Irish curricular dissemination / implementation

Implications for Irish curricular dissemination / implementation drawing on principal and teacher insight

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Abstract

In an effort to understand interpretations of new and revised physical education syllabuses, and conditions that appear to strengthen or weaken the desire to introduce them, this paper draws on insights provided by principals and physical education teachers into the efficient and effective implementation of syllabus within Irish post-primary schools. Situating the discussion within the area of managing curriculum change (Fullan, 2004), we examine how the various elements of the Irish education system are involved in providing support for such curriculum developments. Using principals’ and teachers’ perspectives on the implementation of the revised junior cycle physical education syllabus we suggest how the dynamics within the education system might change to provide effective dissemination and implementation of new and revised senior cycle physical education syllabuses. We discuss to what extent it may be possible to map the community of practice notion (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991) onto the Irish education landscape, seeking to establish how it would work and what might be some of the most pressing issues.
Introduction and background

In an effort to understand interpretations of new and revised physical education syllabuses and conditions that appear to strengthen or weaken the desire to introduce them, this paper draws on principals’ and physical education teachers’ insights into the efficient and effective implementation of syllabuses within Irish post-primary schools. We are of course cognisant that change is complex as well as ‘overloaded, fragmented, non-linear, relentless and breathtakingly fast-paced’ (Fullan, 2004, p. 10). The aim of this paper is to examine how recently developed physical education curriculum in Ireland can inform how we embrace future curriculum developments and the extent to which a gap exists between the idea of a centrally-produced curriculum and the realities of its implementation (Stenhouse, 1975; Kelly, 2004). The study recognises that within communities there is not always a shared understanding of change and the reality of change (Fullan, 2003; 1999). The study acknowledges that effective change involves not only altering the context in which the individuals in the organisation operate but more fundamentally changing the culture of the organisation. In the case of school change this brings into focus, among other things, the relationship between external accountability and internal school development and planning. In this regard it is also important to consider how the system promotes change and the impact that leadership has on impetus for change. Fullan (2004) explains that change is inherently complex and that ‘Solutions occur when people interact in a purposeful way, and when levels of the system interact.
and mutually influence each other’ (Fullan, 2004, p. III). Our interest in this paper is to address how best to promote such interaction and mutual influence in the Irish context. Elements of the paper will resonate with previous Irish Educational Studies discussion, including teacher design teams (Mooney Simmie, 2007), Regional Curriculum Support Service (Johnston, Murchan, Loxley, Fitzgerald & Quinn, 2007) and the Second Level Support Service (McDermott, Henchy, Meade & Golden, 2007).

We begin by contextualising the Irish education system before focusing on school physical education developments in Ireland, including the proposed examinations in physical education. We contend that principals and teachers will be better able to face the challenges of integrating future curriculum developments by reflecting on their experiences of introducing previous syllabuses. This in turn, will lead us to explore the extent to which it may be possible to map the concept of communities of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the Irish education context, seeking to establish how it would work and what might be some of the more immediate issues.

Curriculum implementation in the Irish system
Post-primary education in Ireland 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 senior cycle caters for students in the 15 to 18 year age group. Students normally take 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 Leaving Certificate. It would be difficult to underestimate the influence the Leaving Certificate has on Irish education but almost more importantly on the psyche of the post-primary system. Traditionally the predominating function of the Leaving Certificate is that it is the route by which students progress to higher education. To date assessment at Leaving Certificate has comprised, to a large extent, a written terminal examination though this is changing and a greater range of assessment options is becoming available.

The Department of Education and Science (DES) commits itself to providing high-quality education which will enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society, and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development.

