



BEING A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER IN TURKEY: PRIVILEGES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract:

Physical education teachers are an essential part of the education system as they help develop students' psychomotor skills, instill a sports culture, encourage them to become individuals who engage in lifelong physical activity, and foster responsible individuals with good mental and social well-being. Physical education teachers also play a critical role in students' physical, social, mental, and emotional development, and the active, enjoyable, and natural climate of their classes allows them to build stronger connections with students compared to teachers of other classes. However, in education settings, each country and culture has its own educational goals, learning opportunities, achievements and shortcomings. Similarly, within the Turkish National Education System, being a physical education teacher involves not only convenience and enjoyable aspects but also various challenges and difficulties. Especially, sports activities and school team practices enhance teachers' communication with students, while positive relationships with the local community, especially in rural areas, strengthen the teachers' respect and standing in society. Nevertheless, issues such as insufficient weekly class hours, lack of sports facilities and equipment, educational policies, inadequate administrative support, professional role conflicts (e.g., the dual role of coach and teacher), seeing as a disciplinary authority and declining student interest due to high school and university entrance exams represent the negative aspects of the profession. Also, physical education classes are still not given sufficient value, and there is even partial resistance to recognizing their significance. Although physical education teaching in Turkey offers significant advantages both individually and socially, addressing structural, political, and social problems is essential to improving the effectiveness of this profession. In conclusion, in a country like Turkey, which represents a blend of Eastern and Western cultures, this article examining the advantages and challenges of being a physical education teacher will serve as a valuable resource for future comparative cultural studies.

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1. Introduction

The modern world is one where technology and population growth are reshaping human needs, redefining professions, and giving rise to diverse lifestyles. One of the greatest challenges of this lifestyle, particularly for people living in urban areas, is a sedentary way of life. Physical inactivity not only negatively impacts human health but also places direct and indirect economic burdens on national budgets. While individuals try to create opportunities to stay active through sports clubs, gyms, sports courses, or recreational activities, countries, on the other hand, strive to provide such opportunities to their citizens as a matter of national policy. These countries utilize physical education classes as a tool not only to promote sports culture and increase physical activity but also to instill a sense of civic responsibility. As a result, physical education or sports courses are taught from kindergarten to senior high school, and even in universities. All these elements should be considered when defining physical education. Therefore, we can define physical education as a process of change, development and education that aims to make it a habit for individuals to increase their social, physical, motor skills and mental well-being, internalize their civic responsibilities, try to produce individuals who know the value of sports and engage in sports throughout their lives, and use physical activity, including various sports branches and educational games, as a tool for this purpose.

Physical education not only supports students' physical development but also contributes significantly to cognitive and emotional development (Bailey, 2006). Physical education classes, for example, develop students' problem-solving skills, enhance their strategic thinking, foster self-discipline and self-confidence, and indirectly contribute to academic success. Furthermore, physical education classes play a critical role in the development of social skills such as teamwork, discipline, communication, and cooperation (Bailey, 2006; Boz & Aytar, 2012). As Sallis et al. (2012) emphasizes, regular physical activity and group-oriented sports allow students to embrace a culture of collaboration and contribute to the learning of values such as responsibility, leadership, empathy, and respect.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), it is recommended that children and adolescents participate in a minimum of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day to support healthy growth and development. Integrating physical education classes into school curricula offers a structured and organized environment that assists students in meeting this daily physical activity goal. Finally, by promoting lifelong physical activity and healthy habits, physical education contributes to building a healthier, more resilient, and socially responsible generation (Caspersen, Powell, & Christenson, 1985). Physical education classes are the only educational component that systematically meets these requirements.

Significantly, physical education teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that children and young people benefit from physical activity. They have the power to

