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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REVISED PHYSICAL EDUCATION SYLLABUS: CIRCUMSTANCES, REWARDS AND COSTS

Abstract

This study is concerned with the particular circumstances, personal rewards and costs which Irish post-primary principals and physical education teachers identify as affecting the implementation of the revised junior cycle physical education syllabus and in the future revised senior cycle physical education and new Leaving Certificate physical education. The concepts of the ‘local context of implementation’ (Kirk and Macdonald, 2001) and ‘zones of enactment’ (Spillane, 1999) are utilised to illustrate those factors that impact on decisions made to embrace revised curriculum. Qualitative data is reported from questionnaires returned by school principals (n=417) and physical education teachers (n=405). Using the constant comparison method, four major categories were identified – ‘provision’, ‘curriculum’, ‘training’ and ‘communication’. This paper focuses on the ‘curriculum’ category and the related sub-categories of student-related issues, overcrowded curriculum, examinable physical education, examples of current physical education provision and primary physical education. Related quantitative data from the questionnaires are also reported.

Key words: physical education ● Ireland ●curriculum
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Introduction

The impact of situational factors on principals’ and teachers' decision to embrace curriculum developments and how the context can/cannot accommodate curriculum development is a key focus area of this paper. Differing school environments and the conditions of teachers’ work, variously described in the literature as ‘the local context of implementation’ (Kirk and Macdonald, 2001) and teachers ‘zones of enactment’ (Spillane, 1999) will impact on principals’ and teachers’ vision of curriculum development. Dimensions of the local context of implementation (LCI) include the management structure of a school, the facilities available in the school and the particular pupils that attend the school. The notion of the LCI is supported by a number of authors who appreciated that the contexts in which teachers work must be taken into account when making decisions (Hargreaves, 1994; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992; Fullan, 1982), with teachers judging changes by their practicality to the contexts in which they are teaching. Kirk and Macdonald (2001) were concerned with teacher voice and ownership of curriculum change, arguing that 'the possibilities for teacher ownership of curriculum change are circumscribed by the anchoring of their authority to speak on curriculum matters in the local context of implementation' (p.1). Three particular dimensions of the LCI were identified as being prominent in relation to teachers' authority to speak. These were teachers' knowledge of their students, resources available to teachers and the practicalities of teachers' work.
Spillane (1999) used the term 'zones of enactment' to refer to 'that space where reform initiatives are encountered by the world of practitioners and 'practice', delineating that zone in which teachers notice, construe, construct and operationalise the instructional ideas advocated by reformers' (p.144). Spillane speculated that the extent to which teachers revise their practice would depend on the characteristics of their zones of enactment.

There appears to be a subtle difference between LCI and 'zones of enactment'. While LCI is primarily concerned with the immediate environment of the school, teachers' zones of enactment extend beyond the individual school and emphasise a social dimension, such as deliberations regarding curriculum change with local experts and university academics. The value of interaction opportunities between teachers in helping each other to make decisions and dealing with change have been identified by a number of authors (Hargreaves and Evans, 1997; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992; Fullan, 1982). The same authors believe that the extent of interaction is strongly related to the degree of change implemented by teachers or as a measure of whether to become involved in innovation. Both LCI and zones of enactment are useful terms in our bid to understand the particular circumstances, personal rewards and costs which Irish post-primary principals and physical education teachers identify as affecting the implementation of the revised junior cycle physical education syllabus.
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Lines (1992) investigated pre-conditions and constraints that are evident when teachers participate in making decisions regarding curriculum developments. The constraints and pressures experienced by teachers in making decisions tend to be very particular to the circumstances in individual schools, e.g., staff, buildings, time and resources (Kirk and Macdonald, 2001; Penney and Evans, 1999; Walton and Welton, 1976). Walton and Welton (1976) and Hodge (1984) drew attention to the potential constraint that individual’s interests and ideas can have on their foresight of what is possible. Walton & Welton reported that educational institutions undertaking curriculum development deem the identification of constraints as important, with the institutions carefully appraising and addressing (where possible) the majority of constraints before developing the curriculum.

Personal rewards and costs that emerge from undertaking a curriculum development influence how teachers make sense of curriculum innovations and use them (if at all) in the classroom (Sparkes, 1991; Fullan, 1982). Rewards need to outweigh the costs for effective implementation with teachers likely to resist change if costs outweigh rewards (Sparkes, 1991; Fullan, 1982). Professional values which teachers are obliged to protect include children's needs and interests and a degree of autonomy in determining an individual student's educational needs and the best ways of meeting them (Gatherer, 1999).