The DES has under its aegis a number of agencies with special responsibility for policy formulation, research and evaluation and assessment. In this context the Department works very closely with two agencies The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), advises the Department so that the latter can identify and implement ‘appropriate curricular and assessment reforms’. The Council and committees of the NCCA are structures whose members represent constituencies such as teachers, parents, higher education, employers, and school management. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is responsible for maintaining the quality and integrity of the state examinations ‘in the context of national educational goals and international standards’.
The DES retains the curriculum implementation and evaluation functions. In terms of implementation, support services for teachers and schools are administered by the Teacher Education Section (TES) of the DES. The TES was established in May 2003 and is concerned with the education and development of primary and post-primary teachers. It seeks to promote coherence and synergy of interventions across the teacher education and development continuum of pre-service, induction and continuing professional development (CPD) (The Teaching Council, 2008). The TES oversees two layers of implementation machinery that impact directly on post-primary CPD. On a broad front the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) promotes a strategic approach to the provision of support for post-primary schools and is organised on a regional basis. It aims to (1) assist teachers in acquiring the skills they need to provide their students with desired learning experiences, (2) assist schools in making informed choices about the programmes that best suit their students, (3) promote greater coherence in the provision of support, and (4) take account of the constraints within which schools operate (http://www.slss.ie/aboutus.html). The SLSS offers school-based support, staff development programmes, regional cluster based support, and modular courses. A review of the work of the SLSS and its vision of CPD is discussed by McDermott et al., (2007).

Alongside this structure there are more focused support services related to the introduction of particular new or revised subject syllabus. One such service is the junior cycle physical education (JCPE) support service, established in September 2003, which provides in-service education for the revised JCPE syllabus. The service is staffed by a team of three seconded second-level (post-primary) physical education teachers and is responsible for delivering in-service education to schools within particular geographical
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locations. The support service makes extensive use of associate presenters who tend to be physical education teachers with expertise in a particular area for example dance, gymnastics or health related activity (HRA). The JCPE support service is currently offering five in-service education days comprising (1) introduction to the syllabus and pedagogies associated with games and adventure activities, (2) exploration of teaching principles with particular reference to gymnastics, health-related activity and athletics, (3) planning and assessment focusing on dance and aquatics, (4) HRA / Action for Life, and (5) embedding the JCPE syllabus.

Subject-specific support services usually operate over an intensive phase of three years before being absorbed into the general SLSS where support for the enhancement of generic areas such as teaching and learning methodologies and the curriculum aspect of school development planning are maintained. Due to the perceived need for additional teacher support the initial phase of the JCPE service has gone beyond that three year period and its future is unclear. In the context of the senior cycle physical education (SCPE) and new Leaving Certificate physical education (LCPE) syllabuses currently being developed it is likely that a support service will be required but the format of such a service is yet to be determined.

All three teacher trade unions in Ireland welcome the development of a comprehensive CPD programme to address the professional needs of teachers at the various stages of a teaching career. The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, the Teachers’ Union of Ireland and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland operate branch structures which provide teachers with opportunities to share ideas and knowledge, foster collegiality, and receive information on issues that impact on their
work. While the Teaching Council has a remit to oversee and create opportunities for CPD for registered teachers, the section of the Teaching Council Act governing this role has yet to commence. The Teaching Council is preparing for such a role by researching practice in other jurisdictions and by reviewing current provision for CPD in Ireland. The TES acknowledge that there is an over-emphasis on nationally-driven CPD activities and an under-emphasis on activities meeting school improvement needs identified in the context of school development planning (Ryan, 2006). Accordingly, there is support for teacher-initiated CPD delivered locally, perhaps through Education Centres, with accreditation opportunities and pathways to further study for teachers (Ryan, 2006). There is an aspiration to have linkage between participation in CPD and Teaching Council registration. Tentative suggestions on how the Teaching Council might further its remit to promote teaching as a profession is discussed by Sexton (2007).

