The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

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Word count: 3, 617

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**The continuity between physical education and extra-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective**

**ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of this study was to identify the extent to which Irish physical education teachers promote continuity between curricular physical education and extra-curricular physical activities in post-primary schools. The latter denotes the provision of activities outside the formal (physical education) curriculum, which are not compulsory for all students but offered as optional activities (Penney & Harris, 1997), now also commonly referred to as out-of-school-hours learning or provision. Two particular issues discussed are ways in which physical education can help promote physical activity outside of the physical education class and the identification of factors that may hinder continuity between physical education and extra-curricular activities. The physical education curriculum, staffing and the school ethos arose as elements that have the potential to promote continuity between physical education and extra-curricular activities in Irish post-primary schools.

**INTRODUCTION**

One of the main purposes for promoting continuity between curricular physical education and extra-curricular physical activities (or now commonly referred to as out-of-school-hours learning/provision) is to encourage young people’s sustained and continued involvement and investment in physical activity. In order to influence behaviour it is necessary to promote curricular and extra-curricular physical activity through a broad and balanced programme of activities that cater for the needs and interests of all students (Bass & Cale, 1999). The BJTPE (and its predecessor the
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

BJPE) have frequently reported and discussed the extent of links between physical education and sport and the physical education curriculum, staffing and school ethos have been identified in the literature as factors that contribute to the extent to which continuity between curricular physical education and extra-curricular activities in schools is promoted.

In relation to the physical education curriculum, there is support for disassociating physical education from extra-curricular activities and in particular sport (Hill, 1991; Wilcox, 1991). Hill (1991) pointed out that it is not the physical education teacher’s responsibility to take students for extra-curricular activities or even to channel students into the direction of certain sports. One of her main arguments for this is that there can be conflict of interests between curricular aims and extra-curricular aims. Wilcox (1991) is also very much in favour of separating physical education from sport. He felt that sport has become the focus of physical education and that the physical education programme is often judged by results on the playing fields and not from an educational perspective. An alternative perspective does not see anything fundamentally wrong with taking a sports-based approach to physical education, but does see potential problems with how it might be implemented (Kirk & Gorely, 2000). The fact that the majority of physical education teachers are teaching skills and sporting activities nearly all the time in their classes is also highlighted by Hsu (2000).

The impact of staffing on the potential to make links between the physical education curriculum and extra-curricular activity in Ireland has been severely hampered by the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland’s (ASTI) ‘work to rule’ policy. This policy discouraged all teachers who were members of the ASTI to perform any work for which they were not paid, including covering classes for fellow teachers,
supervising break times, or assisting with any extra-curricular activities. Such a policy clearly has had an impact on the ethos in many schools. Cale (1997) highlighted the importance of the school ethos in making potential links between the physical education curriculum and extra-curricular activity. A school’s policies, ethos, environment, curricular and extra-curricular programme and community links for physical activity participation are all facets of the school which she believes contribute to a whole-school approach to the promotion of physical activity. In particular, the importance of extra-curricular activities which include the provision of sport and non-competitive physical activities that cater for a larger school population are highlighted by Cale (1997).

There have been significant government investment and developments in England, Scotland and Wales in recent years that support and promote school physical activity. Most notably these include the Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links Strategy in England, the Physical Education and School Sport Plan in Wales and the School Sport Partnerships and Out-of-School-Hours Learning Programmes. There does not appear to be an equivalent level of government investment and commitment related to developments within Ireland. However, on a positive note, the Local Sport Partnership initiative, developed by the Irish Sports Council, has resulted in the creation of a national structure to coordinate and promote the development of sport at local level, in some cases resulting in an increase in provision and coordination of extra-curricular sporting opportunities (www.irishsportscouncil.ie/developing-overview.aspx). A recent extensive report by Fahey et al. (2005) examines Irish children’s participation in physical education curriculum in the school, extra-curricular sport played in the school and sport played outside the school with the objective to draw implications for Irish public policy.
METHODS

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 Department of Education and Science, the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences at the University of Limerick, and the Physical Education Association of Ireland. Piloting of the questionnaires 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 covering letter and three different questionnaires was mailed to the principal of each of the 763 post-primary schools in Ireland. One questionnaire was to be completed by the principal, a second by one physical education teacher and a third was included for completion by all physical education teachers in the school. This paper primarily reports data provided by the physical education teachers (n=405) in the second questionnaire that sought responses in relation to current physical education curricular and extra-curricular provision. Returned questionnaires were treated confidentially and the anonymity of each respondent was fully respected. The statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) for Windows (release 12.0) was used to analyse the quantitative data obtained from the survey.