motivate students to actively participate in sports or, conversely, to discourage them from involvement in sports. A dedicated and well-prepared teacher who understands their responsibilities and the significance of their role can have a positive impact on the lives and futures of their students. Conversely, a teacher with a negative attitude and lack of dedication can result in significant setbacks for students. While the roles and responsibilities of physical education teachers exhibit commonalities across international contexts, they may vary in response to the specific educational, sociopolitical, and institutional needs of each country. National and international research reveals that the professional lives of physical education teachers include a variety of rewarding and challenging aspects. For example, a study by Oh et al. (2022) highlighted the challenges faced by physical education teachers in Japan, South Korea, and the United States, including difficulties in capturing students' attention and maintaining focus during lessons. Nevertheless, observing students' development brings physical education teachers a strong sense of fulfillment. In a similar vein, Anastasiou and Panagopoulos (2014) examined professional burnout and job satisfaction among PE teachers in Greece, revealing that supportive factors within the educational environment significantly contribute to boosting teachers' motivation. Nevertheless, physical education teachers frequently encounter significant obstacles, such as the limited allocation of class hours for physical education, inadequate facilities and equipment, and a lack of acknowledgment regarding the importance of the subject (Sallis et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, heightened screen time, and the predominance of exam-oriented educational systems have led to a decline in students' enthusiasm and engagement in physical activities (Hardman, 2011). In addition, role conflicts—like the expectation to simultaneously fulfill both teaching and coaching duties—are often reported as major stressors for physical education teachers (Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012). At the same time, these teachers face challenges such as inadequate physical resources, limited professional recognition, and demanding workloads. On the other hand, factors such as positive relationships with students, the inherently enjoyable nature of sports, recognition of individual accomplishments, and the opportunity to create dynamic and interactive learning environments are identified by researchers as major sources of job satisfaction (Gazali et al., 2024; Baykara & Orhan, 2020; Balga & Antala, 2022; Bailey, 2006).

Despite the abundance of international research on this topic, there is no study that simultaneously examines the challenges faced by Turkish physical education teachers and the enjoyable aspects of being a teacher. Such a study would not only serve as a resource for international research and comparisons but also act as a guide for young individuals preparing for the teaching profession. Therefore, this study aims to examine the facilitators and challenges encountered by physical education teachers in Turkey, as shaped by the national context and its corresponding educational mandates.

To understand the Turkish physical education curriculum in schools, it is necessary to explain the Turkish National Education system and its objectives. The main goal of Turkish National Education is to foster individuals who possess knowledge,

skills, and behaviors integrated with values and competencies. In line with this objective, physical education classes in Turkey are conducted within the framework of curricula determined by the Ministry of National Education (MEB). The primary aim of these classes is to support students' physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development; to improve their motor skills; to promote healthy lifestyle habits; and to encourage a lifelong sports culture. Additionally, physical education classes aim to help students internalize social values such as discipline, responsibility, teamwork, and fair play (MEB, 2018). The weekly course hours for physical education determined by the Ministry of National Education vary according to educational levels. In primary school, physical education is taught under the title "physical education and play" for 5 hours per week from grades 1 to 3, and for 2 hours per week in grade 4. In middle school (grades 5-8), physical education is included as a compulsory subject with 2 hours per week. In high schools (including general, vocational, and technical schools), physical education is offered as a compulsory course for 2 hours per week in grades 9 and 10, while in grades 11 and 12 it is presented as an elective course, with the number of weekly hours varying depending on students' preferences (MEB, 2018).

For a comprehensive understanding of the issue, it is essential to examine how the process of becoming a physical education teacher in Turkey is structured and what stages prospective teachers must complete. The process of training physical education (PE) teachers in Turkey is carried out within the framework of standards determined by the Ministry of National Education (MEB). Individuals who wish to pursue this profession must first enroll in the Physical Education and Sports Teaching undergraduate programs offered within the Faculties of Education or Faculties of Sport Sciences at universities. Admission to these programs is shaped by changes in national education policies and has therefore varied over the years.

As of 2024, the selection of candidates for PE teaching programs has been conducted by the Council of Higher Education Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM). The total admission score is calculated by combining the Higher Education Institutions Exam (YKS) score, a sports background score, and a special talent score. Based on this composite score, candidates who wish to study physical education teaching apply to the relevant university departments across Turkey.

The undergraduate program, which lasts four years, aims to provide prospective teachers with both subject-specific expertise and pedagogical formation. During this process, students take courses such as sports sciences, movement and game pedagogy, training science, sport psychology, educational sciences, and teaching methods, alongside gaining practical experience through applied sports activities. In the final year, the teaching practicum courses enable candidates to transfer their accumulated knowledge and skills into real classroom practice.

Although graduates earn the title of "Physical Education Teacher," they must, under a new system introduced in 2025, take the Ministry of National Education Academy Entrance Exam (MEB-AGS) and the Teacher Field Knowledge Test (ÖABT) in order to be eligible for teaching positions in state schools (Milli Eğitim Akademisi, 2025).

Based on the results of these examinations, successful candidates will, for the first time in 2025, be required to complete one year of mandatory training-totaling 550 hours-at newly established National Education Academies. Those who successfully complete this training will be appointed as contracted teachers, with the right to secure permanent positions after three years, and subsequently be placed in schools across different regions of Turkey as PE teachers. This system marks a partial departure from previous teacher appointment procedures. Altogether, these developments illustrate how teacher recruitment policies in Turkey have undergone dramatic changes over time.