The provision for context-specific professional development is available for primary schools in Ireland through the Regional Curriculum Support Service (RCSS). RCSS advisors support teachers in their own schools providing advice on curriculum content, methodologies, planning and implementation for all subject areas (Johnston et al., 2007). The concept of Teacher Design Teams (TDTs) have been pursued in Ireland, connecting curriculum implementation and the CPD of teachers at regional level by providing creative spaces where groups of teachers work together to ‘reconsider the teaching of their subject, the intellectual stimulus of working together and the challenge to move the thinking forward’ (Mooney Simmie, 2007, p. 165).

School physical education in Ireland
In order to provide context for the insights provided by principals and physical education teachers into the efficient and effective implementation of syllabus within Irish post-primary schools it is necessary to include some background on the physical education provision in those schools.

A revised JCPE syllabus was introduced in 2003 (DES/NCCA, 2003) to support the planning and teaching of the subject for lower secondary students (12-15 years). The senior cycle physical education syllabus is currently being revised 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. The introduction of physical education in the Leaving Certificate system poses significant conceptual and practical challenges for all education stakeholders, including principals and teachers. For example, the proposed assessment for Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE) comprises a written paper, a video analysis element and a practical assessment. Whilst this assessment schedule is familiar to colleagues from other jurisdictions, what makes the Irish proposals different is that the Leaving Certificate relies entirely on the external setting and marking of all examination assessments with no involvement of the students’ own teachers.

In terms of time allocated to physical education a significant number of schools do not deliver the DES recommended two hours per week of physical education per student. The progressive reduction in time allocated to physical education within the post-primary curriculum (an average of 75 minutes a week in Year 1 to 57 minutes a week in Year 6) reflects an international trend, although an increase in time allocation to 101 minutes per week in Year 4 is particular to the Irish context where students have an opportunity to follow the non-examinable one-year Transition Year programme. The availability of
adequate curricular time for physical education and the overcrowded curriculum are issues we have discussed previously (MacPhail & Halbert, 2005).

Physical education as a Leaving Certificate subject in Ireland is relatively late in arriving with respect to most other subject areas. For a context of assessment in Irish schools refer to Looney (2006). The extent to which physical educators in Ireland are supportive of such a development is difficult to establish at this moment. Research to identify factors that impact on teachers’ decisions regarding the teaching of a syllabus can allow such factors to be addressed in the construction and dissemination of a syllabus. In a similar curriculum development in Scotland, Higher Grade Physical Education, it was evident that teachers’ interpretations of what the examinable course entailed were not the explicit reasons for choosing to offer the programme. Decisions were embedded in the context in which individuals worked and included students’ needs and conditions for teaching an examinable programme (MacPhail, 2004). The same study noted concern that physical education teachers were removed from the implementation of HGPE and called for an overall strategy that would result in the construction of physical education being a collaborative venture between all interested parties. Such a removal from the process resulted in teachers wanting to receive considerably more specific central guidance related to the delivery of the syllabus, looking to receive appropriate training and resources from central agencies (MacPhail, 2007). This paper is concerned with what appeared to impact on principals’ and teachers’ decisions to engage with curriculum developments, even before considering the extent to which the school could accommodate such developments.
Methodology

In January 2003, an extensive baseline survey (refer to MacPhail & Halbert, 2005; MacPhail, Halbert, McEvilly, Hutchinson & MacDonncha, 2005) sought to provide a detailed picture of the physical education infrastructure in all 763 Irish post-primary schools and to ascertain the possible impact of new and revised physical education syllabuses on schools. In an attempt to complement and extend understanding of baseline data, structured interviews were conducted with 13 principal teachers and 12 physical education teachers. In the case of most schools the principal and physical education teacher were interviewed. In an effort to contextualise principals’ and teachers’ views, issues related to their own school and their engagement with the implementation of the JCPE syllabus were explored. Issues discussed included the nature of the information they had received on the revised syllabus, their level of familiarity with the revised course and their needs for additional information and support. Finally, their general thoughts on LCPE were probed.