This study is concerned with the particular circumstances, personal rewards and costs which Irish post-primary teachers identify as affecting the implementation of the revised
junior cycle physical education syllabus. The prospects of implementing a revised senior cycle and new Leaving Certificate physical education syllabus are also examined. We give a brief overview of the Irish education system to contextualise the study. A more comprehensive discussion of these issues is available in Halbert and MacPhail (in press).

Education system

Second-level education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two or three-year senior cycle. The junior certificate examination is taken after three years when students are usually 14 or 15 years of age. The principle objective of the junior cycle is for students to complete broad, balanced and coherent courses of study in a variety of curricular areas relevant to their own personal development and to allow them to achieve a level of competence in these which will enable them to proceed to senior cycle. The senior cycle caters for students in the 15 to 18 year old age group. Students normally sit for the Leaving Certificate examination at the age of 17 or 18, after 5 or 6 years of second-level education. Second-level students may opt to follow a non-examinable one-year Transition Year programme after they have completed the junior certificate examination and before proceeding to the senior cycle. In 2001, 37% of the students leaving junior cycle chose to enter Transition Year. A Transition Year enables students to make the transition from a highly structured environment to one where they take greater responsibility for their own learning and decision-making (www.ncte.ie/transition/guidelines.html).

Of the 763 second-level schools (DES, 2000) 17% cater for boys only, 21% for girls only with the remainder being mixed gender schools. There is no significant evidence
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available as to the gender profile of the physical education lessons in these schools but there is a very marked tendency to teach physical education in a mixed gender setting.

Syllabus

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) prepares all curriculum documents (including syllabuses) and the Department of Education and Science (DES) has responsibility for their implementation in schools. The design of syllabuses is done by relevant course committees of the NCCA which are made up of teacher, school management, parent, higher education, and DES representatives. A number of curriculum developments in school physical education within Ireland are now beginning to come to fruition. The introduction of a revised junior cycle physical education syllabus (the existing syllabus dates from 1984) began in over 100 schools in November 2003. A support team of physical education teachers are designing and providing professional development and continuing support to teachers. The senior cycle physical education syllabus has also been revised (the existing syllabus dates from 1984) and for the first time in Ireland, students are to be given the opportunity to study physical education as a subject for certification in the Leaving Certificate examination. At the time of writing the implementation date for these syllabuses has not been announced.

While there has been only a limited amount of continuing professional development for physical education teachers at second level in the past, this is likely to increase significantly with the impending introduction of the new and revised syllabuses. For the current junior cycle syllabus introduction, physical education teachers in participating schools will receive 3-4 days of training over the next two years.
Areas of emphasis

The emphasis in junior cycle physical education is on ‘the participation of each student in purposeful physical activity and the learning associated with this participation’ (DES and NCCA, 2003, p.58). While developing the junior cycle focus on the learning that takes place in physical activity and through participating in physical activity, senior cycle physical education encourages the student to learn about physical activity (NCCA, 2000, p.6). The dual imperatives of promoting long-term learning and enrichment of the person underpin the aims of the Leaving Certificate physical education syllabus. ‘In addition to encouraging continued participation in physical activity, the programme at senior cycle should promote consideration by the students of the option of pursuing further study and/or career opportunities associated with physical education’ (NCCA, 2000, p.4).

The revised junior cycle syllabus includes a number of areas of study representative of a range of practical activities; adventure activities, aquatics, athletics, dance, invasion games, net and fielding games, gymnastics and health-related activities. The revised senior cycle syllabus includes almost the same activity areas as the revised junior cycle syllabus with the only difference being that the former classifies games as invasion games, net games and target and fielding games. The syllabus contains a theoretical dimension, introducing detail on the aesthetic and artistic, kinesiological, and psychosocial aspects of physical education. Similar to the A-level physical education structure in England (Kirk et al., 2002) and the Higher physical education structure in Scotland (SCCC, 1997), the Leaving Certificate physical education syllabus has three
assessment components. These are assessment of performance, movement analysis and terminal examination. The Leaving Certificate syllabus includes almost the same activity areas and theoretical dimensions as the revised senior cycle with only health-related activity not being listed.

Physical education teacher education (PETE)

Approximately 70% of second-level schools employ the services of qualified physical education staff (Darmody 1986). There is only one PETE institution in Ireland based in the University of Limerick (UL). Accordingly the demand for places on the teacher education course has always vastly exceeded supply leading to a very high entry requirement in terms of Leaving Certificate qualifications. Two emerging trends are worthy of note here. Firstly, the steady flow into the system of teachers who have qualified in other countries providing a welcome alternative perspective on the profession and subject. Secondly, the increase in the number of ‘home-produced’ teachers through expansion of the UL capacity along with the advent of new PETE courses in other Irish higher education institutions.