As Kirk (2010) stated, physical education teachers occupy a distinct and privileged position compared to other teachers working in schools. The same situation also applies to Turkish physical education teachers. In this article, the challenges faced by Turkish physical education teachers in the educational environment are presented in a listed format, while their privileges are also discussed:

A. Tension between physical education teachers and other branches of teachers

Physical education (PE) teachers are not merely individuals who deliver curriculum-based lesson plans; they are also regarded as approachable mentors, sources of personal support, and influential figures in students' overall development (Açıkada & Ergen, 1990; Armour & Makopoulou, 2012). Owing to the very nature of the subject, PE teachers build meaningful and strong connections with students not only in terms of physical fitness but also through direct personal interactions that extend beyond traditional classrooms into spaces such as gymnasiums and outdoor fields. These diverse environments provide opportunities for more genuine and emotionally intensive relationships between teachers and students. Such relationships enable teachers to support learners in areas such as the development of social skills and the strengthening of self-confidence. Particularly during adolescence, PE lessons create a safe and supportive context where students can learn to cope with stress, develop teamwork skills, and reinforce their sense of identity and belonging (Casey & Goodyear, 2015; Morgan & Hansen, 2008).

The role of PE teachers is one that some other subject teachers may not fully recognize.

Their responsibility goes beyond covering curriculum content; it encompasses making meaningful contributions to students' holistic development—physically, cognitively, mentally, and socially. By being involved in both the academic and extracurricular lives of students, PE teachers occupy a uniquely influential position within the school environment (Kirk, 2010). However, this influential position can, at times, generate professional tensions among colleagues. For instance, the informal interactions PE teachers maintain with students during breaks, or the visibility and popularity gained through time spent with school sports teams, may occasionally provoke feelings of jealousy among other subject teachers. While often unintentional, these dynamics can negatively impact collegial harmony and workplace morale if not carefully managed.

B. Engaging and active learning environments versus limited instructional time

One of the most effective ways to foster the creation of “physically educated persons” (MacAllister, 2013) is through the design of enjoyable and active lessons. Physical education (PE) lessons not only provide such contexts but also offer a holistic environment that incorporates cognitive, social, and mental dimensions. Young learners who experience enjoyment and a sense of achievement in these lessons are more likely to continue participating in sports during adulthood or to develop positive attitudes toward physical activity. Here, “achievement” does not refer to winning competitions or ranking first in events; rather, it is defined as progress in movement, skills, cognitive, mental, and social development, and is considered a personal process.

During PE lessons, sport-based activities and games in which students actively participate not only increase student engagement but also enhance teachers’ professional satisfaction. However, in Turkey, most PE lessons are limited to only one or two hours per week, which falls far short of the World Health Organization’s recommended minimum of 60 minutes of physical activity per day for children and adolescents (World Health Organization, 2020). The scarcity of instructional hours often prevents teachers from implementing their planned activities and diminishes the overall impact of the subject.

C. High school and university entrance exams

The Turkish education system is largely shaped by a centralized, exam-driven structure. Key national assessments, including the Liselere Geçiş Sistemi (LGS – High School Entrance System) for secondary education and the Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı (YKS – Higher Education Institutions Exam) for university admission, function as decisive gateways that strongly influence students’ academic trajectories. Because performance in these examinations is considered critical for future opportunities, families and students tend to emphasize subjects directly linked to exam success. As a result, courses such as physical education and the arts are frequently marginalized and perceived as less significant within the broader curriculum. Specifically, physical education classes are often neglected in key academic years, particularly in the final year of middle school (Grade 8) and the final year of high school (Grade 12). The main reason for this neglect is that Grade 8 students are required to take the high school entrance examination, while Grade 12 students must sit for the university entrance examination. Since these exams only assess knowledge from other subjects (e.g., mathematics, Turkish, social studies, religion, physics, chemistry), students, teachers, school administrators, and families tend to prioritize those subjects. In this context, academic “success” is often equated with rote learning of exam-related content, pushing PE lessons into a secondary position. Therefore, some students perceive physical education classes as an opportunity either to rest or to study for other subjects (Demirhan, Bulca & Saçlı, 2014). This situation is clearly visible during school–parent meetings. On the one hand, families express the desire for their children to remain physically active; on the other, they tend to undervalue PE lessons and engage with PE teachers only at a superficial level. Consequently, this

exam-focused approach results in a decline in interest toward physical education lessons and limits the functional contributions of such courses.

D. Lack of equipment and sports facilities, and support of the school administration and the local community

In Turkey, PE teachers' roles extend well beyond classroom instruction, encompassing coaching responsibilities, administrative tasks, and participation in community-based activities mandated by the Directorates of National Education, such as talent identification programs, serving as exam proctors, and participating in local sports and cultural activities. The effective implementation of these responsibilities depends not only on the efforts of teachers but also on the support of school administrators, local authorities, and the wider community.