Interview data were reviewed repeatedly and continually coded using ATLAS.ti 5 seeking similarities and differences, groupings, patterns and items of particular significance (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This paper sets out to identify and discuss the dynamics of schools striving to accommodate curriculum developments and their concerns in relation to physical education becoming an examinable subject. We refer to the experiences reported by principals and teachers in their attempts to implement the revised JCPE syllabus as a starting point in identifying the nature of the issues they may face in integrating senior cycle physical education syllabuses. In relation to the introduction of the revised syllabuses (and particularly senior cycle physical education
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and LCPE) change incorporates new materials, new practices and new beliefs/understanding (Fullan, 2004, p. 4).

Induction in curriculum innovation (revised JCPE syllabus)

Dissemination of revised syllabus

In discussing Schon’s (1971) Proliferation of Centre model of dissemination, Kelly (2004) states that such a model represents an acknowledgement that attention must be given to the process of dissemination itself and not merely to the details of the innovation to be disseminated. This is an important point to keep in mind with respect to the dissemination of the JCPE syllabus.

A copy of the revised JCPE syllabus was sent from the DES to the principal of every post-primary school in Ireland, the usual first stage in the dissemination process of a revised syllabus. The in-school distribution of the syllabus is at the discretion of the principal and consequently each school decides how best to do this. The only additional information provided was a brief memo and thus it is unsurprising that the principals’ awareness of the provision of the syllabus is limited.

Principals reported ‘glancing’ at the document as it arrived on their desk before passing it on to the physical education staff. A number of teachers reported not receiving any syllabus documentation and hence were not familiar with the contents of the syllabus. As with many aspects of school life, the principals’ role here is crucial, as illustrated by the following comment from a teacher;
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‘It [JCPE syllabus] came direct into the school. The school was asked to apply to
go to this in-service and it was only when we were accepted that we found out
about it. It was the principals who were asked about it and our principal
progressed forward, so it was only when the letter of acceptance came that we
actually found out about it.’ (Teacher)

This illustrates the principal acting as a ‘gatekeeper’ in relation to staff and school
involvement in curriculum innovation.

Based on interview data, it would be wrong to surmise that principals are simply
not interested in the contents of the syllabus. The range of tasks in which a principal
engages in daily frequently does not allow for comprehensive reading of the extensive
range of documentation that arrives in the school. It appears that they were not provided
with the support to access specialised concepts and language in a subject area with which
they were not familiar. In this instance a number of principals stated that they would have
preferred, along with other school management and physical education staff, to have been
initially introduced and taken through the syllabus by people with relevant expertise.
This, they argued, would have prompted them to engage with the development before
passing on the document and responsibility to the physical education staff. Such a process
would also encourage discussion on implications for the school in delivering the revised
syllabus, giving;

‘people the opportunity to go, hear what’s on the table, look at some of the issues there
and come back feeling it’ll work because, to be honest, very often a lot of that paper
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comes in, you give it a very quick read and then it’s passed on to somebody else.’

(Principal)

There is clearly a concern being expressed as to the nature of the dissemination process, which has implications for the incorporation of the revised course in the school curriculum.

As one would expect, physical education teachers’ needs for additional information were not as obvious. Indeed, no one expressed a desire for further information, which is unsurprising given their expertise in the subject area and their expectation of in-service support.

Availability and suitability of in-service provision

In discussing in-service provision, principals and teachers alluded to the practical difficulties associated with releasing teachers for attendance at courses during the school day. The most pressing issue for principals was securing adequate cover for teachers who were off-site for the day(s). As one principal observed;

‘(…) everytime that you talk about in-service the question is when and how do I cover for that? (…) that’s the real question then that I as a principal has to face every time. When is it happening? How will I provide cover for this?’ (Principal)

In helping the principal to cope with this situation it was suggested that identifying the topics to be covered during a given course would allow teachers to make a professional
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decision as to whether they needed to attend all, or some parts, of the course. By being aware of the focus of an in-service event, teachers could be more discerning as to what they attend thus reducing the pressure on principals to provide cover for all teachers on all occasions.