Time allocation

Figures suggest that a significant number of schools do not deliver the DES (2002) recommended two hours per week of physical education per student. The NCCA (1999) suggests that junior cycle physical education be allocated 5% of the available time per year as a minimum while indicating the possibility of also using some of the discretionary time available to supplement this. This equates to approximately 90 minutes of physical
education each week for the three years of junior cycle. It appears that a great many schools may offer substantially less than this suggested minimum. The majority of schools that employ physical education staff offer two periods of physical education per week to junior cycle pupils. This time allocation tends to increase from 75 minutes for Year 1 students to 91 minutes for Transition Year students and then to decline as students progress through senior cycle (between 54 and 57 minutes) (Darmody and Halbert, 1996). Updated time allocation figures are discussed later under ‘Overcrowded curriculum’.

**Methodology**

In January 2003, an extensive baseline survey sought to provide a detailed picture of the physical education infrastructure in Irish post-primary schools and to ascertain the possible impact of new and revised physical education syllabuses on schools. The survey was constructed and supported by the DES, the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences at the University of Limerick and the Physical Education Association of Ireland (PEAI). Piloting of the surveys with teachers resulted in changes being made to the format of some questions although the nature of the data being sought did not change. A package containing a cover letter and three different questionnaires was mailed to the principal of each post-primary institute in Ireland, totalling 763 packages. The cover letter explained the reason for the study and the need for three different questionnaires. The three questionnaires were coloured to ease reference. The first questionnaire was to be completed by the principal and this sought general information regarding the school and also a projection of the probable impact of new physical education syllabuses. A second questionnaire was to be completed by each physical education teacher and if there
was more than one physical education teacher in the school this particular questionnaire was to be copied. This questionnaire set out to establish data on, inter alia, qualifications and experience, other subjects taught, the profile of the students in classes taught and content of courses. It also addressed the rationale used in the planning of the programme offered by each teacher. A third questionnaire was to be completed by a teacher on behalf of the physical education department in the school. The information sought related to the nature of the programme of physical education offered by the school, the numbers of teachers involved and the extent of the facilities available for the teaching of the subject. Returned surveys were to be treated confidentially and the anonymity of each respondent was to be fully respected. Consequently, regardless if schools had chosen to include their school roll number (identification number), all post-primary institutions were mailed a one-page request to return questionnaires, if they had not already done so, by June 2003.

This paper reports the qualitative data obtained from school principal questionnaire (n=417) and physical education teachers (n=405) who completed the second questionnaire. The principals’ and physical education teachers’ qualitative data analysed and reported in this paper is in response to the question at the end of both questionnaires. The question read ‘Please list any other specific issues, concerns or problems relating to physical education provision in your school. Are there issues that you believe the University of Limerick / Department of Education and Science should be addressing as a priority?’ A total of 285 principals and 303 teachers chose to answer the particular question. The principals’ and physical education teachers’ qualitative data were analysed separately but in a similar way. All individual principal and physical education teacher
responses to the final question were recorded in respective Word™ documents. Where
individual principals and teachers made multiple comments in response to the question
each comment was allocated to the most suitable category. Therefore, all comments
appear only once in what is deemed to be the most suitable category. Similar to the
constant comparative method analysing data the comments were manually reviewed,
repeatedly and continually coded, seeking similarities and differences, groupings,
patterns and items of particular significance (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Previously
reported constraints and pressures experienced by teachers in implementing school
physical education syllabuses (Penney and Evans, 1999) and personal rewards and costs
that emerge from implementation (Sparkes, 1991) were used to initially direct the coding
of data.

The statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) for Windows (release 12.0) was used to
analyse the quantitative data obtained from the three questionnaires. In discussing the
curriculum sub-categories we refer where appropriate to quantitative data from other
aspects of the questionnaires.

**Results and definitions of major categories**

Before discussing the major categories attention is drawn in Table 1 to the demographics
of the teachers whose responses constructed such categories. Similar information was not
collected for the principals.

[Insert Table 1 here]
Table 2 below details the major categories that emerged from the review process described earlier. Comments were further classified into sub-categories under these major headings. The figures in parentheses indicate the numbers of comments relating to each major and sub-category.