Support at both the administrative and community levels directly shapes the quality of PE instruction and its impact on students. In particular, the support of school leadership is one of the most critical factors in enhancing the effectiveness of lessons and school sports teams. For example, the costs of sports equipment used in classes and expenses for participating in competitions are partly covered by PE teachers themselves but are also met through the support they secure from school administrators and the local community.

In smaller settlements, there are additional influential factors that directly affect the quality of PE lessons and school sports activities. These include the involvement of the Directorates of National Education, Provincial Directorates of Youth and Sports, municipalities, sports clubs, and local shopkeepers who are often the parents of students. In many rural schools, the lack of adequate indoor and outdoor sports facilities forces PE teachers to take on roles similar to that of a builder or laborer. In such cases, the support of administrators and the local community become essential for the construction and maintenance of these facilities. By building strong networks of communication, PE teachers are often able to secure the financial resources needed to meet their school's requirements.

However, within an exam-oriented education system, administrators' priorities are frequently directed toward subjects such as mathematics, science, and languages, which are tested in national examinations. As a result, PE lessons are often relegated to a secondary position. The use of sports facilities for non-educational purposes, the reduction of PE class hours to allow additional exam preparation, and the insufficient allocation of budgets to sporting activities all present challenges that make it difficult for PE teachers to conduct their lessons effectively.

On the other hand, the physical education teacher is often received with appreciation and gratitude by the local community and school administrators for the new sports facilities, activities, and guidance they provide to the school, the region, and, consequently, to the students. In smaller settlements, traditional Turkish customs and values still prevail, and owing to the respect and affection accorded to teachers, they continue to occupy a special and esteemed position within society.

E. Professional preparedness and role conflict

Professional preparedness encompasses the knowledge, practical skills, and accumulated experiences that teachers gain through both initial education and ongoing professional development (Trendowski, 2025). It reflects the extent to which a teacher understands, adopts, and desires the profession—in short, their competence and proficiency. These competencies and proficiencies enable teachers to effectively fulfill both their instructional and extracurricular responsibilities (Trendowski, 2025). By contrast, role conflict emerges when the expectations placed on teachers by students, administrators, families, or the community exceed their professional capacities or contradict one another. Research shows that most physical education (PE) teachers perceive themselves as competent mainly in instructional duties, while they face significant challenges in administrative tasks, extracurricular responsibilities, and community expectations (Kul, Yılmaz, & Yasartürk, 2018). The discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge and skills acquired during university education and the realities of school practice is often referred to in the literature as a “reality shock”, which negatively affects the motivation of novice teachers (Tekkursun, Cicioglu, & Ilhan, 2017). In particular, beginning PE teachers, when confronted with unexpected workloads, may experience a decline in job satisfaction and face a heightened risk of burnout.

PE teachers are not only expected to deliver curriculum-based lessons; they are also required to coach school teams, contribute to the development of regional sports, organize a variety of sporting and cultural events, and often assume responsibilities that fall outside the scope of their professional training (Demirhan et al., 2014). This multidimensional role definition increases teachers’ workload and fosters role ambiguity. Community expectations can sometimes enhance the social status of PE teachers, making them prominent figures in their local context. However, the other side of this dynamic is the stretching of professional boundaries and the considerable pressure placed upon teachers. Especially in rural areas, the inadequacy—or complete absence—of sports facilities often forces PE teachers to assume not only the role of educator and organizer but also, at times, that of a laborer involved in the physical construction of sports areas (Çiftçi & Cin, 2017). While such conditions may enhance teachers’ visibility in the community, the excessive workload and limitless expectations blur professional boundaries and result in significant role conflict.

F. Teacher–student motivation deficiency

Not all Turkish students participating in physical education (PE) classes are willing to engage actively. Several factors contribute to this lack of motivation, including students’ perceptions of low athletic competence, the absence of a sense of achievement, insufficiently enjoyable lessons, perceiving classes as monotonous, limited teacher–student communication, a shortage of instructional materials, inadequate sports facilities, and the competitive, exam-driven structure of the education system (Demirhan et al., 2014). Equally important, however, is the growing issue of internet, gaming, and social media addiction, which has accelerated with technological advancement. Particularly

during the COVID-19 pandemic, increased digital dependency reinforced sedentary lifestyle tendencies and significantly reduced students' interest in PE lessons (Çelik, Bektaş, & Duran, 2022).

