the

independent schools stated that they had a sports profile. Some independent schools even have been created with the specific purpose of offering sports. These sporting profiles are probably the most surprising and significant changes regarding PE in Sweden in recent years. Schools with a sports profile literally have exploded in Sweden. These schools are also popular in the other three Scandinavian countries, but are not as common as in Sweden (Eriksson 2007).

It might be surprising that support for elite sports as part of mandatory schooling is politically acceptable in Scandinavian countries with long traditions of social democratic governments. On the other hand, it might be one reason why these countries are quite successful in international sports (Carlson 1991; Metsä-Tokila 2002). During periods of non-socialist governments, there seems to be a better environment for elite sporting profiles in Scandinavian schools, and this is definitely true for Sweden and Norway (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2008).

Aims and objectives

All Scandinavian syllabi of today are less prescriptive than they used to be; the Swedish syllabus has the fewest details. The structure of the syllabi is also almost the same in all four countries. Each syllabus gives goals to aim for and state objectives to reach. However, one problem with the syllabi is that the learning aspect is not focused enough (Annerstedt 2007).

The syllabi seem to have three dominating elements: physical activity, social learning and health. Through multi-activity programs of different physical and sporting activities, the pupils in Scandinavia are to learn about their bodies through the use of their bodies (Quennerstedt 2006). Above all, pupils should develop a desire to perform life-long physical activity through experiencing the joy of movement during PE classes (Rønholt 2005). The subjects overall aims are physical, mental and social development and to develop a positive attitude towards one's own body, and to achieve a healthy lifestyle.

Outdoor activities have always played an important role in Scandinavian society in general and especially in PE. The subject should therefore be linked to well-established Scandinavian cultural traditions concerning the enjoyment of nature (Backman 2007). This can be seen in the syllabi of the four countries, Norway being in the forefront and Sweden being the runner up.

Outdoor activity days also have a long tradition, especially in Sweden and Norway as part of PE (Backman 2007). Schools have run such days for decades as part of the cultural heritage. Through outdoor activities, notably in forests and the countryside, pupils gain experience and knowledge that can stimulate a continuous interest in outdoor life, nature and environmental issues. Outdoor activity days exist also in Denmark and Finland, but are not part of the requirements as they are in Sweden and Norway (Moser et al. 2005).

The importance of social learning

Social development and learning form an essential field of PE in all the Scandinavian countries and this has been emphasized even more in recent years as part of the aims of PE. Through connections to social developmental aims like cooperation, leadership skills, fair play and respect for others, PE teachers point to their unique opportunity for positive influence on children's development (Kougioumtzis 2006). However, there are few empirical data that explain in what way social learning in PE is really taking place (Hellison and Martinek 2006).

Especially in Denmark and Norway there is great emphasis on the social learning process through which pupils acquire values, norms and attitudes. The same holds true for Sweden and Finland, but not quite as evident as in the two first mentioned countries. The main objectives in Finland include, according to Heikinaro-Johansson and Telama (2005), that the pupils should behave in a constructive social and moral manner. This objective is different and, surely more explicit than in the other Scandinavian syllabi and also emphasized more strongly in the present curriculum as compared to before.

Health as a central theme

Health education has always been a significant part of PE in the Scandinavian countries. The syllabi mention it as a major aspect of the subject, and stipulate that there has to be a health perspective. It seems as if this is most evident in the Swedish syllabus, where health is mentioned more often, have more space and together with physical activities should dominate the subject. What a health perspective actually means is however seldom discussed (Swartling Widerström 2005; Quennerstedt 2006). According to the syllabi, good health is first of all developed through being physically active, and by learning a broad repertoire of physical activities. The subject, it is hoped, will create physically active pupils, who take responsibility for their own health, and reflect upon and evaluate factors that influence it.