[Insert Table 2 here]

As can be seen in Table 2 the five major categories are ‘provision’, ‘curriculum’, ‘teacher education’, ‘communication’, and ‘uncoded’. Provision encompasses all comments made in relation to the school’s access to ‘facilities and equipment’, ‘staff’, ‘funding’, ‘time’, ‘resources’ and ‘class size’. Comments that incorporated several of these issues, and were not predominantly related to one, were coded as ‘multi’. ‘Curriculum’ includes comments related to student issues that need to be accommodated within the physical education curriculum. These include gender, mixed ability levels, lack of motivation/interest, learning disabilities and co-ed concerns. The curriculum’s lack of capacity to accommodate further developments in physical education, which might require additional time within an already congested curriculum (‘overcrowded curriculum’), was a frequently expressed concern. Respondents’ views on the potential impact of the introduction of ‘examinable physical education’ on the quality of the physical education curriculum were also recorded. Those comments, which offered insights into the individual school’s current curricular provision for physical education, featured less frequently. In addition, included in this category are comments relating to the curriculum in primary schools and in particular the effect that the perceived inadequacy of primary school physical education has on students attending post-primary school. Teacher
education comments include those directed to the physical education teacher education programme at UL (pre-service teacher education) and those made in relation to requests for continuing professional development of teachers currently working in schools (in-service teacher education). Communication incorporates all comments that were made in relation to the level of ‘information’ that schools were / were not receiving regarding the developments in physical education syllabuses. It includes comments relating to the relationship that existed between schools and those involved in promoting and managing school physical education (particularly the DES). The sub-category of ‘promotion’ records comments made related to how physical education ought to be promoted and what ought to be emphasised during any promotion. The comments that did not contribute to the above categories and could not be accommodated in any further distinct categories were classified as ‘uncoded’.

We have chosen to concentrate in this paper on the category ‘curriculum’ where we believe the issues and concerns raised can be effectively addressed at an institutional and school level. It is at these levels that the circumstances influencing the introduction of revised/new syllabuses are most immediately evident and most amenable to change. In acknowledging that the category ‘provision’ attracted the highest number of responses, we believe that the majority of these related to issues, which can be addressed largely through changes in state policy.
In discussing the curriculum sub-categories we refer where appropriate to quantitative data from other aspects of the questionnaires completed by the same principals and teachers.

**Student-related issues**

Comments related to students’ engagement with physical education in schools and how this influenced or should influence the nature of the programme offered. Quantitative data from two questionnaires confirms that both principals and teachers believed that students in their schools valued physical education (89% and 87% respectively). However, over half of the responses recorded (30 from a total of 55) refer to low, and declining, levels of student participation in physical activity generally and physical education in particular. Two discernable trends emerge in this regard. Firstly the ‘drop-out’ rate is perceived to increase as students get older and secondly the lower rate of girls’ involvement is a cause of concern. Typical comments were, ‘Senior Cycle pupils lose all interest in PE, especially the girls – this has to be recognised – addressed – I have been principal in 2 entirely different schools and found the same in both’ (principal-167) and ‘Falloff rate of those participating in PE, esp. in Senior Cycle, esp. among girls. At the moment, 10% of all our students have an attendance record of 50% or less at PE’ (teacher-282).

Connor (2003) in a study of youth participation in physical activity in Waterford city reports similar patterns of participation as have a number of authors in the UK (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001; Babb and Kirk, 1999; Flintoff, 1996; Kay, 1995) where high profile initiatives have been undertaken to arrest the trend. Dublin City University surveyed over
500 female students between the ages of 15 and 17 attending schools and colleges in the East Coast Area Health Board region in Ireland. They reported that females were significantly less likely to meet minimum physical activity recommendations and had lower levels of estimated aerobic fitness than males (Centre for Sport Science and Health, 2004). Respondents to this survey offer little by the way of opinion on possible reasons for diminished motivation, and hence participation among older students, which may indicate an absence of any real engagement with addressing the problem. The PEAI analysed the differential levels of girls’ and boys’ participation in physical activity as far back as 1991. In a report published in that year it recommended the formulation of a national policy for the remediation of an apparent gender bias in the provision of time and facilities available for young people, with a specific focus concentrating on the relative levels of involvement of girls and boys in various physical education activities.