In addition, an interview with a physical education teacher (Ms. Dolan – a pseudonym) was completed by the second author while completing a final year ten-week teaching practice experience as a requirement of an undergraduate physical education degree. Interview questions were informed by the nature of responses that emerged from coding the survey qualitative comments through constant comparative
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

method (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Analysis of the interview data was approached in the same way. It was anticipated that the interview data would provide one particular context for understanding and examining the common factors that affected the continuity between physical education and extra-curricular activities in Irish post-primary schools. The interview findings represent the perspective of only one teacher and, while too great an emphasis should not therefore be placed on these, they do nonetheless allow us to conceptualise and examine the emerging themes from the survey.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 details the three major categories and related themes that emerged from the coding of the survey qualitative comments in response to ‘What measures exist to promote continuity between curricular physical education and co-curricular physical activities in your school?’ We examine the three major categories in turn.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Reinforcing research conducted in a UK context (Bass & Cale, 1999), there appears to be a limited range and focus of activities offered during curricular and extra-curricular time in Irish schools, with a heavy bias towards game activities. Data from the survey illustrated that the average time devoted to games within the first three years of post-primary physical education curricula was just over 25 hours. The next most popular activity (athletics) received less than 5 hours in the same period of time (MacPhail et al., 2005). While it was evident in the Irish context that schools varied in the amount
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

of extra-curricular activities they provided and the number of physical education and other subject teachers involved, the nature of the provision was very similar. The physical activities offered in extra-curricular provision were also clearly weighted towards games, with a particular dominance of Gaelic (football and hurling), basketball and soccer.

There was also clear recognition by physical education teachers of the influence the school sports season has on the activities that occur in the physical education curriculum. An example of such a comment was;

‘During the relevant sports seasons, i.e. schools GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association, i.e., football and hurling] in autumn or athletics in Spring/Summer, I cover these activities in PE.’ [Teacher 40]

Ms. Dolan formed a strong link between the physical education class and extra-curricular activities by developing the students’ interest in basketball as soon as they started school in September to allow her to observe and assess the level of playing ability;

‘I generally start the year with basketball and probably for the school team element, it helps in picking the teams and getting them back into basketball because I coach them myself and the teams have to be registered by the 2nd week in September, so it helps if you do it in class as well.’

Ms. Dolan admitted that teaching basketball as the first activity on the Year 1 physical education programme was more of a priority than teaching Gaelic football. Gaelic football, the biggest extra-curricular activity in the school for male and female students, resulted in students already having a level of proficiency that would allow the school to field teams. Introducing students to the less familiar activity of basketball as soon as they started school allowed the teacher to begin identifying
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

potential players for the school’s basketball teams. This illustrates the not uncommon perception that it is performance in extra-curricula competitions that are criteria by which a physical education department and teachers are judged (Penney & Harris, 1997).

Survey responses highlighted the importance physical education teachers placed on the transfer of skills taught in physical education to extra-curricula activities. There was a concern to develop students’ basic skills so that they would be better able to participate and enjoy sport and physical activity outside of the physical education setting:

‘The general PE programme covers the core skills in all of the co-curricular [extra-curricula] physical activities and encourages students’ participation in co-curricular [extra-curricular] physical activities in the school.’ [Teacher 330]

Ms. Dolan admitted to pursuing a modified game approach to teaching in a bid to promote general skills that would be transferable to other areas of physical education and to involvement in a number of activities;

‘(…) keeping possession, defensive tactics, general games skills, put them in 3v1 or 3v2 situations (…) Things like keeping possession, width, depth, all that sort of thing, marking players, how to dodge players, how to get away from players.’