The change of names in Sweden from “Physical Education”¹ to “Physical Education and Health” took place in 1994 and was a position statement: the subject should change and the health perspective should be more dominant. Thus, there is no doubt that the concept of health is now much more in focus in Sweden than ever before (Karlefors 2002; Sandahl 2005).

In Norway health has always been an important aim in PE even from the first curriculum of 1848 (Moser et al. 2005). However in the recent reform of 2006, health is not emphasized, not mentioned as a main subject area and only mentioned twice in the syllabus. Instead the subject focus more on physical activity and good experiences in PE that may help form the basis for a health-promoting lifestyle.

In Finland, like in the other Scandinavian countries, health remains one of the main pillars for legitimizing PE and the country has always followed a healthy concept with its gymnastics or “liikunta” as it is called (Richter 2007). However, since 2003, health and PE have been two separate subjects in Finland. In stages 7-9, ‘Health’ is an independent subject with one hour per week during the three years. In upper secondary schools there is one compulsory course (40 ‘hours’) and two national specialization courses in three years. This separation of PE from health education can be seen in for example the US, but is not seen in any of the other Scandinavian countries. It will be interesting to see if the other Scandinavian countries follow the Finland example, or if this will be something that is unique for our eastern neighbors.

Nevertheless, the subject “liikunta” still follows a health concept and the main goal of PE is to contribute to pupils’ health. The main factor for achieving a lifelong participation in physical activity is having fun through the activity, which is triggered mainly through social acceptance, individual appreciation, and knowledge (Richter 2007).

¹ The name of the subject in Swedish is *Idrott och hälsa* which is difficult to translate. *Idrott* is an old Scandinavian word for physical activity, but is nowadays also used as a synonym for sport. On the other hand the word *sport* is also used in Swedish, but means physical activities performed in sport clubs.

In Denmark the health component is also evident, but not as much as in Sweden and Finland. It is an important focus in the syllabi, but in the arguments for subject-legitimization health is not that evident (EVA 2004; Rønholt 2005).

The comparative analysis shows that health is a central proficiency area in PE in especially Sweden and Finland, while in Denmark and Norway health is not emphasized as much as in the two first mentioned countries. Even though a health perspective should permeate the subject in all the Scandinavian countries, what this means in practice is seldom discussed and the teachers have difficulty defining the concept (Quennerstedt 2006; Heikinaro-Johansson and Telama 2005).

Teaching content

All four Scandinavian syllabi talk about a broad content area, but according to research (Huisman 2004; Quennerstedt et al. 2008) ball games dominate in Scandinavia as well as in most other countries.

Quennerstedt (2006) states, by analyzing local curriculum documents in PE, that the subject content in Sweden can be characterized by a wide variety of activities, where pupils are expected to be active participants in the sense of being physically active. The national evaluation (Quennerstedt et al. 2008) as well as many other studies (Annerstedt and Patriksson 2000; Larsson and Redelius 2004) show that ballgames are the most common activity together with gymnastics, fitness training and track and field. On the other hand, those activities that are explicitly mentioned in the curriculum do not stand out to be important in practice and that goes for example for dance, swimming, orienteering and outdoor activities, even though dance has increased in recent years (Sandahl 2005).

It is evident that there is a gap between what the curriculum stipulates and what actually goes on in practice in Swedish PE (Larsson and Meckbach 2007; Sandahl 2005). While the curriculum recommends that education should consist of a broad range of activities with a significant health approach and not only sports, this is not performed in practice. On a practical level the teachers focus on a small range of activities; 75 % of the teaching consists of ball games, gymnastics, fitness training and track and field. Also, great differences exist among the teachers (Sandahl 2005).

In a study requested by the European Parliament, Hardman (2006) gave an overview of the current situation for PE in the European Union. One conclusion by Hardman was that there is a narrow and unjustifiable conception of the role of PE merely to provide experiences, which serve to reinforce achievement-orientated competition performance sport. This picture is however not true for Sweden. Although Swedish PE, in practice, includes quite a lot of sporting activities, the focus is not on competition and performance but more towards a joy of movement and being physically active.