**Overcrowded curriculum**

When reflecting on the probable constraints to the introduction of revised or new syllabuses a significant group of respondents referred to the already significant demands made by other subjects on the available curricular time. Given their role in planning the timetable, it is not surprising that principals were particularly vocal on this point, offering 45 of the 52 comments in the category. From the quantitative data supplied by the principals the shortage of available curricular time was the most frequently identified barrier to implementing junior, senior and Leaving Certificate physical education (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]
The shortage of time was consistently reported as a greater constraint than inadequate equipment and facilities, insufficient number of qualified staff or lack of interest among students. In the Irish post-primary system schools construct their curriculum within a framework, which comprises in excess of 30 subjects. Students at junior cycle typically take 8-11 subjects for examination and their senior cycle counterparts normally take seven (the latter number is heavily influenced by matriculation and higher education entry requirements).

In commenting on the situation at junior cycle respondents referred frequently to the recent introduction of civic social and political education (CSPE), social personal and health education (SPHE) and to a lesser extent religious education (RE). Comments such as ‘recent innovations such as CSPE and SPHE place additional pressure on an already congested timetable’ (principal – 12), ‘Curriculum overload/increase in number of examination subjects (e.g. CSPE) make it very difficult to give PE the profile it deserves’ (principal – 95) and ‘the introduction of CSPE; SPHE; forthcoming introduction of Religion as an exam subject – means that no more time is available!!!’ (principal – 290) suggest that the pressure felt by physical education in terms of curricular time apparently emanates from the introduction of these subjects which of themselves consume a tiny fraction of the available time. A sense of exasperation is evident in the principals’ comments in this regard. Two principals appear to have reached significant levels of frustration with one observing that ‘for the past twenty years new courses and programmes have been handed over to the schools for implementation at the behest of every pressure group with any thought for the “straw that broke the camel’s back”’ (principal – 240) and the other decrying ‘the general overloading of the school timetable
– the difficulty in finding a place/places for extra or expanded subjects – Help!!!’ (principal – 93).

At senior cycle while the number of subjects taken by students is reduced, the nature of the high stakes examination results in a demand for available curricular time, which is even more acute. Verifying earlier claims by O’Sullivan (1997) and Darmody (1986) data from the teacher questionnaire completed by one physical education teacher in each school indicates a trend of diminishing time allocation for physical education within the curriculum from year 1 to year 6 (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Thus even with the reduction to 7 as the number of subjects taken by students in senior cycle the time spent in physical education class is reduced. O’Sullivan (1997) goes as far as to describe senior cycle physical education (Years 5 and 6) as ‘an endangered species’ (p.9). However, a general reduction in time allocation with increasing age, especially in the upper or final years of schooling, is an international trend (Hardman and Marshall, 2000; Mitchell, 1990). One comment provides an interesting insight into the pressure on time that has evolved in senior cycle. The principal in question while expressing a desire to improve physical education provision (both as an examination subject and the enhanced non-examination provision) points out that this would be extremely difficult as it would have to be done ‘in addition to providing 23 LC [Leaving Certificate] subjects on offer at present’ (principal – 400). This resonates with O’Sullivan and McCarthy (1994) who believed that the decline in senior cycle physical education was attributable to the greater emphasis placed on the Leaving Certificate examinations. While the
declining trend evident in Figure 2 is not wholly surprising the peak value for Year 4 (Transition Year) merits comment. At least two immediate and somewhat contradictory explanations present themselves. It may be that the increased time allocation is evidence of recognition on the part of planners within schools of the educational worth of physical education in advancing the holistic aims of Transition Year. Alternatively, it may represent an implicit acceptance that the only opportunity for the inclusion of significant amounts of physical education on the timetable arises when the real business of examinations is more remote than usual. The latter scenario is facilitated by the great diversity of activity available within the subject and the relative ease of sourcing tuition expertise from outside of the school’s physical education staff.