Comments relating to the desired focus of in-service courses frequently referred to guidance on curriculum planning. This may reflect a realisation that the introduction of the revised JCPE syllabus will require teachers to follow a prescribed programme possibly for the first time, a prospect described by one principal as ‘quite alien’ to some teachers. From the teacher perspective there was an appreciation for the value of sound planning and the need for them to adopt the practice and be supported. The JCPE support service identified this need at an early stage and put in place an innovative programme of in-service with a strong planning emphasis. The other distinctive aspect of the JCPE courses was a clear focus on enhancing pedagogy as opposed to the more traditional subject matter approach. There is evidence from the teachers’ comments that they recognised the need for this pedagogical focus;

‘(…) an in-service every term (…) to bring up new ideas because that’s what your looking for pupils nowadays. You want to keep them enthusiastic about physical education and motivated, so new ideas would be great.’ (Teacher)

In considering the situational factors impacting on principals’ and teachers’ decisions to embrace curriculum developments and the extent to which they believe the school context can / cannot accommodate such developments, it appears that issues of
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communication and appropriate in-service are key. Obviously there are other considerations such as the availability of curricular time, facilities and adequate staffing levels which are significant and these have been addressed in earlier work arising from this study (MacPhail et al., 2005). Before we can extrapolate from the experience of introducing the JCPE syllabus, we should consider the special conditions arising from the proposed introduction of examinable physical education (LCPE) to the Irish system.

Examinable physical education

Recognition of learning

Principals and teachers agreed that student learning and achievement in physical education ought to be recognised formally and in the Irish context that means through the examination system. This is of course a perspective that applies to other subjects equally. What distinguishes the views of principals and teachers in this regard is that they not only refer to learning and achievement in examinable physical education but also to the recognition of achievement/involvement in physical activity and sport generally. Similar to a justification for examinable physical education reported by Green (2005), principals expressed the desire to provide students with the opportunity to pursue study in an area in which they have a particular ability and / or interest;

‘I’d feel that if children or young people have a talent in PE, then there isn’t really any reason why they shouldn’t be credited with that through the exam system’

(Principal)
‘(…) the regime we operate is that the core for Leaving Cert. is Irish, English, Maths and they select four other subjects at random from a full list. I don’t see any difference if PE is an exam subject which is included (…) If there’s an exam syllabus developed for PE it goes into the basket with all the other subjects. Students make their choices and our bands and options are arranged to suit the choices of the students.’ (Principal)

While there is a clear support for physical education at Leaving Certificate, there may be a level of misunderstanding of what will ultimately constitute examination physical education and its requirement for students;

‘It’s a great subject that can cater for children who are not necessarily going to be hugely academic but they can get some high grades when it’s half practical and half theoretical and something that they enjoy.’ (Teacher)

The misconception implied in this comment is all the more disturbing given that it comes from a physical education teacher. This is a further indication, if one were needed, of the necessity for a thorough and comprehensive induction in the new subject for all practitioners.

General physical education provision

One issue that featured as a concern for principals and teachers was the impact on general physical education provision of introducing examinable physical education. This is
accentuated in a climate of limited available resources and curricular time (MacPhail & Halbert, 2005). The specific concern related to the possibility of the extra requirements of a Leaving Certificate subject diminishing the resources available for other physical education programmes within the school. Similar to findings in the UK (Stidder & Wallis; 2003 & Green; 2001), there may be a danger that those in the senior cycle who do not choose LCPE, or in some cases junior cycle students, may receive less physical education as a result of the introduction of LCPE in a school;

‘(…) the tendency for certain types of senior cycle students is to withdraw from PE or attempt to withdraw. If you don’t have the general programme there and you don’t do everything you possibly can to try and maintain the highest levels of participation, that withdrawal will get greater. And you’re trying to target a group to build up a certain appreciation and respect and involvement in physical education for their overall well-being down the road.’ (Principal)