Sport and sporting activities are mentioned much more in the Danish text than in the Swedish, and it seems as if the Danish subject is more sports oriented. Words like “participation in sports, competition, values of different types of sports, know and test a wide selection of different sports” are mentioned in the Danish syllabus, while in Sweden the word *idrott* (sport) is just mentioned once in the whole text. The Danish curriculum is, on the one hand, more sports oriented, but on the other hand more focused on creativity, body language, music and drama, than its Swedish counterpart. In both countries it is a very broad subject and whereas the Danes are more towards creativity and body language, the Swedes have more

outdoor education, connections to environmental questions and are less focused on sports (Annerstedt 2005).

Ball games also dominate in Finland and floor-ball and ice hockey are very popular. The same is true for track and field. Boboll, also referred to as “Finnish baseball” and considered to be a national sport of Finland, is not specified in the syllabus, but a very common team game at all school levels. A study by Heikinaro-Johansson, Karjalainen, and Johansson (2005) also showed that ten pin bowling was quite common in Finnish PE, which, compared to the three other countries, is totally different.

The comparative analysis shows that all four Scandinavian syllabi refer to a broad content area and to culturally based physical activities. It is through multi-activity programs of different physical activities that pupils are to learn, but there seems to be a significant gap between what the curriculum stipulates and what actually goes on in practice. However, the performance sporting approach that Hardman (2006) mentions is not a true picture for Scandinavian PE and especially not for Sweden.

Coeducation or separate PE?

The construction of gender is, according to some researchers, a central issue of PE and especially sport (Coakley 2006; Larsson and Meckbach 2007). There are numerous studies that have shown that PE disadvantages girls, and even some boys, because of its traditional masculine form (Carli 2004; Lundvall and Meckbach 2003). However, according to both international and Swedish studies, girls seem to be the ‘losers’ when moving into coeducation classes (Carli 2004; O’Sullivan et al. 2002; Quennerstedt et al. 2008). Boys influence the subject more than girls, boys receive higher grades in coeducation classes and boys get more attention and appreciation (Quennerstedt et al. 2008).

The introduction of coeducation in PE has been an international development, and in Sweden coeducation has been the main principle of PE for more than 25 years. In 1982, the government announced that boys and girls should be taught PE together, as part of the aim for equality between the sexes. This should lead, it said, to greater mutual understanding and respect. Girls were to be given the same teaching as boys and the aim seemed to be gender neutral bodies (Olofsson 2005).

Eriksson (2007) showed that nowadays almost all Swedish schools use coeducation. In compulsory schools 78% state that they always have coeducation, 19% that they have it most of the time and only 3% have separate PE. In upper secondary 94% always have coeducation, 4 % most of the time and 2% use separate PE.

Coeducation is also the normal situation for pupils in Danish and Norwegian schools. The main argument in both countries is the same as in Sweden, that boys and girls must become acquainted with each other where the physical aspect and sport culture are central. In most Danish schools, a male and a female teacher run the classes for girls and boys together in one large gymnasium (EVA 2004). However, as in Sweden and Norway, Danish legislation for PE requires the possibility of occasionally separating boys and girls depending on the content of the lesson.

The legislation in Norway of 1987 and of 1996 added that boys and girls should be taught in classes of coeducation also in PE. Norwegian boys and girls as well as their teachers seem to appreciate coeducational PE (Moser et al. 2005). The same results are valid for Sweden and

Denmark, where a great majority are in favor of coeducation and would not like separate groups (Annerstedt and Patriksson 2000; Rønholt 2005).

Finland stands out in Scandinavia as the only country with separate PE classes. In Finland PE can be run either coeducationally or in single sex classes, but normally, boys and girls have separate PE from grades three to nine and in upper secondary school. Even though Eklund (1999) showed that a majority of PE teachers in Finland felt positively towards coeducation, separate classes are still the most common way to organize PE.