**Examinable physical education**

Physical education has never featured as an element of the state examination. The debate within the physical education community as to the merits or otherwise of its inclusion was cut short in the late 1990’s when the then Minister for Education and Science announced his intention to have physical education made available to students as a Leaving Certificate subject. Support for recognition of achievement in physical education has been evident in the current consultations focussed on the general reform of the senior cycle conducted by the NCCA. It reported (http://www.ncca.ie/j/juice/SeniorCycleConsul/NCCA%20Online%20Survey%202003.pdf) that not only did respondents to its online survey (N=1,800) support the introduction of the subject but 65% were of the view that it ought to be a compulsory area of study for all senior cycle students.
The majority of comments made supported the introduction of the Leaving Certificate subject of physical education with some support also for the subject featuring as a junior certificate subject. One such comment read ‘The image of physical education needs to be raised as a serious subject with the introduction of a Leaving Cert exam and a set Junior Cycle curriculum with a reasonable level of assessment’ (teacher – 275). It is interesting that those commenting positively on examination physical education base their support on the consequent enhanced status and recognition, which would be accorded to the subject. In an earlier study (NCCA, 1999) which reported that principals’ perception of a subject was unaffected by its designation as non-examinable, it was noted that to some extent the value of non-examinable subjects is not apparent to students and schools. Comments from principals and teachers in this study convey wide support for the belief that the introduction of examinable physical education will enhance the status of the subject. Green (2001) reported that teachers regarded the raising of their own professional status and that of the physical education subject as more significant outcomes of the introduction of examinable physical education than meeting the needs of students. However, the minority voices opposing the option of examination physical education in this study present comments which relate more to the damage such a development would do to the physical education provision in schools and the negative impact on student physical education experience. As one principal noted, ‘PE is making the same mistake as RE. Is it a good thing or a vehicle in the fight for (higher education entry) points’? (principal – 284)
Comments focussing on the reduced time and teacher availability for non-examination classes, such as ‘...will result in some students not having any physical education classes’ (teacher – 240), are obviously related to other sub-categories of comments made including, ‘staff’, ‘time’, and ‘overcrowded curriculum’. From the quantitative data provided in the principal questionnaire, a small percentage of principals stated that the introduction of Leaving Certificate physical education would result in reduced provision for junior cycle physical education (8%) and senior cycle (non exam) physical education (16%).

Examples of current physical education provision

Comments in this sub-category identify a variety of factors within each school that affect provision, particularly facilities, staffing, and the school’s level of support for physical education. When principals were asked if they would offer junior cycle physical education (revised), senior cycle physical education (revised) and the new Leaving Certificate physical education in their school there was a high reporting of ‘not sure’ (Figure 3). It may well be that the statements in this category illustrate the differing local context of implementation (discussed earlier) that result in principals being uncertain of the possibility of offering the three programmes.

The following comments describe particular contexts in which principals and teachers work;
‘Physical education is a high status subject in this school. We have a wonderful PE department here, with top class teachers at the cutting edge of their subject area. It is a travesty that such a school, and with such large student numbers, should be so inadequately resourced’ (principal, 285).

We try to teach pupils as much as we can and stick to the curriculum, but with inadequate facilities and equipment and only 30 mins/35 mins or 40 mins for PE, it is difficult to keep the pupils motivated and interested, while covering all you want to, and making sure they get some exercise (teacher – 332).

In surveying 3,315 Irish adolescents in full-time post-primary education, Connor (2003) reported little uniformity in either the type or level of physical education provision on offer to the adolescents. The extracts from our study support the level of variability in the physical education experience currently offered in Irish schools.

**Primary physical education**

The primary and post-primary sectors of Irish education are distinguished by discrete organisational, administrative and training systems. When this is allied to the limited flow of information accompanying the young person’s transition from primary to post-primary school, it is hardly surprising that there is a lack of synchronisation between the operation of programmes in the respective sectors. No principals’ comments were recorded in this category. It is nonetheless noteworthy that all the comments made relate to perceived shortcomings of primary school physical education provision and inadequacy of physical
education experience of young people coming in to post primary. Comments included, ‘Look at the whole area of PE in primary schools. Pupils are arriving into secondary schools with a very limited experience of PE’ (teacher – 33), ‘Students in Ireland come from primary schools offering little in the way of PE – this needs to change’ (teacher – 302) and ‘Children arrive in secondary school with no basis for development of the physical. Movement, coordination and attitude with regard to physical movement is totally untouched’ (teacher – 309).

Similar to other countries, in Irish primary schools, the class teacher teaches physical education and there are very few physical education subject specialists in the primary system. McGuiness and Shelly (1995) found that 55% of primary teachers taught physical education only once per week. It appears the factors that effect the quality and quantity of provision in primary schools are inadequate facilities and equipment, limited primary teacher preparation in the area of physical education (resulting in a lack of perceived competence) and insufficient time allocation (Broderick and Sheil, 2000; McGuiness and Shelly, 1995).