STAFFING

There was a large variation in terms of the amount of time that teachers (physical education and other subjects) spent on extra-curricula activities, supporting the findings of Fairclough & Stratton (1997). Staff being actively involved in extra-curricular activities was supported by comments from the survey;
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

‘A lot of staff give of their time to help promote the sports in the school, giving children the chance to enhance their personal and social development.’ [Teacher 228]

The vast majority of related responses were very similar although some did highlight that it was only a few dedicated staff members who always seemed to be helping out with extra-curricular activities;

‘Promotion of after-school sports, organised and run by a few members of staff specialising in different sports/activities.’ [Teacher 182]

Ms. Dolan explained that the school she worked in had recently undergone an amalgamation of two schools, leading to some early retirements and consequently new younger teachers joining the staff. This may have resulted in the following situation arising in this particular context, which perhaps would not be the norm in every school;

‘We had a meeting at the start of the year sorting out who was going to coach the different teams and we actually had too many people at the table and we had to get extra chairs in and there were people actually arguing about, ‘well I had them for the last few years so I’d like to keep them on’.’

The above quote contrasts with previous findings in a UK context of a lack of support amongst all but a few PE staff for extra-curricular in schools (Bass & Cale, 1999).

Another issue related to the staffing of extra-curricular activities was the involvement of external coaches. Some are of the view that physical education teachers should not assume responsibility for school teams, arguing that teaching physical education and coaching are two very different entities and should be treated as such (Hill, 1991; Wilcox, 1991). In the context of this particular study, there is little evidence of the adoption of such a philosophy. Survey responses implied a preference for physical
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

education teachers being responsible for the delivery of extra-curricular activities. Certainly Ms. Dolan was clear in her concern over involving coaches in the delivery of such activities;

‘You will have people sitting on the bench for the whole season and an outside coach doesn’t see what’s wrong with this, they are out to win, but when you are a teacher you know there is something wrong with it, even though deep down you want to win the competition, but at the end of the day you want the students to enjoy it and you want them to have a positive experience so they might continue to play that sport after they leave school’.

SCHOOL ETHOS

Principals and teachers implied a strong school ethos towards physical education with 92% of principals believing that staff and students valued physical education and over 80% of physical education teachers believing that their principal and students valued the subject. From the survey comments, physical education teachers viewed it as important to encourage their students to participate in extra-curricular activities and any other physical activities;

‘We try to encourage all pupils to take part in extra-curricular activities, as not only an opportunity to play sport and represent the school, but also as an opportunity to interact with other pupils and staff in a less formal but positive atmosphere. We also promote extra-curricular sport as an opportunity for pupils to be active in response to the health and fitness aspect covered in PE.’

[Teacher 343]

Ms. Dolan admitted to encouraging extra-curricular involvement mainly with Year 1 students, as they would not be fully aware of how the school operates in relation to
such provision. She also made a conscious effort to encourage those who perhaps did not have ‘sporty’ friends, but whom conveyed a level of commitment to being involved;

‘(…) it's very easy to get caught up in that as opposed to going basketball training, so may be if you do say to a particular child you do have a talent and why don’t you think about using it, it’s amazing, it does give them a huge boost and they do come down, while they [may] not make the team, but it does actually get them involved and that would be my main reason.’

There was evidence from the survey data that principals, and other subject teachers, also encouraged students to participate in extra-curricular activities;

‘All members of staff encourage pupils to get involved in co-curricular [extra-curricular] activities and principal at assemblies always takes the opportunity to do so.’ [Teacher 218]

Ms. Dolan mentioned the principal, in particular, as encouraging and supporting student involvement in extra-curricular activities. She acknowledged how a very productive and active principal, who is very involved in sport himself, had revitalised the school’s commitment to extra-curricular activities resulting in greater participation in such activities and increased ‘school spirit’.