Nature of senior cycle physical education
There was a strong desire to maintain provision to all students at senior cycle, with a particular emphasis on increasing students’ potential for continuing an active lifestyle throughout adulthood. A number of comments questioned the extent to which examinable physical education would perhaps change the current senior cycle physical education experience for the teacher. There was evidence that teachers currently enjoyed a high level of flexibility and autonomy. As one teacher commented in relation to their current practice;
‘[Currently] there are no deadlines as such. If a class really likes a dance project that you’re doing you can extend it into the next class. If they really enjoy yoga you can extend it for another two weeks (…) you have flexibility.’ (Teacher)

While this flexibility may be retained in relation to non-examination senior cycle physical education it would diminish significantly in the LCPE environment where there will be a strong degree of prescription and greater levels of accountability.

**Potential increase in status**

Principals acknowledged that within Ireland’s exam-orientated post-primary education system there is a tendency to prioritise those subjects that contribute to the students’ examination performance as manifested by points accumulated for entry to higher education. Findings from the baseline survey (refer to MacPhail & Halbert, 2005) related to the likely improved status of physical education as an examination subject is supported by the comments of principals and teachers. There was an acknowledgement that examinable physical education was likely to increase the credibility of the subject within the school and physical education teachers hoped that other teachers and management would begin to see that their subject was ‘a proper subject rather than they’re just playing games’ (Teacher). The attraction of a potential increase in status for the subject is likely, in many cases, to overcome the reluctance on the part of teachers to become involved in providing examination physical education.
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_Caution related to implementation_

There is evidence of a deficit between what principals say and what they propose to do. It appears that principals are exercising a certain level of caution, effectively distinguishing between listening and engaging with an initiative on a conceptual level and enacting its implementation on a practical level. From our survey data, 75% of principals stated that physical education _should_ be available as a Leaving Certificate subject while only 22% stated that they _would offer_ LCPE in their school. Interestingly, 59% were ‘not sure’ if they would offer LCPE in their school. It appears that while principals have conveyed a positive disposition to the availability of physical education as a Leaving Certificate subject, they are not prepared or are unable to commit due to a lack of information on the syllabus and implications for implementation. One can surmise that such a high level of non-committal responses suggests that principals are open to persuasion. As Fullan (2004) states, successful implementation consists of some transformation or continual development of initial ideas. Principals and teachers in the study would welcome an opportunity to develop initial ideas of what the introduction of the revised senior cycle physical education syllabus and the new LCPE syllabus will entail.

_Observations and implications for implementation_

Principals’ and teachers’ positive dispositions towards the introduction of new and revised physical education syllabuses is undermined by an apparent uncertainty surrounding them. To counteract this uncertainty and the lack of knowledge /information (particularly in relation to LCPE) it is imperative that principals and teachers have opportunities to learn about the syllabuses and engage with the implications of
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implementation before the syllabuses appear for the first time in the school. For example
in relation to new and revised senior cycle syllabuses it may be necessary to provide
guidance to schools on how they might put in place and sustain a curriculum that
provides LCPE without diminishing other physical education programmes. Engaging
with staff within the immediate environment of the school may aid principals and
teachers in identifying pre-conditions and constraints that may arise when making
curriculum decisions. This would begin to position teachers and schools as the key agents
in the change process.