This disengagement not only disrupts communication between teachers and students and undermines the flow of lessons but also diminishes teachers' own willingness and motivation to teach (Guo et al., 2025; Reeve & Cheon, 2025). Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), such disengagement can be explained by the failure to meet students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When these needs remain unfulfilled, both student and teacher motivation decline.

In Turkey, cultural factors play a unique role in shaping teacher–student relationships. Despite increasing skepticism in interpersonal relations, Turkish culture—blending both Eastern and Western traditions—continues to emphasize respect and affection. Teachers are often regarded as parental figures, particularly in primary and middle school education. In this context, students' expressions of affection and their achievements positively motivate teachers, whereas their avoidance of participation has the opposite effect, undermining teacher enthusiasm and lesson quality (Donkor, 2025; Kul et al., 2018).

G. The physical education teacher as a disciplinary authority

The establishment of discipline in schools is fundamental not only for academic achievement but also for sustaining a safe and respectful learning environment. In Turkey, physical education (PE) teachers are frequently positioned by school administrators as central authority figures responsible for discipline in addition to their teaching roles. This expectation is closely linked to the structural nature of PE lessons, which are often conducted in open areas or with large groups of students. In such contexts, the absence of order can easily lead to confusion, disputes, or even accidents, making teachers' capacity to maintain discipline highly visible. The extent to which students respect rules, collaborate effectively, and embrace fair-play values is strongly connected to the classroom management and leadership practices of PE teachers (Bailey, 2006).

Within the Turkish cultural context, the disciplinary role of PE teachers is reinforced by their distinctive presence in students' daily lives. Unlike many other subject teachers, they frequently accompany students outside the classroom through sports, competitions, and extracurricular events. This close interaction fosters trust-based relationships, and in many cases, students regard PE teachers as mentors or even parental figures. Such perceptions mirror broader cultural traditions in Turkey, where teachers continue to be held in high esteem, especially within smaller communities. Consequently, administrators often rely on PE teachers not only to manage athletic activities but also to contribute to the overall disciplinary climate of the school.

Nevertheless, the expectation that PE teachers act as disciplinary authorities carries significant risks. When teachers are consistently associated with discipline, their

core pedagogical responsibilities may be overshadowed, narrowing their professional identity to that of “enforcers.” This situation can erode the bonds of trust and affection that students hold for them, thereby weakening the relational foundations of effective teaching and learning. Moreover, the additional burden of disciplinary duties has the potential to reduce job satisfaction, elevate stress, and adversely affect professional well-being (Kul, Yılmaz, & Yasartürk, 2018). In some cases, such tensions have escalated into formal disputes between teachers and administrators, extending even into legal proceedings.

2. Conclusion

The role of physical education (PE) teachers in Turkey is shaped by a complex interplay of systemic, professional, and cultural dynamics. On the one hand, PE teachers hold a privileged position in schools, distinguished by their ability to build meaningful relationships with students inside and outside the classroom. They contribute not only to physical development but also to the emotional, cognitive, and social growth of learners, often being perceived as mentors or parental figures. This close bond enhances trust, motivates students, and reinforces the holistic educational value of PE.

On the other hand, PE teachers face considerable challenges that undermine the potential of the subject. Limited instructional hours, insufficient facilities, and the exam-oriented nature of the national education system marginalize PE within the broader curriculum, reducing student engagement and restricting the subject’s functional contributions. Additionally, heavy workloads, role ambiguity, and expectations to serve as both educators and disciplinary authorities exacerbate stress, diminish job satisfaction, and, in some cases, lead to professional burnout. The growing influence of digital dependency and sedentary lifestyles further compounds the issue, creating motivational deficiencies among students and eroding the effectiveness of PE lessons.

While cultural respect for teachers in Turkish society enhances their social standing, the dual role of PE teachers as both trusted mentors and authority figures creates tensions that can disrupt the balance between pedagogy and discipline. Without adequate systemic support, these competing expectations risk narrowing their professional identity and weakening the educational relationships that underpin effective teaching. Therefore, meaningful reforms are urgently required. Expanding compulsory PE hours to align with World Health Organization recommendations, investing in infrastructure and resources, and offering professional development focused on leadership, classroom management, and psychosocial support are essential steps. Equally important is fostering collaboration among schools, families, local authorities, and communities to sustain active lifestyles and strengthen the role of PE within the education system.

Ultimately, recognizing both the challenges and privileges faced by Turkish PE teachers will not only enhance their professional well-being but also ensure the cultivation of healthier, more active, and socially responsible generations. Most

importantly, the lasting respect and appreciation shown to PE teachers by their former students highlight the profound and enduring impact of their work—one of the most rewarding aspects of the profession.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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