In reporting and discussing the pattern of responses related to the major category of ‘curriculum’ a number of suggestions can be made from the perspective of syllabus design and implementation and teacher education towards facilitating the introduction of revised and new physical education syllabuses.
Implications for syllabus design and implementation

Addressing student issues

The numerous comments from respondents drawing attention to the declining participation rates among older students generally and girls particularly highlight a trend that has been suspected for some time. In curriculum terms the solution may lie in changing the nature of the courses on offer and the structures which deliver them. Providing alternative activities, allowing greater levels of choice and modifying the physical education environment to make it more attractive to the young adults involved are just some of the options available. In terms of curriculum design however the messages emerging form the study are more fundamental. As has been mention earlier, education partners contribute to the representative structures on which curriculum development in Ireland is based. It is ironic that those most directly involved with the curriculum, the students, have not had a voice in this representative model. If the changes envisaged in physical education are to find a receptive audience an essential first step for future development should be the engagement of students as contributors to the reform (National Children’s Office, 2000). This will not be an uncomplicated innovation or may not be universally accepted initially but one that will undoubtedly assist in addressing some of the participation problems identified in this study.

The overcrowded curriculum

The primary and post-primary curricula are set to experience a period of unprecedented change. A revised primary curriculum is currently being introduced, on a phased basis, in the country’s 3282 schools and from September 2004 the focus of implementation will
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include physical education. At post-primary both the junior and senior cycle curriculum are being extensively reviewed and some of the key elements of these reviews are based on concerns similar to those raised in this study. Of these, the pressure for adequate curriculum time appears to be one of the most keenly felt concerns. The comments of the respondents in this study reinforce for example the NCCA’s commitment to reducing the length of all syllabuses to make more time available in school timetables for the introduction of new areas of study, the enhancement of existing time allocations and the broadening of the range of learning approaches employed with particular emphasis on encouraging students to accept more responsibility for their own learning.

Primary physical education

It is reasonable to expect that some of the concerns raised by respondents in relation to the quality of the physical education experience provided in primary schools will be lessened in time with the widespread use of the revised primary curriculum. A further significant issue is raised here however and it relates to the quality and quantity of information in the possession of post-primary schools about the primary curriculum and the levels of attainment of students entering post-primary. Cross sector knowledge of curricula in terms of physical education has not been quantified but it is fair to assume that in common with his/her post-primary colleagues the physical education teacher has very limited acquaintance with the primary curriculum. In addition, on transfer to post-primary school there is no established requirement for the communication of student specific information on attainment. It is hardly surprising that the resultant information gap leads to frustration among teachers such as is evident in the comments reported.
At a curriculum design level it is clear that greater levels of integration are needed to assist in promoting coherence in the young person’s physical education experience.

**Implications for teacher education**

**Awareness of primary physical education**

Teacher education at primary level is faced with a series of new demands. Colleges of (primary) education must address the needs of prospective teachers in the context of an expansive and progressive curriculum, while reflecting on and dealing with the sources of perceived lack of confidence in teaching physical education within the existing teacher cohort.

In post-primary teacher education students ought to be familiar with the primary physical education curriculum as a context to what students should be introduced to in post-primary physical education classes. They should also gain experience in observing primary classes and delivering physical education lessons in the primary school. This not only enhances their understanding of young children’s stages of development and ability levels but also informs them of the numerous contextual factors that consistently impinge on the primary physical education programme. Establishing a postgraduate qualification in physical education for primary school teachers and sharing a specialist physical education teacher between a number of primary schools (Physical Education Association of Ireland, 2001) are initiatives that teaching education institutions should pursue further.
Familiarity with syllabus & examination

There is an onus on PETE programmes to produce graduates who have a comprehensive understanding of the key and current developments within physical education. It is therefore imperative that PETE programmes critically appraise and analyse any new syllabus to be introduced in the Irish education system. There is also scope for PETE programmes to deliver elements of the programme with direct reference to the revised or new syllabus in schools. That is, students can be given opportunities to experience physical education and its related assessment as they themselves would hope to deliver revised and new syllabi once qualified. The possibility of physical education becoming examinable in schools is an area in which the PETE programme would need to make sure students experience and understand the subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge necessary to deliver the new syllabus. PETE students would also need to be familiar and confident with new and different ways of assessing students’ experiences of physical education. Students can also, particularly through extended teaching placements in school, experience and attempt to address the barriers that are likely to suppress the introduction and delivery of new and revised syllabi in particular school contexts.

In-service education

PETE institutions are perhaps the most obvious institutions to provide valuable national leadership in the area of continuing professional development of physical education teachers. Our discussion has highlighted the need for such training to address the perceived inadequacies within the existing teacher cohort, particularly in the areas of
primary physical education and in encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice and perhaps adopt new or alternative pedagogical approaches. There is also a pressing need to ensure that those currently teaching physical education are not only aware of, but are comfortable in delivering, the revised and new syllabuses in physical education. Perhaps the completion of professional development courses could form part of an accreditation system which may not only encourage teachers to reflect on and develop their practices but may also feed in to a formal recognised qualification, such as a Diploma or Masters in Physical Education.