Concerning coeducation, there is hardly any debate at all going on around these questions in any of the Scandinavian countries. On the contrary, there seems to be a general consensus in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, that coeducation may cause some difficulties, but that the advantages outweigh the drawbacks. The lack of debate is hard to understand when, for example in Sweden, both Carli (2004) and Quennerstedt et al. (2008) have presented results showing that PE has patriarchal features.

In conclusion, coeducation is a main principle in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, while in Finland, PE is taught in separate groups. It was introduced as part of the aim for equality between the sexes and it seems as if both teachers and pupils are in favor of coeducation (Quennerstedt et al. 2008). However, no research supports the view that coeducation makes society more equal and it also seems as if girls have become the losers in coeducation (Carli 2004; Sandahl 2005).

Concluding remarks

This article has shown the similarities and differences between PE in the Scandinavian countries, noting that there are many more similarities. It even seems possible to talk about a Scandinavian model for PE, characterized by a broad content area, where pupils choose from a kind of "smorgasbord" of physical activities. Activities particularly popular in Scandinavian culture like skiing, skating, orienteering and outdoor education with a focus on environmental questions and health form the basis of a program that differs from those found in most other countries. Cooperation, socialisation and team effort are emphasized more than physiology, competition and results (Annerstedt 2005).

Hardman and Marshall (2005) and Hardman (2006) have reported in their European and world-wide surveys significant problems for PE. However, this comparative analysis shows that the situation seems to be better in Scandinavia than in many other countries around the world. In Sweden for example, the situation has changed over the last seven years. The PE climate is now much more positive and the subject has regained status and resources (Annerstedt 2007; Eriksson 2007). The situation, while not quite as good as in Sweden, also looks positive in Finland and Norway. PE in Denmark, however, still lags behind. This positive picture might be explained by a strong tradition of PE in Scandinavia. There has been good encouragement for outdoor recreation because of a law of common access to nature, very good facilities and a newfound interest in being physically active.

The analysis also shows that school systems in the Scandinavian countries are very similar. Recent educational reforms have moved towards decentralization and, at the same time, an emphasis on goals. Sweden took the first step and the three other countries have moved in the same direction. This shift of educational policy was politically initiated. It has meant moving from centralism and universalism towards decentralisation and particularism with market ideas as one of its guiding principles (Lundahl 2002). In the Scandinavian countries, and

especially in Sweden, embracing market ideas has meant that more pupils attend private “independent” schools that offer sports profiles or sports programs that aim at talent-development. Having options or electives is common. Green (2008) reports that this type of market-driven education offers the benefits of ‘specialism’, ‘diversity’ and ‘choice’. This “marketization” is now more common in Scandinavia, and especially in Sweden, compared to the years of social-democratic governmental rule (Lundahl 2005).

However, there are also problems facing PE in Scandinavia. There is, for example, a discrepancy between what the policy documents says the programmes should offer and what is actually offered (Sandahl 2005). There is still orientation towards sports-dominated programmes, but not as significant as Hardman and Marshall (2005) reported from other countries. Green (2008) talks about the “sportization” of PE, by which sport becomes increasingly prominent, but this process does not apply to recent developments in Scandinavian PE.

The Swedish syllabus has been questioned for being too vague and lacking clarity of prescription (Annerstedt and Patriksson 2000; Annerstedt 2007). What a health perspective actually means is, for example, seldom discussed. Another problem, according to a Danish national evaluation, is that the teachers focus more on activity than on learning, and more on doing than on knowing (EVA 2004). This conclusion also holds true for Sweden, where the learning aspect sometimes seems to be missing (Annerstedt 2007). In fact, researchers in Sweden (Larsson and Meckbach 2007) agree with the notion that there seems to be a problem between what the core of PE actually is and its learning outcomes. This is something that Annerstedt first discussed in 1991 and is still one of the most important questions to deal with for Swedish PE.

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