While acknowledging that the teacher’s role is central to the effectiveness of any
attempt at curriculum change or development (Kelly, 2004), there is a need within Ireland
for support structures that effectively promote change and development within schools.
Fullan’s (2004; 1999) notion of ‘deep learning communities’ is similar to that of
professional learning communities and communities of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,
1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991), providing an infrastructure that supports change, a setting
where teachers come together to learn from each other and identify professional
development opportunities, acknowledging that working together as a learning
community enhances a sharing of expertise. Schools can no longer afford to work in
isolation and Fullan (1999) proposes a set of schools operating within the same
geographical area, relying on a coordinated but flexible delivery of staff development
requirements. This may be a means of allowing principals and teachers to share their
tensions between the expectations of state departments and the context of their particular
school(s), with the potential to link with the respective teacher trade unions branch
School- and teacher-networks have recently become evident in the Irish second-level system. School Networks and Education Centres are examples of structures promoting community of practice principles while individual projects such as Teaching and Learning for the Twenty-first Century (TL21) (Hogan, Brosnan, de Roiste, MacAlister, Malone, Quirke-Bolt & Smith, 2007) and Project Maths (NCCA, 2008) operationalise the principles. Particular to physical education is a project initiated by the Kerry Education Service, examining the impact of a community of practice on physical education teachers’ professional development. The project monitors and evaluates the impact of a collaborative learning framework as a potentially effective model for professional development. This learning community (a community of practice) is supported at the local, regional and national level to develop its members’ professional capacities as teachers and leaders of physical education in Kerry schools. Furthermore it seeks to create and implement models of good practice in physical education at junior cycle with a particular focus on the interplay of assessment processes and student learning. A number of other initiatives have supported clusters of Irish physical education teachers working to improve their practice. These include an assessment for learning project (NCCA / JCPE support service), the establishment of communities of physical education teachers attached to Education Centres to access in-service provision (Physical Education Association of Ireland), clusters of physical education teachers emerging from in-service programmes (JCPE support service) and networks of physical education teachers (Tannehill, O’Sullivan & Ni Chroinin, 2006). School-based networks would allow principals, school management and physical education teachers to be supported...
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throughout consideration and implementation phases of new and revised syllabuses by fellow colleagues.

The establishment of professional development schools (PDS) similar to those piloted by Stroot, O’Sullivan & Tannehill (2000) contribute to the school-based network concept. Stroot et al. acknowledged that many physical education teachers have professional lives isolated from other physical educators because they are the only physical educator in the school, or their teaching space is isolated physically from the rest of the school or because they are consistently involved in extra-curricula activities. By bringing together teachers from multiple sites, teachers can be encouraged to identify professional development needs, plan, create resource materials and share teaching ideas. There is also the possibility that schools (members of a network) who are offering the LCPE programme may host students from other network schools who, for whatever reason, are unable to provide LCPE.

Responses from principals and teachers indicated a desire for an in-service focus on pedagogy and planning rather than on content. This may well be addressed in the restructuring of the SLSS, along with other support services, to provide curriculum and pedagogical support rather than only subject-specific (Ryan, 2006). While it is currently beyond the capacity of individual subject support services to alter the system of in-service provided to schools, it is open to them to change the nature of the provision. Specifying the break-down of the content / focus of an in-service course in advance would facilitate varying degrees of teachers’ attendance, encouraging teachers to prioritise their needs and aiding principals in the continual struggle to provide cover for teachers attending in-service. The flexibility available to support services in regard to the provision they offer
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is reflected in the innovative programme of courses provided by the JCPE support service
focussing on planning and the embedding of the syllabus in existing school curriculum.

Principals’ reluctance to release physical education teachers due to a lack of
qualified replacements is a supply problem that may be ameliorated by the recent increase
in numbers of PETE undergraduate places. However it may be more than just a matter of
numbers as the current output of newly qualified teachers ought to be adequate for the
needs of the system. Without a coherent structure for providing qualified replacements, it
is difficult to imagine how a system predicated on the temporary release from teaching
duties of participants can function effectively. In planning future implementation
strategies the agents of teacher supply and the providers of in-service must address this.