Strategies for enhancing participation in physical education

Internationally there is now a well established advocacy for the use of different curriculum and instructional strategies within physical education, with numerous school-based studies being completed supporting the use of Sport Education, Teaching Games for Understanding and Cooperative Learning (Dyson, Griffin and Hastie, 2004). Such an advocacy is matched by the philosophical paradigmatic shift toward including students with disabilities in general education contexts (Meegan, 2004). While the principals and teachers in this study did not mention students with disabilities in particular there was a definite concern with inclusion, i.e., how to maintain all students interest and involvement in school physical education. The importance of complementing the (suspected) current over-reliance on directive teaching styles within the Irish context with a wide range of teaching strategies has two main benefits. Firstly, it is a key element in realising the objectives of the restructured post-primary physical education curriculum.
and secondly in attempting to cater for students who do not benefit from such traditional teaching styles.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have highlighted common constraints and pressures affecting the implementation of new and revised physical education syllabuses. These include an already over-crowded curriculum and the need for additional time for the delivery of physical education at Leaving Certificate. It was stated that this latter point could potentially result in time being taken from senior cycle physical education provision for all students. Rewards and costs in implementing the new and revised syllabi were noted in respect to the examination of physical education. In some instances there was a belief that examinable physical education would enhance the status and recognition accorded to physical education (reward). Conversely, others believed that in order to accommodate an examination syllabus in terms of timetabling and staffing, there was likely to be a reduction in non-examination physical education classes across all years of post-primary education (cost).

Similar to MacPhail (2004) who studied the introduction of a new examinable physical education syllabus in Scotland, teachers’ interpretations of the new and revised syllabuses in this study are not explicitly identified as reasons for making implementation decisions within schools. We have attempted to identify the conditions that strengthen or weaken the desire to introduce revised and new syllabuses. By doing so valuable insights from principals and teachers into what should be changed and what should be preserved in
order to initially encourage the contemplation of such syllabus introductions are provided. Interviews with a sample of principals and teachers who completed the surveys will investigate the reasons for, and contextualise the emerging pattern of responses evident from the survey data. It is anticipated that the data gathered would provide the basis for a comprehensive programme of further research that will provide insights into the efficient and effective implementation of syllabuses within Irish post-primary schools.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Ciaran MacDonncha for his assistance in processing the quantitative survey data and to acknowledge the late Michael Darmody’s involvement in initiating the study. The time and interest shown by principals and teachers in completing and returning the questionnaires is also acknowledged.

References


THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REVISED PHYSICAL EDUCATION SYLLABUS: CIRCUMSTANCES, REWARDS AND COSTS


THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REVISED PHYSICAL EDUCATION SYLLABUS: CIRCUMSTANCES, REWARDS AND COSTS


### Table 1: Background information on teachers completing survey (n = 405)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Mean or %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>Mean age: 36 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years teaching</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>Mean: 14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>Female: 226 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male: 176 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>Permanent whole time (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Temporary whole time (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eligible part time (14.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Part time (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in school</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>Principal (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Principal (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Principal (12%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special duties (30%)</td>
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### Table 2: Categories and sub-categories (number of comments recorded, n= 885)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provision</strong></td>
<td>Facilities and equipment (219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(493)</td>
<td>Staff (113)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funding (58)</td>
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<td>Time (57)</td>
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<td>Resources (20)</td>
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<td>Multi (14)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class size (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong></td>
<td>Student-related issues (55)</td>
</tr>
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<td>(169)</td>
<td>Overcrowded curriculum (52)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Examinable physical education (33)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current practice (17)</td>
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<td>Primary physical education (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher education</strong></td>
<td>In-service teacher education (86)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(121)</td>
<td>Pre-service teacher education (35)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Issues to be addressed (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(85)</td>
<td>Information (30)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promotion (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncoded</strong></td>
<td>e.g. ‘transport’ ‘too soon to consider’,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>‘senior cycle physical education’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inadequate equipment or facilities 32.8
Insufficient staff 26.8
Lack of student interest 9.3
Not a curricular priority 16.3
Inadequate curricular time 45
Fig. 2: Allocated curricular time for physical education
Fig. 3: Introduction of new/revised physical education syllabus

- Junior Cycle
- Senior Cycle
- Leaving Certificate

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Junior Cycle</th>
<th>Senior Cycle</th>
<th>Leaving Certificate</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reply</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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