The organisation of lunchtime leagues was a common practice reported in the surveys as a means of promoting continuity between curricular physical education and extra-curricular physical activities;

‘After school and lunchtime clubs are offered by the PE teachers to the pupils. These are timetabled and run in conjunction with our curriculum.’ [Teacher 159]
Such responses highlight how the physical education teacher links in the physical education curriculum with fun lunch time activities. There was also a great emphasis on recreational activities, i.e., activities that are not too competitive in nature, to encourage a wider range of students to participate;

‘At lunchtime, we have a policy of taking recreational sport where students participate in lunchtime activities for fun.’ [Teacher 348]

Ms. Dolan was conscious of the benefit of lunchtime leagues but was restricted in the activities on offer by the available facilities;

‘I would love to organise lunchtime badminton, which I have done in previous schools, but you can’t do it here with only one court, so you tend to go for basketball leagues, soccer leagues and Gaelic football leagues.’

Ms. Dolan reported that the problem with such leagues was that they tended to be dominated by players from the school teams, or that the league would be suspended whenever the facilities were needed for a competitive school match. Indeed, she has since decided to allow only students who are not on a school team to take part in lunchtime leagues.

CONCLUSION

There is a strong argument that linking curricular physical education with the school sports season, as well as teaching students skills that can transfer from one area to another, will best enhance students’ chances of developing links between curricular physical education and extra-curricular activities. This was borne out by the survey responses and Ms. Dolan who highlighted the school sporting season as a major factor in planning for physical education. It also appears that school staff can be effective in developing links between curricular physical education and extra-curricular activities.
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

by encouraging students to participate in extra-curricular activities and coaching and helping out with school teams. The ethos of a school is perhaps more varied and difficult to pursue in relation to developing links between curricular physical education and extra-curricular activities as there are a number of contributing factors to an effective school ethos. These may include the attitude of the school Principal, the physical education teachers, other teachers within the school and the support for adequate facilities.

Reinforcing the related body of literature from the UK, extra-curricular activities continue to thrive in many schools (Bass & Cale, 1999). However, there is a tendency for the majority of physical education teachers to discuss extra-curricular activities in terms of sport, with a concentration on (competitive) traditional games. Yet, these attributes of extra-curricular activity offer limited opportunity and experiences to a minority of students (Penney & Harris, 1997). Similar to the UK, extra-curricular programmes in Ireland appear to reflect the dominant activity areas covered in the physical education curriculum (Fairclough & Stratton, 1997; Penney & Harris, 1999).

There would seem therefore to be a need to support the promotion and creation of opportunities to deliver a broader and more balanced range of activities during curricular and extra-curricular time. The need to develop better integration between formal physical education and extra-curricular activities is acknowledged from an Irish perspective, with Fahey et al. (2005) stating that such an integrated approach should seek to ‘develop synergies and complementarities between formal PE and extra-curricular sport, and thus enhance the potential for mutual support between the two that inheres in the wide range of activities and interests they share in common’ (p.vi).
The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

Encouragingly, there appears to be willingness from Irish post-primary schools to support the links between curricular physical education and extra-curricular activities. However, it is difficult to gauge if this passion will survive in a context where the Irish government appears to under-appreciate the valuable role played by such a commitment. There may well be a need to rebuild some of the bridges that collapsed with the ASTI’s ‘work to rule’ policy. Many teachers for example, became disgruntled by the Department for Education and Science’s stance and have never returned to being involved with extra-curricular activities. It is hoped that the important role those Irish physical education post-primary teachers currently play in encouraging young people to engage and remain involved in sport and physical activity, via their contribution to extra-curricular activities, is acknowledged.

References


The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective


The promotion of continuity between physical education and co-curricular physical activities: an Irish perspective

Table 1: Promotion of continuity between curricular physical education and extra-curricular physical activities (numbers in brackets denotes frequencies of statements)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Category</th>
<th>Statement Group Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical education curriculum (94)</td>
<td>Influence of the school sports season on physical education class content (56)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transfer of skills taught in physical education class to co-curricular activities (19)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encouragement from physical education teacher to participate in co-curricular activities (17)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Influence of the school’s main sport on physical education class content (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing (73)</td>
<td>Staff actively involved in co-curricular activities (52)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Staff encourage pupils to participate in co-curricular activities (15)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical education teacher takes all the teams (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Ethos (41)</td>
<td>Lunch time leagues organised (25)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sports coaches hired (5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Extra curricular timetable (4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>After-hour coaching (4)</td>
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<td>Competitive and non-competitive activities available (3)</td>
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