The nature of in-service provision in Ireland is being challenged. There appears to
be an underlying preference for a move towards CPD occurring outside school time,
acknowledging that the current system is not sufficient to deal with the CPD needs of
Irish teachers. As a result of their increased involvement in school development planning
and whole-school evaluation, schools are in a stronger position to identify what they need
in terms of professional development (e.g., curriculum planning and teaching and
learning, along with opportunities for subject specific support). The School Development
Planning Initiative was established in 1999 to stimulate and strengthen a culture of
collaborative development planning in schools, with a view to promoting school
improvement and effectiveness. This encourages bottom-up development with schools
determining, and being more knowledgeable about, their needs and requirements
particular to their own context. To a certain extent these initiatives better position
principals and teachers to identify in-service provision that best suits their context, an
issue raised during the interviews with principals. Whole-school evaluations are a recent innovation providing a formal procedure for evaluating the effectiveness of the school management and planning process. They also look at the quality of the curriculum and learning and teaching promoted in the school.

Conclusion

Interviews with a sample of principals and teachers provide insights into the efficient and effective implementation of syllabus within Irish post-primary schools. Principals and teachers have provided valuable insights into what should be changed and what should be preserved to encourage the contemplation of each syllabus. The most common problem in schools initially striving to accommodate curriculum developments is the infrastructure to support developments (i.e., dissemination of information, involvement with the process long before the documentation arrives in the school and the nature of in-service provision). It is not surprising to read that more than the provision of resources and in-service support for teachers is necessary.

The DES determines what policies and resources are made available to support any curriculum developments in Irish schools and, within the area of physical education, the DES have not been forceful in defining related policies or in providing resources. Subsequently, developments within this subject area have been sporadic and very much credited to the individual schools and teachers who have been interested in pursuing curriculum reform. Fullan’s (2004) advice on what the state requires resonates with how the DES could begin to work towards providing sustainable reform in the Irish education system. This includes ‘strategies to build accountability-based capacities at local levels.'
While Brown and Eisenhardt (1998) (cited in Fullan, 1999) warns of too much structure producing a ‘rule-following culture, rigid process’ (p.51), we believe there is a need at Departmental level in Ireland to consider the phasing in and timing of the introduction of curriculum development policies and in providing strategies of implementation that support large-scale, sustainable development;

‘If a national agency is to influence the development of the school curriculum to any significant degree, then, it must be able to effect changes on a broad front and, in particular, to address the issues raise by the many constraints on curriculum change and development, especially the public examination system’ (Kelly, 2004, p. 104).

The ‘Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers’ (Teaching Council, 2007) makes explicit the essential values that underpin the profession of teaching in Ireland, encouraging greater teacher accountability (Sexton, 2007). Core values encourage teachers to reflect on and continue to improve their own professional practice and are provided with opportunities to engage in professional development and to work in collegiality with colleagues in the interests of sharing, promoting, developing and supporting best professional practice. The Council is in consultation with teachers, teacher educators and other partners in education in developing its policy on the continuum of teacher education. Survey research conducted in five Irish post-primary schools has already been conducted to offer suggestions to the Council might further its remit to promote teaching as a profession (Sexton, 2007). In discussing changing school
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cultures, Fullan (2004) proposes professional learning communities at the school and local community level, with networks of schools continually engaging and supporting each other on ways to manage curriculum innovation and change. It is necessary for those operating in Irish policy or system-level reform to understand school conditions that strengthen or weaken the efficient and effective implementation of syllabus. This will encourage interaction, and a shared investment, between schools, communities and the state, ‘Collective work increases shared commitment and shared knowledge necessary to alter the context for all schools’ (Fullan, 2004, p. 61).

Curriculum development and teacher development are inextricably linked (Stenhouse, 1975). We acknowledge that a change in the culture and organisation of schools and changes in teaching and learning practice are interlinked, and that to undertake one without the other results in superficial change. It is important to note here that the development (and subsequent introduction) of these physical education syllabuses is being carried out in the context of a fundamental review of the entire senior cycle (NCCA, 2004; NCCA, 2008). It is therefore intended that insights shared in this paper would provide the basis for a comprehensive and informed process of curriculum implementation that would encourage, and create where necessary, a change in culture and context in which principals and teachers work.

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