
Scaring the Parents. Disease and Disability as Arguments for the Physical Education of Children in Romania from the 1880s to the 1930s

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Résumé

A history of disease and disability in Romania shall not be comfortable. But gymnastics and sport of the 19th and 20th centuries should be considered. There was little next to nothing in terms of exercises or competitions for disabled children or adults. Discriminatory attitudes prevailed and a better social protection system was slowly created only in the latter years. Since the late 19th century, however, several authors presented gymnastics and sports for children as a possible defence against different life-changing diseases, such as tuberculosis or skeletal issues, leading to possible physical disabilities, hence to inadaptation or discrimination in adulthood. Besides death at a young age, disease and disability in adulthood were constantly presented as major perils for the health of children. Medical research and statistics were invoked, as many described the reality of a childhood marred either by poverty (the social structure of Romania must be considered) or fear of the better-off parents for the safety of their children. Medical practitioners and physical education teacher alike devised own experiments and measurements, later published as (personal and limited) successes (or solutions) in a fight for the benefit of children and youth, hence of the future of the society. In this paper, I aim to analyse the discourse and actions of the Romanian theorists of gymnastics, physical education, and sport, focusing on the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. I argue that disease and disability were central arguments in favour of body exercise and hygiene. Such arguments were addressed to the parents, being nothing short of a scare on the future of their children, given the social perception of disability. I rely on articles and books explaining the benefits of gymnastics and sport, school inquiries, and medical texts and statistics, some unpublished.

Mots-Clés: Disability and disease, Gymnastics, Sports theories, Modern Romania, Social perception of disability.

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